COMMUNITY

On a Mission

Community-based nonprofits provide nutritious food to families

Feeding Tampa Bay is a Florida nonprofit partnering with area hospital systems to provide medically tailored meals to patients. FEEDING TAMPA BAY

By Robin Roenker

By providing area residents with boxes of healthy fruit and vegetables and dietitian-approved lean proteins, nonprofit Feeding Tampa Bay hopes to create a downstream ripple effect of not only addressing food insecurity but also preventing diet-related health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

"The more we make available good, fresh, healthy foods, the far more those are consumed and selected over and over again," says Thomas Mantz, Feeding Tampa Bay's president and CEO. "We find that the general population we serve wants access to healthier foods, but they can't always afford them in the stores."

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The Florida nonprofit is partnering with area hospital systems to provide medically tailored groceries to patients, and it plans to expand to add fully prepared, medically tailored meals to its services.

In both programs, healthy foods are matched to cater to the specific nutritional needs and health goals of recipients.

In addition to providing critical access to nutritional foods, nonprofits in the Food is Medicine space are also hard at work developing educational platforms to help their clients better understand how to work healthy ingredients into their daily lives.

In San Francisco, for example, the nonprofit agency 18 Reasons offers hands-on cooking classes and workshops with tips on buying nutritious foods on a limited budget.

Area physicians can refer patients in need of dietary interventions directly to the nonprofit for connection with healthy food delivery boxes and weekly live online tutorials.

"If you've never tried cooking with more fruits and vegetables in your diet, it can be really overwhelming," says Sarah Nelson, executive director of 18 Reasons. "All of our programming is focused on helping people learn to cook more at home and explore different healthy recipes and ingredients that may be new to them."

In Cincinnati, some programs at nonprofit La Soupe remove the prep work for clients entirely by providing ready-made soups and meals sourced from nutritious ingredients that would have otherwise gone to waste at farms or grocery stores.

"We have a wonderful group of chefs that are highly trained to transform these random pieces of food that come into our door into beautiful, nourishing meals for our community," says Hannah Griswold, La Soupe's Food as Medicine director.

In its meal prep, La Soupe adopts a nutritious approach, including efforts to ensure a portion of its meals adhere to DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) dietary guidelines — a low-sodium approach recommended for cardiovascular health.

"We strive to incorporate as many nutrient-dense foods as possible into our Food as Medicine meals," Griswold says. "We're really working hard to prevent, manage and treat chronic illness in our community."

La Soupe's sous chef, Alae Dashti, prepares meals to be packaged and sent to food pantries, school districts and other organizations by his Transform team and more than 750 active volunteers. LA SOUPE

Team chef Krina Desai helps prepare meals. LA SOUPE

An 18 Reasons worker conducts an online cooking class. 18 REASONS

SERVING COMMUNITIES LARGE AND SMALL

The Food is Medicine Coalition (FIMC) represents a growing network of U.S. nonprofit organizations that are working to provide access to high-quality, nutritious meals and groceries as a means of improving health outcomes for families in their communities.

Formally launched as a unified coalition in 2012 — though many member organizations trace their origins to meal delivery efforts in support of HIV patients in the 1980s — FIMC is working to help develop new programming in the Food is Medicine space and accredit existing agencies using proven quality standards.

"We know that the agencies in our coalition are known for the impressive outcomes our nutrition programs produce. But we know that those results are not possible without nutritious food, connection to community and a client-centered approach," says Alissa Wassung, the Food is Medicine Coalition's executive director.

In the last five years, FIMC's Accelerator Program has helped more than 20 existing community nonprofits expand their food support services to include nutritious, tailored meal programs in communities that had previously lacked such outreach.

These newer programs join dozens of long-established FIMC member organizations in efforts to strengthen the visibility and impact of medically tailored meals and grocery programming across the country — programs that deliver food customized to match recipients' specific nutrition and health needs.

FIMC's work to develop research-driven, best-practice standards within the field also helps ensure that "regardless of where an agency is, or their location or their size, they're all delivering similar, high-quality interventions" for their communities, Wassung says.

— Robin Roenker