

Sea Mar Community Health Centers: Cultivating Health Through Food Security

ABOUT US

Sea Mar Community Health Centers (CHCs) is located in Washington State and was founded on principles of social justice. Sea Mar has worked to improve the health of underserved communities, especially Latino/a, immigrant, uninsured, and low-income populations. Annually, Sea Mar serves over 290,000 patients and clients across Washington state. These communities have historically been disproportionately impacted by food insecurity. The Sea Mar Health Education team works as part of the medical care team to promote self-management of chronic conditions by providing health education on the pathophysiology of chronic conditions, medication management, and healthy lifestyle changes. Since 2017, Sea Mar CHCs has worked to address food insecurity through robust food access programming and food insecurity screening in response to community needs, which increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.



SCREENING FOR SOCIAL NEEDS & UNDERSTANDING OUR PATIENTS' SOCIAL NEEDS

In 2017, Sea Mar Community Health Centers participated in Food Lifeline's Healthcare Initiative (HCI) workgroup to find solutions at the intersection of hunger and health. The workgroup is comprised of hospitals, insurance companies, public health agencies, health clinics, and health-related non-profits. The HCI was launched in response to the correlation between food bank utilization and chronic disease.

As part of the HCI activities, Sea Mar CHCs began screening patients with diabetes for food insecurity at the Burien Medical Clinic. During the food insecurity screening, patients were read two statements: *"Within the past 12 months, you worried that your food would run out before you got the money to buy more,"* and *"Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn't last and you didn't have money to get more."* Response options included, *"Never true," "Sometimes true," "Often true,"* and *"Patient refused."* A response of either *"Sometimes true"* or *"Often true"* to one or both statements was considered a positive screen for food insecurity. Patients who screened positive for food insecurity were then connected to food access resources and referred to a Customer Service Representative (CSR), who was overseen by the Managed Care Department, to assist with enrolling for Basic Food.

Food Insecurity Screening Questions in EPIC EHR

Time taken: 5/9/2022 1242 + Add Group + Add Row + Add LDA Responsible

Food Insecurity

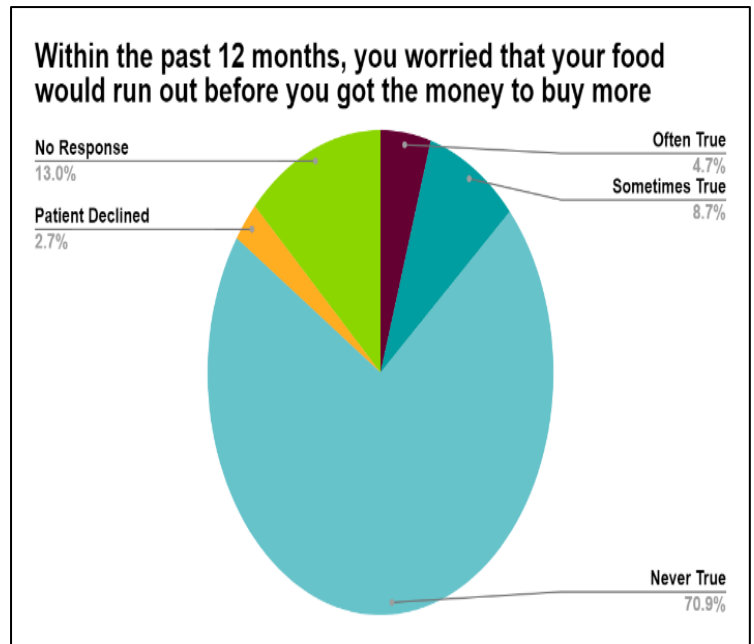
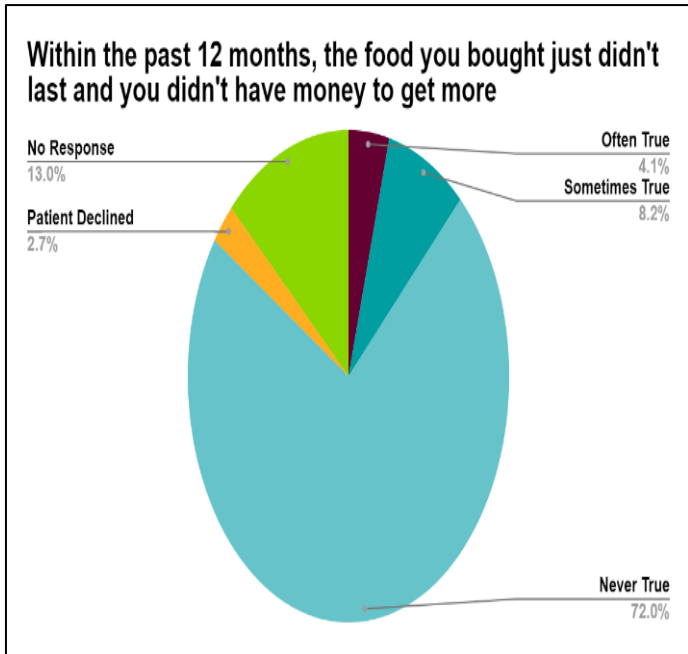
Within the past 12 months, you worried that your food would run out before you got the money to buy more.

Within the past 12 months, the food you bought just didn't last and you didn't have money to get more.

Following Sea Mar CHC’s participation in the HCI, the Health Education team has worked to expand their knowledge of local food resources and food access programming. In 2019, Sea Mar CHC’s Health Education team strategically partnered with local food banks, Food Lifeline, and Public Health – Seattle & King County to implement non-perishable food pantries across 16 sites in the following counties: Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, King, Pierce, and Grays Harbor. Between January and September 2022, approximately 1,600lbs of food was distributed through the food pantry program. Over the following nine months, 6,500lbs of non-perishable food items were distributed to patients and community members.

