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North Carolina's Food is Medicine Leaders Gather to Highlight State's National Leadership

Raleigh, NC — State leaders, researchers, and community organizations from across North Carolina came together last Thursday to share the state's growing national reputation in Food is Medicine and to announce several significant steps forward.

"Food is Medicine" refers to an increasingly important, national effort to provide healthy, nutritious food through the healthcare sector as a critical strategy to prevent and manage chronic disease and reduce healthcare costs.

Last week's event featured food is medicine initiatives across North Carolina's health care system, including the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the State Health Plan and Kintegra Health, the largest federally qualified health center in the state.



NC DHHS Secretary Dr. Dev Sangvai underscored the importance of sustaining the state's momentum.

"We have something good going on here," Sangvai said, "and we have to find a way to make sure we can continue to keep it going."

The event, hosted by Reinvestment Partners and the North Carolina Medical Society and keynoted by Secretary Sangvai, included announcements of several new Food is Medicine efforts.

These include a statewide Veterans Affairs clinical trial to test produce prescriptions with veterans across all regions of North Carolina; a new produce prescription benefit for state employees through the NC State Health Plan; and a \$1.5 million investment from Reinvestment Partners to pilot Food is Medicine efforts in each of the state's six rural health NC ROOTS Hubs, with a focus on maternal health.

"New York and Maryland have both told me they're looking to North Carolina as the basis for what they're going to create in their Food is Medicine programs," said Sam Hoffler, Executive Director of the National Produce Prescription Collaborative. "North Carolina was very early to recognize the opportunity to be a leader in Food is Medicine and to create innovative solutions that would both drive down health care costs and improve health outcomes."

Under the NC State Health Plan's new produce prescription, eligible members earning \$50,000 or below with one or more chronic conditions will receive an \$80 monthly stipend to purchase fruits and vegetables through the Eat Well Rx program.

Funding for the program is provided by Reinvestment Partners. More than 100 members enrolled within the first two days of the program's launch.

"We're not buying health, we're paying for services, and we need to shift our approach to being active purchasers of health," said Tom Friedman, Executive Administrator of the NC State Health Plan. "We have about 70% of our members with at least one chronic condition. We've got to figure out how to do better by those folks."

Friedman noted a straightforward reality underlying the investment: "You're going to have a doctor two or three times a year. You're going to eat food every day. If we can make that a little bit easier, that's what we need to do."



Dr. Connor Drake, Research Health Scientist at the Durham VA's ADAPT Center and assistant professor of population health at Duke University, announced that the VA has begun recruiting 1,500 veterans to a randomized clinical trial of the Eat Well Rx produce prescription program — the largest Food is Medicine trial ever conducted within the VA system, spanning clinics and medical centers from Asheville to Morehead City.

"Every part of the state will be represented," Drake said.

North Carolina's national reputation in the Food is Medicine space rests on a deep evidence base. Reinvestment Partners' Eat Well Rx produce prescription program has been the subject of more than a dozen independent research studies conducted with top research institutions, with findings showing reductions in blood pressure, decreases in emergency department utilization, and lower total cost of care for participants.

Lori Stradley, CEO of Impact Health and network lead for the state's Rural Health Transformation program in Western North Carolina, pointed to a principle that has guided the state's approach.

"Those who are closest to the needs are also closest to the solutions," Stradley said.

Stradley also noted that North Carolina's model has succeeded in part by building on existing community assets and organizations rather than creating new ones — an approach that has allowed Food is Medicine programming to take root across the state's diverse regions.

About Reinvestment Partners and Eat Well Rx

Reinvestment Partners is a North Carolina nonprofit with a mission to promote healthy communities and economic opportunity for all. Its Eat Well Rx produce prescription program — one of the largest of its kind in the United States — provides participants with a prepaid card to purchase fresh, frozen, and canned fruits and vegetables at a network of major food retailers nationwide. To date, Eat Well Rx has served more than 150,000 participants, who have purchased more than \$35 million in healthy food through the program. More information is available at eatwellrx.org.

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