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Saint Anne's to write prescriptions for fresh produce



Kathleen Brennan of Dartmouth's Silverbrook Farm puts out fresh lettuce at Saint Anne's Hospital in Fall River. Saint Anne's, along with Southcoast, has kicked off new farmers markets on-site. The markets will run through the end of October.

JOHN SLADEWSKI/The Standard-Times

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By ANIKA CLARK

aclark@s-t.com July 19, 2012 12:00 AM

FALL RIVER — Conventional wisdom says an apple a day keeps the doctor away. But through Saint Anne's Hospital's soon-to-launch produce prescription program, a patient will be able to receive a physical and fresh fruit in the same visit.

After recently starting a weekly farmers market on-site in Fall River, Saint Anne's is striking partnerships with select area doctors to offer prescriptions for fresh produce.

Funded through the hospital's community benefits program, the vouchers are redeemable at the market for one serving of fruits or vegetables, per day per person, for up to four family members throughout the market's season, according to Susan Oldrid, vice president for mission and community partnerships. Oldrid said she was inspired in the charge by the nonprofit organization Wholesome Wave.

Under the program, slated to begin by Aug. 1, participating doctors will offer prescriptions to patients considered vulnerable, and either at risk for — or already dealing with — prevalent local health problems such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity and heart disease, Oldrid said.

Dr. Michael Campbell, who will write produce prescriptions from Steward Health Care's Millview Medical Associates, said he frequently includes eating fruits and vegetables on patients' treatment plans. But this is the first time he's been able to actually prescribe it.

"I think it's wonderful." he said.

After launching last month, the market will run through the end of October, but Oldrid said she sees potential for the market to eventually extend into the winter. In the future, the hospital also plans to expand the market to include additional farmers.

The hospital started the market with Dartmouth's Silverbrook Farm because of Andrew Pollock's experience working with government-subsidized food programs and because of collaboration with the Codman Square Health Center in Dorchester, according to Oldrid.

Pollock participates in a community supported agriculture (CSA) program at the health center — a model under which customers buy shares of produce — along with a farmers market in the area.

He said Codman Square has also offered produce prescriptions and called the concept "so forward-thinking."

Campbell said his practice will first write prescriptions for elderly, Medicare recipients with certain health problems before expanding to other patients.

Participants will need to allow doctors to track key measures such as body-mass-index, weight and blood pressure, according to Oldrid, She said she also wants to link patients with nutritionists.

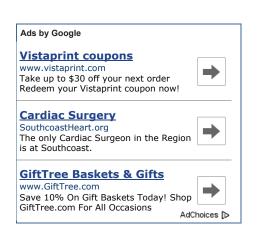
But Saint Anne's initiatives don't stop there.

Oldrid said she is hoping to launch a "double-coupon" program that would allow a limited number of people to double the value of government benefits for seniors and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits at the Saint Anne's market. She said the hospital is also reaching out to other community groups who can help meet the varied needs of farmer's market shoppers. And already, she said, hospital employees can pay for their produce through payroll deductions.

"These two employees came out and they had never eaten fresh sugar snap peas," she said, referencing a video that captured the moment. "They were just astonished at how delicious they were."

The Saint Anne's farmers market runs Mondays 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the South Main Street side of the hospital.

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