

Access Community Health Services (ACCESS) Forming Farmers Market Familiarity and Fortifying Food Access

ABOUT ACCESS COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICES (ACCESS)



Chartered in 1978, [Access Family Health Services \(ACCESS\)](#) has grown from a single location to sixteen sites and a mobile clinic, all dedicated to serving the rural communities of northeast Mississippi. Ten of the sixteen sites are school-based clinics, that serve nearly one-third of all individuals cared for by the health center. Over 65% of patients served by ACCESS live below 200% of Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and almost half are uninsured or on Medicaid. Mississippi has not yet expanded Medicaid, and

many Mississippians have recently been dropped from Medicaid due to Medicaid redetermination. Additionally, many communities are food deserts with Dollar General as the only option for purchasing food. In 2023, ACCESS provided medical, pharmacy, dental and behavioral services to 12,265 patients with over 39,000 visits. Due to the rural nature, ACCESS is often the only healthcare provider in the community. In order to bolster their services, ACCESS has recently added a dietitian and a Master's level social worker, as well as two community health workers. ACCESS also has three in-house pharmacies. ACCESS achieved HRSA's gold badge for quality in 2023 after achieving silver the previous year (79% hypertension controlled; 85% diabetes controlled). ACCESS is also one of the top performing health centers in the Mississippi Health Center (Aledade) ACO.

SCREENING FOR SOCIAL NEEDS & UNDERSTANDING PATIENTS' SOCIAL NEEDS

ACCESS screens all patients for social drivers of health (SDOH) using the American Academy of Family Practice SDOH Screening Tool on an annual basis or when there is a known change in SDOH circumstances. Through the screening process ACCESS is able to utilize their electronic health record system (AthenaHealth) and the Azara DRVS Population Health Platform to monitor SDOH screenings, referrals and outcomes.

HEALTH CENTER RESPONSE TO PATIENTS' SOCIAL NEEDS



Operating hours run from 7:30 to 11:00 every Saturday, spanning from June through October.

When the town of Smithville, Mississippi was devastated by an EF-5 tornado in 2011, the community lost access to its only local grocery store, the Piggly Wiggly. This loss left residents facing significant challenges, particularly in accessing affordable, healthy food options, which was especially critical for individuals living with metabolic syndrome, diabetes, and hypertension. Despite efforts, the store was never rebuilt, and subsequent attempts to recruit another grocery store were unsuccessful. It wasn't until 2017 when ACCESS, with support from Catholic Charities, opened a farmer's market known as Farmacy, providing locals with a much-needed source of fresh fruits and vegetables. ACCESS

was aware of this need for fresh fruits and vegetables not only due to the lack of grocery stores available locally, but also due to the SDOH data they collected at their health center which showed the community's lack of access to these foods. Therefore, the Farmacy has become a vital asset for the entire community and is further enriched by the presence of two dietitians who craft a healthy recipe each week utilizing ingredients available at the market. Through SDOH screening, patients who indicate food insecurity can enroll into the ACCESS Assistance Program receiving \$10 a week in tokens specifically earmarked for fresh fruits and vegetables. Currently, about 25 individuals per week benefit from these tokens. The vendors at the Farmacy food market accept tokens as payment, then ACCESS pays the vendors for the tokens they turn in. Additionally, transportation is needed for some patients, and ACCESS provides transportation through a company vehicle or contracts with other transportation providers.

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

In the fall of 2022, ACCESS published a cookbook, *The Farmacy's Prescription for Healthier Eating*, with assistance from a grant through the Community Health Center Association of Mississippi with funding from Direct Relief. Proceeds from the sale of the cookbook help support the token program. The Farmacy Farmer's Market has been a social hub in the community, and strong bonds have been developed between ACCESS staff working the market, and low-income individuals receiving tokens.

One of the goals of the ACCESS farmers' market was to support local farmers. A barrier has been the shortage of farmers and individuals raising produce. People expect to come to the farmers' market and find a wide variety of produce like at the local Walmart. ACCESS currently only has two individuals that have a variety of produce for the duration of the market and they are being recruited by many farmers' markets. ACCESS is fortunate to have a building that is large enough to house the market, and it is temperature controlled which makes it more attractive to farmers and vendors.



Another challenge is how to make the fresh produce available across the wide service area. Lane Farms now has a mobile market that can go into other communities to expand the program. This creates the challenge of getting the tokens to individuals that qualify without requiring staff to work weekends and after hours. There are currently no grant funds to support the Farmacy. ACCESS has allocated a portion of its 340B program to support its Food as Medicine program. The challenge has been staffing the market on Saturday for the long market season. The same is true with transportation because there is no public transportation, Uber is not an option, and the service area is large. ACCESS has one vehicle and is continuously looking for contractors or partners to extend the service. Marilyn Sumerford, Executive Director at ACCESS notes "It is truly a labor of love, but no better to connect with the patients of ACCESS and to understand the challenges that they face. I am most proud when patients ask to speak to their "advocate". So many first-time health center patients feel marginalized and don't have a voice. I'm proud when a patient learns that I'm the Executive Director of ACCESS, and they don't believe it because they see me and talk to me every Saturday when they come to The Farmacy, and I call them by name. The last market day of the season there's a lot of hugging and saying, 'I'm going to miss you!'".