

# Illinois food pantry offers health screening program

February 20, 2024

Good nutrition is the foundation for good health. A 2023 systematic review found that people who do not have regular access to nutritious foods have a 55% higher risk of heart disease, diabetes, kidney dysfunction, hypertension, high cholesterol, and other conditions.<sup>[1]</sup> People who use food pantries are also less likely to see a health care provider regularly — and more likely to use emergency departments.

Noting these connections — and seeing the significant increases in food pantry usage during the COVID-19 pandemic — the Chicagoland CEAL Program (CCP) used a “captured audience approach” to reach out to this population. By offering health screenings onsite to food pantry participants, they uncovered undiagnosed and undertreated hypertension and diabetes and connected people to needed care and services.

Bringing health care screenings to food pantries offers several advantages. Food pantries are usually situated in local communities and often sponsored by houses of worship or other trusted community-based organizations. This helps to overcome barriers to preventive care posed by issues of distance, transportation, convenience, and trust.

For this program, CCP expanded on partnerships they forged in 2021 and 2022 to conduct COVID-19 vaccination drives in underserved areas of the city. The project brought together community-engaged researchers from the University of Chicago (UChicago) with representatives of community-based organizations on Chicago’s South Side. Partners included UChicago Medicine and three neighborhood food pantries, Windsor Park Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Moses the Black Parish, and Woodlawn Community Food Pantry. The pantries promoted the events to their food pantry attendees. Nurses from UChicago Medicine and public health students from UChicago volunteered to conduct the screenings.

While attendance at the events varied, nearly 160 people took advantage of the health screenings offered during pantry hours during the months of February, April, and May 2023.

- Over 125 were screened for hypertension, with 75% diagnosed with Stage 1 or Stage 2 hypertension — nearly three times the rate in the total Chicago population.
- Thirty-three people were screened for kidney function, revealing abnormal results for diabetes, kidney function, or both in more than 72% of this group.

CCP worked with the South Side Health Community Organization to connect individuals without health care providers to clinics and physicians.

Despite the expertise of UChicago Medicine nurses and public health students in cultural competency, the CCP team credits the success of the program to their community partners and volunteers who have long-standing relationships with food pantry participants. These familiar faces and places helped create a welcoming atmosphere that helped pantry participants feel comfortable interacting with health care providers.

“The only reason we were remotely successful in the implementation of our programming and recruitment among pantry participants was due to our long-standing relationships built with our community partners and the pantry volunteers,” said David Moskowitz, Ph.D., principal investigator for CCP. “Both churches and the community center loved the concept and its implementation. They saw this as an achievable and concrete extension of their organizational missions and a real, tangible way to help the health of their patrons and parishioners.”

The team is looking forward to expanding offerings in the future — and expanding the role of community-based organizations in the planning and implementation. “We are listening to the needs of our partners and helping them implement their own health programming,” Moskowitz added. Other conditions that the partners would like to address in the future include arthritis, Alzheimer’s disease, high cholesterol, substance use disorder, and mental health.



**Topic(s):** Health Knowledge Monitoring

**Program:** Community Engagement Alliance Regional Teams