mid-ohio food collective
foodbank | farm | farmacy | kitchen | market

3960 Brookham Drive, Grove City, OH 43123
614.292.FOOD (3663) | www.mofc.org
@mofcollective | @midohiofoodcollective

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Media Contact: Steve Nichol, Public Relations Manager
561.756.5520 | snichol@mofc.org

NATIONAL REPORT: DOCTOR REFERRALS TO FOOD BANKS IMPROVE HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR HUNGRY NEIGHBORS

Food security tied to lower community care costs, better individual health

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A new national report from Feeding America, a nationwide network of food banks and hunger relief partners, shows that consistent access to nutritious food can be tied to lower community healthcare costs and better health outcomes for individuals and families.

According to data assembled over a three-year period from 21 food banks (including Mid-Ohio Food Collective) across 13 states, participation in "Food as Medicine" programs—in which healthcare providers refer food insecure patients to food banks and pantries—resulted in marked improvements in key health indicators. Each food bank worked with local healthcare partners who screened patients for food insecurity and directed them to local hunger relief resources. The report is the largest evaluation of such programs conducted to date.

"MOFC has been demonstrating for more than a decade how nutritious food can be a form of effective, low-cost preventative healthcare. Now, there's national data supporting it and showing Food as Medicine to be a workable, scalable model," said MOFC Director of Research and Nutrition Amy Headings, PhD. "Millions of low-income people use food banks, and this report suggests that doing so could help prevent chronic illness and save the healthcare system millions of dollars. It's a win-win."

Across the network of participating food banks, healthcare providers screened more than 1.4 million patients for food insecurity and connected more than 161,000 people to Food as Medicine programs. Over the data collection period among program participants, hospitalizations and emergency room visits fell by 14% and 11%, respectively. Among participants with baseline and follow-up clinical data, HbA1c, BMI and LDL cholesterol measurements all improved. At a community level, the findings suggest that doctor referrals to food pantries for food insecure patients could save significant healthcare spending over time.

"These findings show us what is possible when food, healthcare and human dignity work together," said Melanie Hall, chief health, research and evaluation officer at Feeding America and registered dietitian nutritionist. "Over three years, communities across the country demonstrated that when neighbors have consistent access to nutritious food, real change follows. Food as Medicine is not just a concept. It works."

In central and eastern Ohio, Mid-Ohio Food Collective partnered with OhioHealth, which screened patients for food insecurity. Patients who screened positive received referrals to the Mid-Ohio Farmacy, which provides weekly produce access to the patient and their household at no cost. Eligible patients who enroll in the program receive a Mid-Ohio Farmacy card that allows them access to a site most convenient for them.

Among the many patients who were screened at OhioHealth Doctors Hospital and other regional OhioHealth practices, more than 350 people (and their households) received food through a food pantry participating in the Mid-Ohio Farmacy program. Eighty-three customers provided data at the beginning and end of the research period. Reported emergency room visits among those 83 fell 17%. Among participants with HbA1c data (a key indicator of the onset of diabetes) available at baseline and post, the average value decreased from 8% to 7%.

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The Food as Medicine 3.0 (FAM3) Cumulative Report represents the largest and one of the first national food as medicine evaluations focusing on healthy grocery provision through food bank and healthcare partner programs. The national initiative was funded by Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation, an affiliated arm of Elevance Health Foundation, and evaluated by the Center for Nutrition & Health.

Mid-Ohio Food Collective, Columbus' regional food bank that serves 20 counties in central and eastern Ohio, was an early adopter and champion of Food as Medicine practices. In the late 2010s, MOFC was among the first wave of U.S. food banks to re-tool its supply chain to support the distribution of fresh, healthy produce with refrigeration infrastructure, cooled trucks, and other capital investments. Last year, 62% of the food distributed by MOFC was fresh. In addition, Mid-Ohio Farmacy is one of the most well-established Food as Medicine programs in the state with over 46,000 total enrollments in MOFC's service area. The model has since expanded to other food banks under the name Farmacy Ohio.

To read the full findings from the Food as Medicine evaluation, visit feedingamerica.org/our-work/nutrition-health. To learn more about MOFC's related work in central and eastern Ohio, visit www.mofc.org/farmacy.

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About Mid-Ohio Food Collective
Mid-Ohio Food Collective (MOFC) is the largest hunger relief organization in central and eastern Ohio. Through our five assets (the Mid-Ohio Foodbank, Mid-Ohio Farm, Mid-Ohio Farmacy, Mid-Ohio Kitchen, and Mid-Ohio Market), MOFC addresses the root causes of hungeer while working with more than 600 partner agencies in 20 counties to feed hundreds of thousands of hungry Ohioans every year. Learn how we're co-creating hunger-free, healthier communities at www.mofc.org.

About Feeding America
Rooted in the voices of neighbors facing hunger, Feeding America® unites communities through a nationwide network to ensure everyone has access to food and a thriving future. As part of a network of 250+ food banks, 20+ statewide food bank associations, 10+ regional co-ops and 60,000+ agency partners, food pantries and meal programs, we helped provide 5.9 billion meals to tens of millions of people in need last year.

About Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation
The Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, is a philanthropic arm of the Elevance Health Foundation. The Foundation works to improve the health of the socially vulnerable through partnerships and programs in our communities with an emphasis on maternal-infant health; behavioral health; and food as medicine. Additionally, the Foundation also responds to disasters when our communities need us the most. ®ANTHEM is a registered trademark of Anthem Insurance Companies, Inc. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield names and symbol are registered marks of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. To learn more about the Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation and the Elevance Health Foundation, please visit www.elevancehealth.foundation and its blog at www.medium.com/elevancehealthfoundation.

About the Center for Nutrition & Health Impact (CNHI)
CNHI is a nonprofit research institute providing expertise in measurement and evaluation to develop, enhance, and expand public health programs. CNHI's research focuses on encouraging healthy eating and active living, improving food security and healthy food access, and promoting local food systems. With expertise in public health nutrition, CNHI is dedicated to building measurement strategies to assess the impact of innovative health-related programs. CNHI works nationally and internationally, partnering with other nonprofits, academia, government entities, and private foundations to conduct research, evaluation, and strategic planning. Visit centerfornutrition.org to learn more.

About OhioHealth
OhioHealth is a nationally recognized, not-for-profit, faith-based health system serving patients across Ohio through a network of hospitals, physician practices, ambulatory sites and health services. Guided by its mission to improve the health of those it serves, OhioHealth provides compassionate, high-quality care while advancing medical innovation, education and community wellness.