

News release

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NEW PILOT PROGRAM FROM EXCELLUS BCBS AND FOODLINK TO SUPPORT A HEALTHIER COMMUNITY

Rochester, NY - When the pandemic forced Karen Goossen to close her business this spring, she knew her income was at risk. She didn't realize the economic fallout would also put her health at risk.

Goossen, an Excellus BlueCross BlueShield member, had been following her doctor's advice to add more fresh fruits and vegetables to her diet to help manage her medical concerns. However, with her income limited, those healthier choices became luxuries.

"I had to find a way to stretch my dollars," she said, "so sometimes I had to do without fresh fruits and vegetables."

A new analysis conducted for Excellus BCBS by data science company Algorex Health Technologies identified food insecurity as one of the most prominent needs in Rochester. Another recent study by Feeding America showed food insecurity in Foodlink's 10-county area is expected to rise 45 percent this year due to the pandemic.

To help at-risk members like Goossen, the health insurer developed the "Fresh Account at Curbside Market" program with Foodlink. As part of the pilot project, Excellus BCBS members with the greatest risk of food insecurity and health care needs receive a monthly \$30 voucher for six months. Members redeem the vouchers at Foodlink's "Fresh Account at Curbside Market" locations. The Curbside Market is Foodlink's mobile farmers market, which provides affordable and convenient access to healthy foods in underserved communities.

Members also receive support from nutrition counselors and have the option to take part in Foodlink's Cooking Matters nutrition education classes.

Loss of income, poverty, a person's environment, education levels, and discrimination can all contribute to health risks. Known as social determinants of health, these factors can have significant impact on a person's quality of life and well-being.

"Understanding how social determinants impact our members' health allows us to provide them with better care," said Dr. Brian Steele, Excellus BCBS's vice president and chief medical officer for safety net and population management. "Food insecurity, apart from the pandemic, was identified as a clear need in our community. You need a healthy diet to improve and maintain good health. This seemed to be an area where we could intervene."

"This is an exciting partnership for Foodlink and Curbside Market because it aligns perfectly with our mission as a public health organization," said Julia Tedesco, President & CEO of Foodlink. "The Fresh Account program helps people access healthier foods and celebrates making the healthy choice the easy choice. We hope this will improve Excellus BCBS member experience and health outcomes – and lower health care costs."

Participation in the program helps Excellus BCBS member Carl Draper extend his food budget and meet his health care goals. “It brings a nice balance. I get lots of good green stuff into the mix,” he said. “I can make a well-rounded meal, adding fresh fruits and vegetables I can’t ordinarily get.”

“The goal is not only to help members eat healthier, it helps us engage more easily with them.,” Steele said.

Program participants are connected with nurse care managers who support the members’ health care needs. The care managers help identify gaps in care, encourage continuation of medical care and identify available community resources. Improving overall health, helps reduce emergency department and hospital admissions.

The pilot launched on August 1, with 250 members and another 250 members are expected to be enrolled later this year.

Goossen calls the program “a blessing. The timing was perfect. I really needed it and there’s a need in the community.”

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Excellus BlueCross BlueShield, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, is a nonprofit health plan with 1.5 million upstate New York members. The company's mission is to help people live healthier and more secure lives through access to high-quality, affordable health care. Its products and services include cost-saving prescription drug discounts, wellness tracking tools and access to telemedicine. With more than 3,500 employees, the company is committed to attracting and retaining a diverse workforce to foster innovation and better serve its members. It also encourages employees to engage in their communities by providing paid volunteer time off as one of many benefits. To learn more, visit ExcellusBCBS.com.