



Shelley Turk

Divisional Senior Vice President, Illinois
Health Care Delivery,
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois

How is Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois working to advance the Food as Medicine movement?

Our Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois Blue Door Neighborhood Center in Morgan Park in Chicago has teamed up with nonprofit Dion's Chicago Dream and T. Castro Produce to provide residents easy access to fresh food. "Each week, 175 families are going to have access to food and fresh produce," says Tiffany Davis, executive director quality improvement & health equity, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois. "We're really excited about this. Our Medicaid, our

Medicare, as well as community members that come into the Blue Door Neighborhood Center will have access to this." Those who qualify will receive a code that they can take to BDNC Morgan Park, enter into the Dream Vault display screen and collect their food from one of several refrigerated lockers. The Dream Vault in Morgan Park is part of BCBSIL's broader efforts to improve health equity and outcomes across the state. In 2023, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois purchased nearly \$2M dollars' worth of food distributed by T. Castro and 2.2M servings at no cost to community events and pop-up farmers markets throughout Illinois.

How have perspectives on Food as Medicine in both healthcare and the food industry evolved in the last year?

I'm seeing a shift in how we think about health care and a more concerted and strategic focus on prevention of disease through food. For example, during 2023, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid



Services (CMS) began testing a “food as medicine” program in response to the growing awareness that access to nutritious food supports human health. The Federal government began approving programs in certain states for Medicaid to cover nutrition interventions aimed at reducing healthcare costs. There’s no single definition of “food as medicine”—and Medicaid’s pilot programs vary from state to state—but interventions might include food “prescriptions,” food safety or cooking education, meal delivery, and/or nutrition counseling, which is really fantastic.

Are there emerging opportunities or areas of innovation within the Food as Medicine space that you find particularly exciting?

For the first time, I am noticing that there is a real recognition that the food we eat matters and that there are real inequities in the availability of healthy foods and

produce. Over 33.8M Americans live in food-insecure households or food deserts. Without healthy foods including the right vitamins, minerals and nutrients, disease abounds and an avalanche of health conditions can follow, impacting some of our most vulnerable and underserved populations who are already challenged with higher incidences of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure. At Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois we have access to a program called “POPART” which actually shows us the locations of food deserts across the State of Illinois. With this information, we can start to consider the “art of the possible” to reduce the negative impact of food deserts, like the advances we are making with Dion’s Chicago Dream. We can also think about how food deserts and health outcomes are linked in certain zip codes, rating areas or census tracts, and then begin to consider value-based care programs that tackle both the food access issue along with disease-state. That’s an emerging area that I find interesting and exciting to explore.



What actions can we take, individually or collectively, to make significant impact?

Every day I ask myself whether I am “doing enough” for people with obesity to make a difference. We are in an era of GLP-1 frenzy where the holistic view of humans is getting lost. Meaning, when someone is obese, their food matters, exercise matters, mental health matters, options for psychiatric drugs matter, options for bariatric surgery and pharmacology matter. There is no single drug that provides a silver bullet for obesity. And sometimes it can feel overwhelming to have so many ideas and perhaps only be able to execute on one or two at a time. I take comfort in the fact that there is value in awareness, in working to change hearts and minds, in taking small steps, in releasing fear, and in continuing the work to make health care better than I found it. Collectively, small and medium actions by all of us, make a significant impact together if we all keep striving, growing and moving.

What are you looking forward to at the Food as Medicine Summit?

I am looking forward to hearing different perspectives on the topic. “Food as medicine” touches all of us in so many different ways, that I am quite sure I will be hearing about areas that are brand new. The more we know, the better we can work for the cause in reducing food insecurity, food deserts and finding pathways toward healthier living.

To hear more from Shelley, join us at the Food as Medicine Summit in Chicago this May (21st -22nd). She will be sharing her insights on the Panel Discussion with Open Q&A: Demonstrating the Value of Food as Medicine for Healthcare and the Food Industry, alongside Adam M. Ameen, PsyD, DipACLM, Director of Behavioral Health and Lifestyle Medicine, North Star Health ; Mark Walker, Chairman and CEO, Performance Kitchen; Jeff Zachwieja, PhD, Senior Director Global R&D Nutrition Sciences, PepsiCo and Grace Noboa-Hidalgo, MA, Director – Product Innovation, Walgreens Health.