

### Overview

For many communities, COVID-19's impact on food insecurity has been among the most challenging disruptions. This has been particularly true in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, home to Augusta Health, a 255-bed community hospital that serves the region. For years, Augusta Health has furthered strategic collaboration — both among its internal departments and with external local partners — to enhance its community and population health approaches. In light of the pandemic, these strategic alignments have proved to be valuable to the community. Specifically, Augusta Health has aligned its data-informed community health strategies on nutrition and physical activity with its clinically integrated network, which has improved its capacity to understand and meet emerging needs related to COVID-19.

Prior to the pandemic, Augusta Health developed a shared internal leadership model to align its clinical and community health efforts. This arrangement called for close coordination between its community and population health leaders — specifically, the vice presidents of population health and of community partnerships. Earlier in 2020, the hospital hired a chief clinical population health officer to provide medical direction on community health efforts and value-based care contracting.

As part of a [comprehensive list of community initiatives](#), one noteworthy result of this strategic alignment was creation of the [AMI Farm at Augusta](#)

[Health](#), an on-campus farm that was developed in partnership with the [Allegheny Mountain Institute \(AMI\)](#). The hospital had already been supporting residents at risk of food insecurity by serving as a supplier for the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank and the Valley Program for Aging Services. Augusta Health provides fresh produce and protein boxes, paying market value, which are distributed along with shelf-stable foods. Building on these existing efforts, the AMI Farm at Augusta Health provides food for use at the hospital, serves as a hub for nutrition and sustainable agriculture education, and offers nutrient-dense foods to community members facing chronic illness or limited food access.



One of many initiatives associated with the farm is the hospital's Food Pharmacy Program, which gives fruit and vegetable "prescriptions" to patients with specific chronic illnesses diagnoses. These fresh produce prescriptions can be redeemed during group nutrition and cooking classes.

When COVID-19 threw the lives of many across the region into a state of perpetual instability, the hospital's experience promoting community food security proved invaluable in ensuring community residents were able to meet their nutritional needs while sheltering in place to slow the spread of the virus.

### Approach

To identify at-risk individuals and families, Augusta Health embedded screening for food insecurity into its

COVID-19 screening efforts. This has allowed hospital staff to better coordinate resources for those needing support. Augusta Health and its partners also have been able to provide a stable source of nutrition for those who test positive for COVID-19, enabling them to isolate or quarantine as appropriate without needing to leave their homes to get essential items like food and medicines. Additionally, Augusta Health staff has been providing nutrition assistance to COVID-19 patients at the time of hospital discharge as well as to those who present in the emergency department for COVID-19 testing and are experiencing food insecurity.

To further improve resource utilization, Augusta Health is leveraging its data collection and analytics capabilities to track those who screened positive for food insecurity and those who received food. These data will allow the hospital to better understand patterns of need in communities and apply improvement methods to create efficiency and develop strategies aimed at underlying factors contributing to food insecurity.

## Impact

A key impact of Augusta Health's alignment strategy for meeting food needs is its enhanced ability to support the community — via distributing thousands of boxes with fresh and shelf-stable food — during an incredibly challenging time. As people across the Shenandoah Valley found themselves under stay-at-home orders, the hospital was able to leverage its distribution models through the AMI Farm at Augusta to optimize home deliveries. Likewise, Augusta Health's strong, already-established partnerships serve the community well by creating a resilient supply chain for essential goods.

Standing partnerships with not-for-profit and for-profit food producers in the community allowed the hospital to strengthen its efforts to identify and meet the needs of individuals and families experiencing food insecurity.

Food boxes have been distributed to more than 2,500 patients and community members, totaling a market value of over \$50,000.

## Lessons Learned

Augusta Health has found that an integrated approach to addressing important community needs, such as food insecurity, has been a crucial element of success. According to Daniel O'Connor, Augusta Health vice president of population health, engaging diverse resources from across the organization and combining those with an array of key community partners have truly helped to drive collective impact, ensure shared values and provide a stronger overall approach to supporting the communities served. "The unique

challenges generated by this COVID-19 year prompted us to be nimble and responsive, and we're pleased with the efforts that we have helped to lead," O'Connor said. "We're confident that this integrated and collaborative approach will have applicability to future challenges."

Another important lesson is that partnerships to meet community needs are not only important to

promoting population and community health but also a crucial source of motivation for front-line clinicians, driving professional satisfaction and alleviating burnout. According to Mary Arrowood, director of operations, Augusta Care Partners, "Our partnerships help clinicians connect their patients in need with an actual resource, satisfying that need. This drives happiness with work, [and] builds trust and connection with patients."

Finally, and perhaps most actionable in the immediate term, Augusta Health leaders learned that making community impact possible starts by simply getting things started. "Just do it," says Krystal Moyers, Augusta Health director of community outreach, counseling other health care leaders to be active



listeners and trust in their partnerships. “Our local partners were very receptive to coming together to meet community needs during COVID-19; the overwhelming majority of responses were positive,” she noted. “Especially if your role is as a convener, don’t feel like you need to be the heavy hand in the room. Others will be open to that, and you can focus on making a collective impact.”

## Future Goals

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Food insecurity in the community surfaced as an emergent need during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it will not disappear as a critical issue anytime in the near future. The fresh food box program, coined Crop to Community, is still going strong, and plans are to continue until the end of the harvest season in late November. Boxes of shelf-stable food from the Blue

Ridge Area Food Bank continue to be provided for those in quarantine after COVID-19 testing. Next year, Augusta Health hopes to begin “pop-up” fresh food events in areas of exceptionally high need.

Looking to the future, the hospital will continue to use data analytics derived from social determinants of health screenings to drive outreach efforts in the community focused on food access and other crucial upstream initiatives.

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