

## Urban Health Plan Creating Urban Food Security and Building the Community's Trust

### ABOUT URBAN HEALTH PLAN



Urban Health Plan provides primary and specialty health care and social services to the Hunts Point, Mott Haven, and Morrisania sections of the Bronx, Central Harlem, and Corona, Queens. The organization, which in 2024 celebrates its 50th Anniversary, was founded by Dr. Richard Izquierdo, a lifelong resident of the South Bronx who was concerned about gaps in the medical system that failed to meet the increasing health needs of his underserved community. He opened the San Juan Health Center, a group medical practice, in 1967 to bring affordable primary care to residents who often had no choice but to rely on emergency rooms for care and endured long waiting times at crowded local hospitals. In 1974, he established Urban Health Plan, a private,

non-profit corporation licensed by the Department of Health, to broaden the reach and scope of his practice. Today, Urban Health Plan offers an array of services, including prenatal care, HIV care, and WIC support. Over time, Urban Health Plan has formed collaborations and partnerships with community-based organizations to continue to uplift the community's needs, address social drivers, and serve them so that they can attain their health goals. Urban Health Plan has received national recognition for its performance improvement work, innovation, and provision of high-quality care.

### SCREENING FOR SOCIAL NEEDS & UNDERSTANDING PATIENTS' SOCIAL NEEDS

*Urban Health Plan uses PRAPARE®, a national screening tool and approach to collect standardized social needs data to better understand the patients' social needs and transform their care. PRAPARE® consists of a set of national core measures as well as a set of optional measures for community priorities. It was informed by research, the experience of existing social risk assessments, and stakeholder engagement. For more information about PRAPARE®, visit [www.prapare.org](http://www.prapare.org).*

Urban Health Plan asks each patient to complete a set of basic intake questions at a minimum annually. However, Urban Health Plan also recognizes the importance of addressing barriers and screens for food insecurity in addition to asking patients about their food situation during nutrition appointments. Because the food program is community based, patients know that Urban Health Plan will help anyone who comes to their door. There are many patients in the community who rely on Urban Health Plan for their produce and connection to resources identified through the PRAPARE® SDOH screening. For example, many community members experiencing homelessness in Hunts Point have contacted Urban Health Plan to access the food pantry and were also connected to other resources for their needs identified in the screening process. Moreover, Urban Health Plan's case management system helps identify patient needs and verify if patients are enrolled in assistance programs such as food stamps. This system has also helped Urban Health Plan to identify needs connected to food insecurity including unemployment, transportation, and education. Urban Health Plan employs a care team with a variety of staff, including community outreach workers, physicians, and nutritionists, which contributes to their success in identifying and addressing patients' social needs.

## HEALTH CENTER RESPONSE TO PATIENTS' SOCIAL NEEDS



Throughout the years, Urban Health Plan has found ways to connect with patients to best respond to their social needs. For instance, Urban Health Plan initiated a social media challenge on Instagram where they asked patients to show how they cook their favorite culturally appropriate meals. Patients engaged with pictures and videos of their favorite meals and helped Urban Health Plan to better understand what the community enjoyed cooking and eating, especially for patients with children and close family members. Urban Health Plan recognizes the importance of connection in community building, especially when it comes to fostering relationships with community partners. This is why Urban Health Plan reaches out to community partners for help

with donations. It maintains continuous communications with these partners, such as food banks, to understand what resources they can share to support patients and to determine how Urban Health Plan can help them in return. One example is Urban Health Plan's connection with a local bodega food store, which now has a salad bar thanks to the partnership with the health center and their continuous support in keeping the bodega's healthy items stocked. Through these programs and connections, Urban Health Plan has observed that for patients with uncontrolled chronic conditions, improving their food security reduces their A1C levels and has a significant positive impact on their chronic conditions. One patient who achieved food security and overcame pre-diabetes with the help of Urban Health Plan became a proud advocate for the health center and even joined the board. Additionally, Urban Health Plan is participating in the NACHC Innovation Incubator program, with plans to expand their kitchen cooking program by inviting guest chefs to teach patients how to make affordable, healthy foods.

## CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

While the Urban Health Plan's food projects had a lot of success, they also experienced challenges. The community relied heavily on Urban Health Plan for produce, often surpassing the available supply. Consequently, there were times when the health center had to refer patients to alternative sources for affordable or free food. Additionally, balancing the provision of shelf-stable items like peanut butter with perishable, healthier options like lettuce posed a significant challenge. Perishable foods were in high demand and had a limited shelf life, complicating inventory management for Urban Health Plan. To address this need, Urban Health Plan collaborated with a local farm stand. Although they initially faced challenges in gaining buy-in from the farm stand, they eventually earned the community's trust by consistently showing up in support of food security for their community and providing resources for the local farm stand. This collaboration also supported connecting patients with the health center's cooking classes, empowering them to make healthy meals at home. Similarly, Urban Health Plan recognizes the critical importance of partnering with community organizations to bolster food security initiatives. As part of this effort, the organization has established working relationships with local food banks, which generously donate items to help stock Urban Health Plan's food pantry shelves. Maggie Milone, Director of Nutrition at Urban Health Plan says that "providing services and helping [patients] to connect to food and connect to Jamine Williams [Healthy Livable Communities Coordinator] and connect to the workforce program... is really nice, it's very fulfilling and very unique". Jamine Williams adds, "testimonies are the best marketing tools... and not just talking to people but living [healthy] ourselves is important too". Urban Health Plan hopes to be able to share testimonies and success stories so that others may be encouraged to start their journey to a healthy, nutritious lifestyle as well.