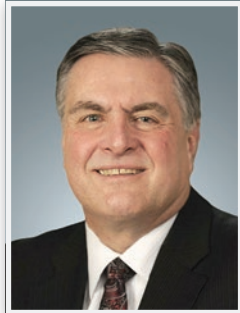


An Outside-the-Box Approach to Addressing Social Determinants of Health

By David Kindlick, Virtua Health



As board chair for Virtua Health, southern New Jersey's largest health system, I've supported some bold plans for advancing our care to best meet the needs of our community. Some efforts, like building a cancer center or acquiring a neighboring health system, are more customary to



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endorse, as they are consistent with the core operations of a dynamic health system in a competitive market. Other initiatives, like the one to turn a decommissioned city bus into a supermarket on wheels to bring healthy, affordable food directly into neighborhood "food deserts," stand out as truly unique and meaningful decisions—ones that don't come in front of healthcare boards every day.

The takeaway from that "get-on-the-bus" decision, and all the incredible work that ensued, is that sometimes the most outside-the-box ideas are the ones that can have the greatest impact.

For context, Virtua Health is a comprehensive healthcare organization with roots that date to the 1880s. Its 15,000-person workforce, five hospitals, and 300 care locations provide a wide spectrum of services, from primary and urgent care practices to renowned and highly ranked cardiology and organ-transplantation programs.

Many things we do are considered critical and innovative to the region, but what truly sets us apart is a series of programs that directly impact the most vulnerable members of our community.

Helping Others "Eat Well" With Dignity

Virtua's supermarket-on-wheels is now the flagship of our three-pronged "Eat Well" initiative, outlined below. The Eat Well name is a purposeful extension of Virtua's mission to help people "Be Well, Get Well, and Stay Well."

- The **Virtua Mobile Farmers Market** launched in 2017 and quickly established itself as the largest hospital-operated farmers market in the nation.

Registered dietitians and support staff visit daycares, senior centers, housing complexes, and places of worship to sell fresh produce at deeply discounted prices. This year-round program—operated from a 23-foot, customized van—offers locally grown fruits and vegetables whenever possible.

- Two **Virtua "Food Farmacies,"** or food pantries that enable physicians to "prescribe" free food to patients with diet-related chronic diseases and food insecurity and connect these patients to nutrition education and social support services.
- The **Virtua Mobile Grocery Store** is a 40-foot traveling store that offers fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant foods at below-market prices. In its first six months of operation, the Mobile Grocery Store helped to feed 1,700 people.

Collectively, this trio makes it easier for people with limited resources to prioritize their health. Many of the communities we serve have an abundance of fast-food establishments and convenience stores, but no entities offering food that is both healthy and affordable. Eat Well addresses the issue of cost by providing deep discounts on all products or, with the Food Farmacies, by supplying all groceries free of charge. In addition, the two mobile programs address transportation barriers by going directly into food desert neighborhoods.

Measuring Impact

With Eat Well, we aim to address the short-term need of getting healthy foods into people's homes, while also establishing healthy habits that can span generations. Our teams provide nutrition education, develop recipes, and make it simpler for folks to make good choices. Through these programs, we have encountered children who proudly proclaim they love to eat carrots and seniors who say they look forward to shopping with us every week.

The gratitude we receive often feels like ample proof that these initiatives are successful. Yet, as board chair, I

Key Board Takeaways

To reduce food insecurity and improve health through population health programs, healthcare boards and leaders should consider taking the following steps:

- **Embrace bold ideas.** Sometimes the most unconventional ideas deserve the most attention.
- **Get out there.** If you want to be of service to people, serve them where they are. Identify ways to integrate into the community.
- **Listen to the people you serve.** Virtua routinely surveys its constituents to identify areas of greatest need. Our community surveys revealed food access as a critical need and an area in which we could make a substantial impact.
- **Establish advocates and allies.** Tap local leaders and other supporters who can help introduce you to the people you want to reach. Virtua owes a great deal to the teachers, pastors, government officials, and other advocates who welcomed us with open arms and minds.
- **Build trust through consistency.** Virtua's mobile programs visit the same locations week after week. This reliability establishes trust and builds ongoing care relationships.

know the board must hold the impact of these programs to the same high standards we apply to more traditional strategies. Our teams set goals, review metrics, and assess outcomes.

Here are just a few measurable examples of Eat Well's success:

- Eighty percent of customers reported they eat more produce and prepare more nutritious meals due to the Mobile Grocery Store, and 90 percent said they have more access to healthy food.
- Sixty percent of Mobile Farmers Market customers reported their health improved over 12 months.
- Participants in the Food Farmacy program reported a 33 percent increase in daily fruit and vegetable consumption on average.

Funding Support

As a not-for-profit, Virtua relies on its philanthropic community to literally fuel our outreach efforts. For instance, we set a \$4 million fundraising goal to cover the cost of creating and operating the

Mobile Grocery Store for its first five years. Thanks to many generous supporters, we are confident in our ability to achieve this level of support for a program that is so well-received and already showing impact.

In my conversations with potential donors, I encourage them to think of the Eat Well programs as an investment in the long-term health and wellness of our neighbors. We are confident that by helping people eat well, we can reduce rates of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and other diet-related diseases that limit people's

quality of life. The results may not be instantaneous, but they are truly profound.

Creating Healthy Communities

Virtua is a leader in community outreach in ways beyond food access. We operate two other specially converted vans—one providing pediatric services and the other offering mammography. Both cater to clients with limited or no health insurance and transportation challenges. Virtua also operates a two-campus therapy program for children who have emotional, behavioral, or psychiatric challenges.

I'm proud to have a voice in an organization that has dedicated itself to being a force for good, prioritizing population health in ways that are often seen as beyond the scope of a health system. If you find yourself in southern New Jersey one day, be on the lookout for some of our exciting, traveling services.

The Governance Institute thanks David Kindlick, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Virtua Health, for contributing this article. He can be reached at dakindlick@gmail.com.