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When is food medicine?

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Karina Hayes (left), the food relief program manager at the Center for Advocacy, Support and Transformation, with CAST executive director Cathy Demeroto, at the Southold organization’s food pantry, which supplies food for the Food as Medicine program. (Credit: Melissa Azofeifa)

Southold’s Center for Advocacy, Support and Transformation is partnering with Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital in Greenport to combat health inequity and food insecurity.

The “Food as Medicine” program connects qualified hospital patients to CAST, giving them access to the nonprofit’s food pantry and other services. The partnership is part of an effort by hospitals nationwide to improve health equity in their communities.

“This initiative is not just about food access, it’s about health intervention,” said Karina Hayes, manager of CAST’s food relief program.

The initiative is aimed at addressing — and preventing — chronic health conditions among CAST clients and in the community, according to executive director Cathy Demeroto.

“We want to ensure we are providing, through our food relief programs, nutrition that not only addresses the immediate hunger and food insecurity, but will prevent or help with any chronic illnesses that our clients are experiencing,” Ms. Demeroto said.

Every SBELIH patient is screened for food insecurity and, if deemed at risk, receives a tote bag of food from the hospital’s food pantry when they are discharged.

When a patient is identified as food insecure, the hospital’s social workers and case managers complete a referral to CAST. From that point, CAST contacts the individual to , complete an intake screening and links them to its multitude of services.

Besides a well stocked food pantry, CAST offers transportation assistance, and seasonal programs like a fall school supplies drive , a summer feed-a-kid program and a toy drive before Christmas. They will also have access to the organizations education and outreach programs which include English as second language classes, computer training and work force connections as they transition back into the community.

“We know that social risk factors can negatively affect a person’s health, and these include worse health outcomes and longer hospitalizations,” said Tara Kraemer, vice president of quality and regulatory affairs at SBELIH . “As health care professionals, we really do have a duty to address these social determinants of health.”

CAST has also started a new program for clients with dietary requirement or restrictions due to conditions such as diabetes or hypertension. On the shelves of its impressive food pantry, which resembles a small grocery store, clients will find items with color-coded labels to indicate foods that are low-sugar, low-sodium and low-cholesterol.

To further develop the program, CAST is partnering with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, which will provide a nutritionist and offer bilingual workshops on eating healthy and managing chronic health issues through food.

“We will be providing not only nutrition and healthy lifestyle tips to address the increase in diabetes and heart disease, but recipes and food tastings using CAST food pantry items,” said CCE senior nutritionist Karen Ball. “CCE Suffolk is looking forward to assisting our community neighbors in making the healthiest choices for themselves and their families.”

CAST currently serves 2,822 clients — around 10% of the population of Southold Town — and about 50 of them have special dietary needs, according to Ms. Demeroto.

Ms. Kraemer noted that the hospital will be reaching out to other community-based organizations to help support this initiative.

“When it comes to health equity and the social determinants of health, the food as medicine program is only one aspect of that, and we’ll be continuing to work to address the other determinants of health,” she said.