

Fighting Food Insecurity

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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Illinois Congresswoman Cheri Bustos (IL-17) is one of the bipartisan sponsors of the Social Determinants Accelerator Act of 2019. The bill would create a federal grant program to empower states and local governments to tackle persistent economic and social conditions — like limited access to health care providers, stable housing, reliable transportation and healthy foods — that often hinder health outcomes.

OSF HealthCare has been among those on the forefront of finding ways to overcome challenges faced by the communities it serves when it comes to improving the health and access to care in those communities.

It isn't just about what happens inside a particular facility, but is a far bigger picture – and challenge.

"When we think about trying to do population health we want to take care of patients in the things that affect their health outside of the hospital and the clinic. So those are things like safe housing, having access to fresh and healthy foods, and being able to have safe places where kids can play and people can grow up. So all this is building off of that idea of affecting social determinants of health," explains Mary Stapel, Physician, OSF HealthCare.

Dr. Stapel works closely with the innovation and wellness teams to find ways to improve the social determinants of health for both adults and children.

More than 18-million people in the United States do not have access to healthy food, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Among all states, Illinois has a higher rate of food insecurity overall, with the Peoria area having a 15% higher rate than the rest of the country.

In many of the communities it serves, OSF HealthCare cultivates community gardens with a variety of produce that is shared with those in need.

"It's not just having access to food but having access to healthy and nutritious food. We do know that many of the places we serve across the ministry there are areas of food deserts, so places where people can't access food, there aren't grocery stores, there aren't places that they can't get to fresh, healthy foods. So that's really what we were getting out with this idea of having community gardens and places where people can go and get healthy, nutritious food," says Dr. Stapel.

Dr. Stapel says OSF HealthCare is working on ways to better identify those who need extra help when it comes to social determinants of health, and then getting those people connected to additional services.

It will be a slow process, but part of a steady, nationwide movement with a focus on expanded collaboration.

"Population, community health are really coming into the picture more and more. We're picking up on and identifying that 80% of what affects someone's health – and this comes from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation - is not what happens within the walls of the clinic and the hospital. So if we really want to take good care of our patients and improve the overall health of our population, decrease costs, then we need to be looking at these factors."

Learn more about the work of OSF HealthCare to address [social determinants of health](#) and the [legislation](#) co-sponsored by Rep. Bustos.