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A Recipe for Health Success: Community Servings' Medically Tailored Meal Delivery Service Associated With Reduced Costs for High Utilizers of Health Care

Health Affairs Study Reveals 16 Percent Drop in ED and Inpatient Expense, Through Research Project with Mass General Hospital, Commonwealth Care Alliance and AARP Foundation

BOSTON – A medically tailored meal delivery service provided by [Community Servings](#) to homebound and critically or chronically ill individuals was associated with a 16 percent net reduction in health care costs, according to a new study published in the April issue of the journal *Health Affairs*. Dually eligible for Medicaid and Medicare services, these individuals are among the highest cost, highest needs patients in Massachusetts.

The research, funded by AARP Foundation and undertaken in partnership with Massachusetts General Hospital and the community-based health plan Commonwealth Care Alliance, is the first to demonstrate how this specialized yet basic intervention – providing made-from-scratch medically tailored meals to a nutritionally vulnerable population – can lead to fewer costly emergency department visits and hospital admissions.

“This rigorous study reinforces our belief that there is significant potential for improved health outcomes and cost savings if health plans cover medically tailored meals for patients with complex health issues,” said David B. Waters, CEO of Community Servings. “Food is, in fact, medicine, and we are excited about the tremendous effect of medically tailored, home-delivered meals on the health and well-being of homebound and critically or chronically ill individuals.”

The study, led by Dr. Seth A. Berkowitz, examined two meal programs and medical claims data for adults who were dually eligible for Medicaid and Medicare coverage. One group received home-delivered meals from Community Servings, whose meals are developed by a registered dietician and executive chef and are tailored to fit the complex medical and nutritional needs of those with diabetes, HIV/AIDS, cancer, heart disease, kidney disease, and other life-threatening illnesses. The other group was served by a traditional home-delivered meals program, which also provides nutritious meals but does not tailor them to individual medical needs. Both groups were compared to a control group of patients with similar demographics and illness profiles.



Researchers found that participants in both meals programs experienced fewer emergency department visits and emergency transportation services, but only Community Servings clients who received medically tailored meals had fewer inpatient admissions – resulting in a 16 percent net reduction in health care costs. In dollar terms, the average monthly medical costs for medically tailored meal participants was \$843, compared to \$1,413 for the control group, reflecting a gross difference of \$570 per month, or a net difference (factoring in the cost of the meals) of \$220 per month.

“We know from decades of research that poor diet is associated with worse health, and there is no doubt that poor diet leads to higher costs of care. This study adds evidence that medically tailored meals may have a positive effect on health while lowering the use of expensive health care services,” said Berkowitz, a physician who is now an assistant professor at the [University of North Carolina School of Medicine](#) in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Nutrition is increasingly recognized as a key social determinant of health because poor diet and food insecurity are connected to chronic health problems and frequent use of costly medical services. Food insecurity causes more than an estimated \$77 billion in additional health care expenditures annually in the United States.

“Every day 10 million older adults face the threat of hunger,” said Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of [AARP Foundation](#), which supports Community Servings through its grant making. “This first-of-its-kind study confirms what we’ve learned about medically tailored meals: They improve health outcomes for vulnerable patients.”

Lori Wiviott Tishler, MD, MPH, vice president of medical affairs at [Commonwealth Care Alliance](#), said, “When working with some of the most vulnerable individuals throughout the Commonwealth, it’s critical to recognize how social determinants of health play a major role in their overall healthcare. Food insecurity and poor nutrition are directly correlated with chronic health problems, which can lead to the use of more – and more expensive – medical services. Meal delivery programs, such as those offered by Community Servings, may offer an opportunity not only to lower costs, but to dramatically improve a patient’s quality of life.”

The study abstract is available from *Health Affairs* through the following web link: <http://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/abs/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0999>

The study’s release coincides with the launch of Community Servings’ *Food is the Foundation* capital campaign to support the organization’s upcoming expansion project and program growth.

About Community Servings

Community Servings is a not-for-profit organization with a 28-year history of providing medically tailored meals and nutrition services to individuals and families coping with critical and chronic illnesses like HIV/AIDS, cancer, kidney disease, diabetes, heart disease, and others.



The meals are made-from-scratch and home-delivered, sending the message to those in greatest need that someone cares. Community Servings helps its clients maintain their health and dignity and preserve the integrity of their families through free, culturally appropriate meals, nutrition education and counseling, and other community programs. For more information, visit www.servings.org.

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