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Voucher-based program Veggie Rx prescribes fresh food with local access

By Drew Myron



Carey

Hughes, left, owner of Huskey's 97 Market in Moro, shows Delores Richter the fresh fruit and vegetables available with Veggie Rx vouchers.

The shelves are bare at the local market, and owner Carey Hughes is delighted.

“We’ve had so many people buy produce this week,” she says. “I’m already low on strawberries, and I just got these left.”

She smiles as she points to two lonely cartons in the walk-in cooler where she keeps the goods fresh.

Business has been brisk at Huskey’s 97 Market in Moro, the town’s only grocery, with Carey happily redeeming prescriptions for fresh fruit and vegetables as part of Veggie Rx.

Veggie Rx is a food voucher program, recently made available to Wasco and Sherman counties. The program allows medical and social service providers to “prescribe” monthly vouchers worth \$30 that can be used to buy fresh fruit and vegetables at local farmers markets and retail stores.

The program is administered by Gorge Grown Food Network, a local nonprofit organization with a mission to build a regional food system that improves the health and happiness of the community. Funded with grants and donations—not government assistance—Veggie Rx is quickly becoming a national model for bringing health care, nonprofits and food systems together to address health and hunger.

The program grew out of a 2015 study by the Columbia Gorge Health Council that revealed one in three Gorge residents worries about running out of food, and one in five regularly misses meals.

Gorge Grown Executive Director Sarah Sullivan says Veggie Rx provides a practical solution to the hunger epidemic.

The program took root in 2015 with funding from the Oregon Community Foundation and Washington State Farmers Market Association. Since then, more than \$70,000 in Veggie Rx vouchers has been spent locally, feeding more than 10,000 people.

With proven success, the health community has joined in. One Community Health, a clinic serving the region’s most vulnerable populations, has allocated funds for Veggie Rx. Columbia Gorge Family Medicine, a private health clinic, also funds vouchers for its patients. PacificSource, the regional Coordinated Care Organization, recently allocated \$10,000 to pilot the Veggie Rx program.



Caitlin Blagg, district administrator for Sherman County Health District, shares recipes and meal ideas with Delores and Karl Richter.

In May, the program came to Sherman County, thanks to the Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization and the Local Community Advisory Committee, with Community Benefit Initiative Reinvestment grant funds.

“The fact that clinics are allocating funding from their general operating budgets, and the CCOs are allocating Medicaid funding to Veggie Rx, is truly revolutionary,” Sarah says. “We hope this sets a precedent nationwide.”

Delores Richter is thrilled to finally have access to healthy food. She is retired and has lived in Moro for more than a decade. She was one of the first to sign up for the program in Sherman County.

“Now I can eat more fresh food, and I can buy from my local store,” she says.

Loaded up with recipes provided by the program, she and her husband, Karl, frequently prepare stir-fry meals featuring a rainbow of fresh veggies, such as green beans, carrots, asparagus and beets.

That is good news to Carey, who sees her customers load up on chips and sweets.

“So many people eat processed food because it’s cheap,” she says. “It’s cheaper to eat bad food, sadly.”

Price and proximity are two barriers to healthy eating, and just what Veggie Rx hopes to change by making vouchers easy to spend on healthy food at local grocery stores and markets.

In small, remote places, the gas and time required to travel to major grocery stores can be a deterrent to accessing fresh, healthy food. Add bad weather and the challenge is overwhelming.

“This winter, a lot of people couldn’t get out to make the drive to The Dalles,” Carey says. “This program will help people get good food close to home.”

In Sherman and Wasco counties, Gorge Grown is working with small, independent grocers to improve access to fresh food. Participating markets include Huskey’s 97 Market in Moro, Wasco Market and Maupin Market. Organizers are working to add more retail locations. Fostering these local partnerships means the money stays in the county where the vouchers are distributed.

While not a cure, the Veggie Rx program is helping to increase good nutrition and improve overall health.

“It’s a great program for people who need it,” says Caitlin Blagg, district administrator for Sherman County Health District. “The best part is when I give a voucher and I hear someone say, ‘I haven’t had a fresh cucumber in years.’ ”

Veggie Rx Eligibility

To find out if you are eligible for free produce, answer the following:

1. In the last year, have you worried that your family will run out of food?
2. Has anyone in your family skipped a meal because you ran out of food?

If the answer is yes to either question, you qualify for Veggie Rx. There are four places to sign up:

- Sherman County Health District,
(541) 565-0536, 110 Main St., Moro
- Sherman County Medical Clinic,
(541) 565-3325, 110 Main St., Moro
- Deschutes Rim Clinic
(541) 395-2911, 1605 George Jackson Road, Maupin
- North Central Public Health District
(541) 506-2600, 419 E. Seventh St., The Dalles

For more information, go to www.gorgegrown.com/veggierx, or ask your health care provider or local health department.