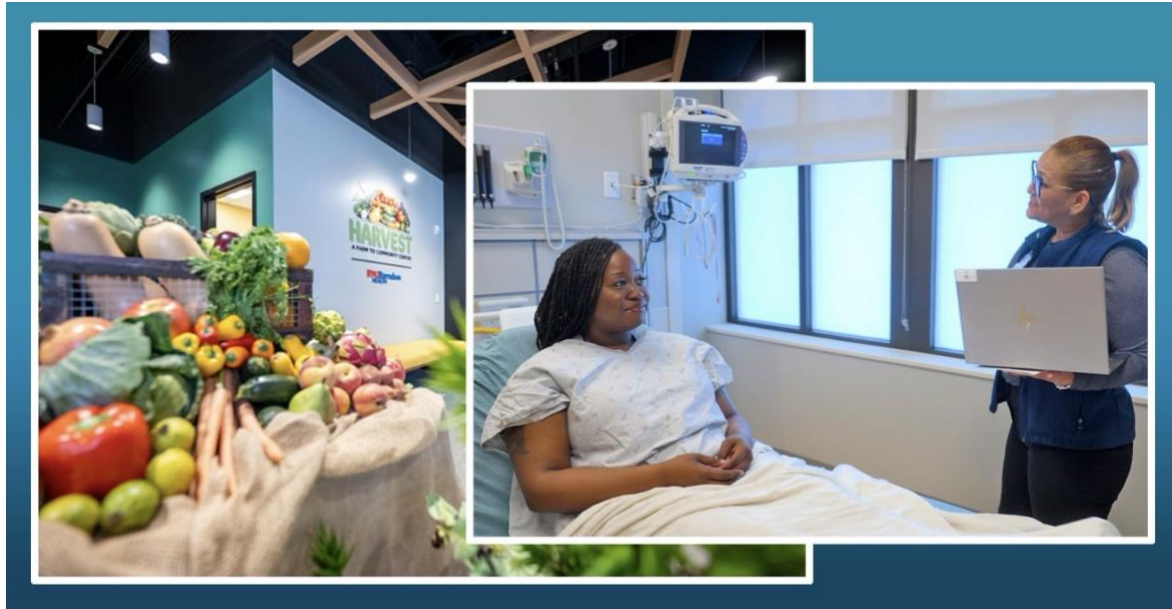


Food-as-medicine gets a new test case in Newark



From left: RWJBarnabas' new farm to community food center in Newark, NJ; Community health worker assisting patient. (RWJBarnabas)

By

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Key Takeaways

- The RWJBarnabas' Harvest facility will teach patients how to eat healthy and provide them with fresh produce.
- Food-is-medicine programs are on the rise as three out of four American adults have at least one chronic condition.
- The state of New Jersey funded construction of the project, and the health system is funding operations.

RWJBarnabas Health has opened a \$7 million food-is-medicine hub to take on chronic disease, making it a potential standard bearer in the Make America Healthy Again movement.

Last week, the New Jersey academic health system opened Harvest — an 8,000-square-foot facility in Newark that is a combination food bank, commercial kitchen

and classroom. The center is designed to teach people living in nearby food deserts how to eat healthier and provide them with the food to do it.

Food-is-medicine initiatives have been gaining ground within hospitals and health systems over the past five years, as three out of four American adults have at least one chronic illness that can be linked to diet. If successful, RWJBarnabas' program could be the next iteration of these efforts and it comes at a time when there are increased concerns about food insecurity.

Related: CMS targets chronic care, nutrition in 'MAHA' Medicare payment model

The health system is among New Jersey's largest, treating about five million patients annually at 14 hospitals and 700 care locations. The state of New Jersey bankrolled construction costs for Harvest. RWJBarnabas is funding operations that are expected to cost about \$430,00 annually.

President and CEO Mark Manigan called the food hub a smart investment in the face of skyrocketing rates of chronic disease that coincide with federal cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

“Where we can use food as preventative medicine to promote greater health overall and lessen an individual's chance of needing a healthcare intervention down the line, that is a worthwhile investment that will be returned many times over,” Manigan said.

Cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, obesity and some cancers account for about 90% of U.S. healthcare spending, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Toledo, Ohio-based Promedica, Mass General Brigham in Boston, and Rush University Medical Center in Chicago are among a handful of health systems that have launched food-is-medicine programs. They offer nutrition counseling, connect patients to food pantries or deliver fresh meat and produce to patients' homes.

RWJBarnabas is going a step further.



Harvest commercial kitchen (RWJBarnabas Health)

Harvest features a test kitchen that offers free classes to the public on how to eat healthy and prepare nutritious meals.

It has a separate state-of-the-art commercial kitchen where local chefs and entrepreneurs can pay for space to improve their culinary skills, while learning how to scale businesses focused on healthy cuisine.

In the rear of the building is a food warehouse where workers receive fresh produce trucked in from New Jersey farms, package it and distribute it to local food pantries. The facility is staffed with approximately a dozen people, including dietitians and community health workers.

Getting state and health system buy-in was fairly easy, said Dr. Balpreet Grewal-Virk, the system's senior vice president, community health.

Patient surveys consistently found food insecurity to be a top concern and many people in high-risk neighborhoods said they were eating the least nutritious foods, she said. “We see in bodegas around New Jersey people use SNAP benefits to buy Twinkies, bags of chips and soda. They don’t use them to buy produce,” Grewal-Virk said.

Getting the project off and running, though, was a heavier lift.

The health system needed to find a suitable property with a loading dock. A former department store fit the bill. It also needed to secure partnerships with about 30 local farmers for the produce and a deal with a food cooperative to operate the warehouse.

Internally, RWJBarnabas had to decide which community health needs to prioritize.

Harvest’s commercial kitchen should generate revenues. The larger return on investment, though, could be fewer uninsured, chronically ill patients flooding the health systems’ emergency department.

RWJBarnabas is looking to replicate the initiative in other New Jersey communities where it offers services. It’s also offering Harvest as a blueprint for other health systems to follow.

“This could be done in Chicago. It could be taken anywhere,” Grewal-Virk said.