Partnering for care

Ceres and Santa Rosa Community Health reaching those most vulnerable to COVID-19

Though clinicians Dr. Deborah Donlon saw her patients facing them every day, but never more so than over the past 7 months of the coronavirus pandemic. Dr. Donlon has been a family doctor at Santa Rosa Community Health since 2004, and since 2017 she has served as the Medical Director of the center’s Lohnert campus.

Most of the patients at her clinic, located in Santa Rosa’s Rosemont district, are monolingual Spanish-speaking. Some are living with medical conditions that are diet-related, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and cancer. Sonoma County’s high cost of living leaves less money for purchasing food, and parents will often prioritize healthy food for their children over themselves.

Ceres’ Client Care staff advocated early on in the pandemics for serving clients with the chronic conditions that were already known to increase risk. Our team reached out to Marin and Sonoma health centers including Santa Rosa Community Health to let them know Ceres remained open and able to accept referrals for an expanded range of clients we believed could most benefit from our meals.

“When COVID came into our reality in March,” said Dr. Donlon, “we started doing telephone visits with all our patients to see who could most benefit from our meals. Some were at risk for COVID, they were in the shelter in place mandate. They were the first ones I referred to Ceres. COVID has made it even harder for patients who were already on the edge. The care we provide in the clinic is a small fraction of overall health. Environment, food access and other social determinants of health are a big part of the answer. I really felt like Ceres was an incredible part of their sustenance.”

85-year old patient José Betancourt was another person she referred to Ceres. “She told me of a great program that would help get my cholesterol under control through healthy meals. When I was younger, I used to eat greasy food but I have tried to maintain a healthier lifestyle since noticing that my health was being affected. I have always been a very active person, I am a swimmer, runner and cyclist. I am in awe of the generosity of the people involved in this program. There is a person that brings the food right to my door. I really appreciate that and I am thankful to Ceres. It’s delicious, clean and fresh!”

We are grateful to our clinic partners, donors, volunteers and staff for partnering with us to serve our community in these extraordinary times. Thank you for your support, we expect to deliver 175,000 meals this year, more than double the number in 2019.

“Covid has made it even harder for patients who were already on the edge. I really felt like Ceres was an incredible part of their sustenance.”

—Deborah Donlan, MD. Medical Director, Santa Rosa Community Health

What are you grateful for?

“I cannot stand for more than a few minutes at a time. The meals are a boon as I have 7 stents in my heart and at 89 everything is difficult. I am beyond grateful.”

—Ceres Client Hilary, Novato

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March, Ceres Community Project has delivered more than 180,000 meals to people who need medically tailored meals in order to stay safe and healthy at home. Over the past seven months, as we’ve worked with both county and statewide officials to respond to the pandemic, it’s become clear that our current food safety net—which relies almost exclusively on local banks and pantries—while critically important, doesn’t meet the needs of the most vulnerable: those living with conditions like heart disease, cancer and diabetes, often alone without support, and unable to drive or prepare a healthy meal—the clients we serve most often.

That’s why, even as we’ve managed our most urgent period of meal delivery to clients during the pandemic, we’ve also been focused on those vital projects that will make medically tailored meals more readily available in the future.

Partnering with Kaiser for new research

Thanks in part to innovations we’ve been having with Kaiser Permanente’s national Community Health Teams, this innovative health leader is currently conducting random- ized control trials in four of Kaiser’s regions—Washington, Oregon, Colorado and Northern California—to test the value of medically tailored meals. Ceres is conducting one of these trials in partnership with our friends at Project Open Hand in Sonoma County. Our study includes 1,200 patients with diabetes, heart disease and/or chronic kidney disease who are being discharged from the hospital. Half the patients, 500, are receiving 10 meals a week for themselves and family members. The other half are receiving the meals along with five meals with our registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) to support them in adopting these healthy habits. Kaiser will use the research results to determine the best ways for them to integrate medically tailored meals into their care for patients. They also plan to publish the results in 2022 to help educate other health plans and providers about the benefits and value of medically tailored meals.

Mail Pilot leads to MedCal innovation

Along with our five partner agencies in the California Food & Medicine Coalition, Ceres continues to provide medically tailored meals to low-income patients with comorbid health failure as part of a four-year pilot with California’s Department of Social Services. We’ve been busy....
of Health Care Services which oversees the state’s MediCal program. More than 1,000 MediCal patients who have comorbid heart failure are receiving up to 25 meals a week for 12 weeks along with support from an RD/IP. The pilot, which is being conducted in San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Clara, Sonoma, and Fresno, Alameda and Sonoma counties, will wrap up at the end of 2021 with full evaluation available in 2022. While it’s hard to be patient, the team has already achieved important results as a result of the study. California is currently planning for a significant revision to the state’s MediCal system which will roll out in January 2022. And homes delivered meals offer discharge from the hos-
pital, and medically tailored meals for people living with 8 different diagnoses have been included as an affordable ben-
efit that health plans across the state can offer. If this model turns out as ex-
pected, this means that health plans will be able to offer and pay for this benefit for thousands of low-income patients within the next 18 months.

Advocating for nutrition security for seniors
California’s Department of Aging has been convening stakeholders for the past year with the goal of developing a Master Plan on Aging that will guide policy and investment over the next decade or more in response to the aging of California’s population. Ceres has been following the progress of the Master Plan, and along with the California Food Policy Coalition has submitted comment letters on topics related to medically tailored meals. In August, the various workshop presentations and their recommendations, Food and nutri-
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Roasted Winter Squash with Rice & Garbanzo Bean Pilaf

Ingredients 6 servings
• 1 small to medium Kabocha or other round winter squash
• olive oil, as needed
• 1 cup brown rice, soaked overnight
• 1 tsp cumin
• 1 Tbs lemon juice
• ¼ cup pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, or pine nuts, lightly toasted
• ½ cup chopped parsley
• 1 The onion, chopped
• 1 The onion, chopped
• 2 The onion, chopped
• 2 Tbs olive oil
• 2 cups cooked garbanzo beans
• ½ cup pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, or pine nuts, lightly toasted
• ½ cup chopped parsley
• 1 The onion, chopped
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Instructions
Preheat the oven to 400°. Wash the squash and then cut it in half. Scoop out the seeds. Cut the squash into wedges to make single servings. Brush the cutouts of the squash with olive oil and place flash down on a cookie sheet. Roast until tender, about 25 minutes.

Drain and rinse the rice and place it in a saucepan with the water, salt, and pepper. Bring to a boil, stir, reduce the heat to low and cook until the water is absorbed and the rice is tender, about 25 minutes. Let steam, covered, for 10 minutes.

Mix rice with the sautéed onion, garbanzo beans, nuts (or seeds), parsley and lemon. Taste and adjust seasoning as needed. Serve warm or at room temperature. This can be made 2 days in advance and stored in an airtight container.

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