

Physician and Society 201 Advocacy Project: Expanding Produce Rx

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The inability to consistently access nutritious food impacts the physical and mental health of Cincinnati residents. CAIN (Churches Active in Northside) addresses this issue through a tri-weekly choice food pantry. In 2023, CAIN conducted guest surveys to evaluate its programs and explore potential new services. Survey data highlighted barriers to healthy eating, such as access to grocery stores and transportation. Additionally, while CAIN attempts to help the community as much as they can, they face a high demand and have limited resources. Our advocacy project focuses on addressing gaps in a current piece of legislation, Produce Rx, which seeks to increase access to affordable, healthy food through healthcare provider visits. The project aims to address the shortcomings of the program, which limit its accessibility and effectiveness.

Data from CAIN's surveys show that access to grocery stores within 15 minutes varies based on transportation. Individuals with cars can access stores faster, while those relying on public transport struggle, highlighting the disproportionate effect of food deserts on low-income residents. Over 20% of CAIN's clients use bus passes, but continued funding for this service is uncertain, threatening to exacerbate these challenges.

The Produce Rx program entails patients visiting a medical provider monthly, who can provide their monthly "prescription" of \$30 per household member each month to buy produce at participating sites. In 2023, Produce Rx provided \$22,400 worth of produce to families in Hamilton County, targeting areas with high rates of Black infant mortality. Of the 180 participants, 82% of infants were born at healthy weights, and 90% reached full term. However, the program only reached a fraction of those in need. Expanding the program to provide nutritional support outside of pregnancy could mitigate broader health challenges and financial strain.

While the program promotes health education and has shown success, the \$30 allocation is insufficient for larger households. Additionally, many low-income individuals live in food deserts and face transportation barriers. We propose several modifications to Produce Rx to increase its impact. First, healthcare providers should have an easy way to formally prescribe Produce Rx. Integrating information about this program into electronic medical records (EMR) would trigger information to be included in the patient's After Visit Summary and provide a reminder to physicians about the availability of the program. We also recommend increasing the monthly prescription budget from \$30 to \$40 to account for inflation. Finally, funding for transportation, such as bus passes, would help patients access both healthcare providers and participating stores.

Partnering with local grocery stores, such as Kroger, to secure donations for the program would also help extend its reach. Collecting and presenting data on the success of the program will be key to demonstrating its importance to policymakers.

Our advocacy campaign will highlight the program's role in improving access to nutritious food and healthcare for underserved populations. Visual advertisements will target hospital policymakers and government officials to effectively communicate the need for these proposed improvements.