Since 2017, Sea Mar CHC has implemented food insecurity screening across the Health Education and Medical Nutrition Therapy (MNT) teams. Four sites – Burien, White Center, South Park, and Federal Way – have also since implemented clinic-wide food insecurity screening. In 2023, 7,297 patients have been screened for food insecurity, which Sea Mar CHC hopes to increase to 10,000 by the end of 2024. Out of the patients asked about food insecurity, 15.69% of them screened positive.

Food Insecurity Screening – Patient Responses Across All Sites (Q3 2024)



HEALTH CENTER RESPONSE TO PATIENTS' SOCIAL NEEDS

The COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic impact on food insecurity, disproportionately affecting communities of color. Through Sea Mar CHC's existing partnerships with Food Lifeline and Public Health – Seattle & King County, the Preventive Health Services Department (which houses Health Education and MNT), worked to expand and enhance food insecurity programming to address this social need. Food insecurity programming at Sea Mar CHCs addresses patients' social needs in three ways,

- 1) Increasing food insecurity screening across multiple sites and departments statewide,
- 2) Increasing patient access to healthy, culturally relevant foods, and
- 3) Connecting patients to local resources.

In Sea Mar CHC's 2024 Quality Improvement Plan, the organization's equity goal focused on the social drivers of health (SDOH) and health related social needs (HRSN) data collection. Specifically, one of Sea Mar CHC's aims is to increase the number of patients screened for food insecurity from 7,297 to 10,000 in 2024. As part of these efforts, the Health Education team partnered with the American Heart Association (AHA) to expand food insecurity programming to sites located in southwestern Washington, including sites located in Thurston and Clark Counties. Internally, the Health Education team also increased coordination with the Managed Care and Dental departments to extend food insecurity screening outside the medical departments.

The Sea Mar Health Education team operates several programs to address food insecurity among Sea Mar patients, including:

- **Food Pantry Program** – offering non-perishable and perishable (at some sites) food items at clinical sites for patients or community members in need,
- **Food FARMacia Program** – a mercado-style produce distribution program,
- **Produce Voucher Program** – pairs nutrition and general health education with the distribution of \$10 produce vouchers to Safeway through partnerships with the Washington State Department of Health and Coordinated Care Apple Health, and
- **Utilizing grocery store gift cards as program incentives** – through funding from the AHA and Community Health Plan of Washington (CHPW), Health Educators across the state may provide grocery store gift cards to food insecure patients participating in Health Education programming.

The Health Education and MNT teams at Sea Mar CHCs work to improve the self-management and control of a patients' chronic conditions through nutritional and behavioral change counseling. The above programs addressing food insecurity help increase access to food and other resources which aid patients improve their health as advised by their care team.

Perishable Food Pantry – Federal Way Medical Clinic



Although Sea Mar CHC's food insecurity programming has grown over the past 7 years, internal food access resources are still limited, and clinic capacity for addressing food needs is variable across the organization. As such, the Health Education and Managed Care teams at Sea Mar have developed external partnerships and increased their knowledge and awareness of local food resources, such as food banks to which they can refer patients. Health Educators may provide patients with additional information on external organization's food distribution process and requirements, as well as help address other barriers, such as transportation, that might prevent patients from utilizing these resources. The Managed Care Department also aids eligible patients in enrolling in state-run programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), called Basic Food in Washington, and Medicaid.

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

Sea Mar's equity goal, as outlined in their 2024 Quality Improvement Plan, is to increase food insecurity screening from 7,297 patients to 10,000 patients. To aid in this effort, the Health Education team began engaging the medical sites in November 2023 to implement clinic-wide food insecurity screening across the state, particularly in the following counties: Pierce, Thurston, Grays Harbor, and Clark. The two primary challenges that arose during the implementation process were:

- 1) Limited knowledge/awareness of food insecurity programming and resources among clinic staff, and
- 2) External partners' limited capacity for supporting food insecurity programming for Sea Mar patients.

Although staff and leadership alike were cognizant of patient barriers to improved health outcomes such as food insecurity, and supported the practice of identifying patient needs through SDOH screening, there were significant concerns about how the organization would address these needs once identified. As a result, staff were hesitant to conduct food insecurity screening in the clinic, fearing they would not be able to provide support to patients who screened positive.

To address this concern, the Health Education team organized virtual and in-person meetings to enhance staff knowledge of food insecurity programming and provide additional training on conducting food insecurity screening during patient appointments. During these meetings, staff were updated on ongoing programs, such as the produce voucher initiatives, and informed about partnership development and outreach activities led by Health Educators to identify external resources for patient referrals. By hosting these additional meetings and training, Sea Mar has been able to increase the number of patients receiving education on the Basic Food program by 79.19% between October 2023 (7,736 patients) and August 2024 (13,862 patients). During this time, Sea Mar was able to assist 916 patients complete Basic Food applications. As the Health Education team at Sea Mar continues to reach out to potential partners to secure food donations and other resources, another challenge has emerged. Funding from COVID-19 emergency response is discontinuing and food organizations are struggling to meet the high demand for their services within their local communities. Sea Mar has acknowledged this challenge and is working to strengthen both new and existing partnerships, such as those with local grocery stores, while seeking new grant opportunities to sustain food insecurity programming across the organization. Sea Mar's community partnerships have been essential to their food insecurity work; by addressing these needs around food through community partnerships, patients have more capacity to focus on their health and make the necessary lifestyle changes to improve their health conditions.