

Tackling Diabetes Management and Food Insecurity: A Pilot Collaboration between Sharing Excess, the American Diabetes Association, and OptumRx

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Abstract

In Philadelphia, a cross-sector collaboration between Sharing Excess, the American Diabetes Association (ADA), and OptumRx aimed to tackle interconnected issues of diabetes management and food insecurity. Through community pop-ups, the initiative provided food distribution alongside diabetes education and risk tests. Analysis revealed significant participation and positive responses despite financial barriers to medication access. Grassroots marketing and community trust were vital components of the project's success. This collaborative approach exemplifies a scalable model for addressing complex health challenges through community engagement and strategic partnerships.



Photo Credit: Branden Eastwood

Suggested Caption: Monumental Baptist Church free food pop-up distribution hosted by Sharing Excess.

Introduction

In the city of Philadelphia, a unique cross-sector collaboration took place in fall 2023, demonstrating the power of innovative partnerships in tackling community health challenges. This case study focuses on the innovative partnership between Sharing Excess, the American Diabetes Association (ADA), and OptumRx, highlighting their approach to addressing the interconnected issues of diabetes management and food insecurity. The project not only serves as an excellent model of collaborative innovation but also provides insights into effective strategies for addressing public health issues through community engagement and technology. Philadelphia faces a dual challenge: high rates of diabetes and significant food insecurity, two issues that influence each other.^{i ii} This understanding formed the basis for the collaboration between Sharing Excess, ADA, and OptumRx. Each organization brought a unique perspective and expertise, creating a holistic approach to address these community health challenges.

Project Overview

This pilot partnership between the ADA, OptumRx, and Sharing Excess focuses on diabetes education and food distribution through community pop-ups in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Sharing Excess is a community-based organization based in Philadelphia that aims to rescue food and feed communities. These four pop-up events, designed like farmers' markets with free food accessible to anyone, aim to destigmatize free food distribution and educate the community about the link between diabetes and diet.

In addition to providing healthy food, ADA offers a 60-second diabetes risk test. The importance of diabetes education in communities where diabetes prevalence rates are high is crucial. Over 133 million Americans are living with diabetes or prediabetes. We can't let this number continue to grow—especially when some communities still lack access to equitable health care and resources. Diabetes is the most expensive chronic condition in the United States, and millions of Americans struggle to afford health care, insulin, and other medications to manage their diabetes and associated complications.ⁱⁱⁱ Grounded on the belief that health equity is a human right, cross-collaboration allowed the groups to understand the need for and address equitable health care through community interventions and systems to ensure everyone can access the best possible diabetes care. The pilot program also collected data to understand diabetes awareness, economic barriers to accessing diabetes medication, and participants' willingness to use digital methods for prescription management.

The cornerstone of this initiative was the establishment of community pop-ups in neighborhoods with high diabetes prevalence, as well as the ADA Health Equity Bill of Rights. In working with Terri Wiggins, SVP of Health Equity at ADA, we anchored part of the cross-collaboration aim on Bill of Rights #1 - the right to access insulin and other drugs affordably, and #2 - the right to healthy food.^{iv} These pop-ups served a dual role: they were both food distribution points and hubs for diabetes education. This model broke new ground by integrating food aid with health education. Sharing Excess, known for its food redistribution efforts, tackled the issue of food insecurity directly. ADA brought in its expertise in diabetes education, providing crucial information and risk tests to the community. OptumRx funded the project, expanding capacity to

collect survey data and provide more meaningful pop-up experiences.

The surveys provided to participants, along with the free food distributions, were designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. **Assess Diabetes Awareness:** Determine the level of awareness and gauge the immediate response of individuals to the results of their diabetes risk tests. This helps increase awareness of diabetes risk in the community and the potential for diabetes risk tests to prompt personal reflection and potential behavior change.
2. **Understand Post-Screening Actions:** Through follow up surveys, assess whether participants seek medical care or follow up with healthcare providers after learning about their diabetes risk and/or engaging in conversations about diabetes at one of the SE pop-ups, which reflects the project's ability to encourage actions towards better health management.
3. **Identify Barriers to Medication Access:** Examine any financial obstacles faced by participants that prevent them from acquiring necessary diabetes medication, which can inform future opportunities to support medication access in this community.
4. **Evaluate Digital Medication Management:** Investigate participants' openness to utilizing online platforms for medication management, which could inform digital strategies.
5. **Increase Community Access to Nutritious Food:** By providing a farmers market style pop-up free food distribution across four different dates, this project aimed to increase community access to nutritious, affordable groceries.

Impact and Outcomes

The impact of this collaboration was significant. The pop-ups did not just distribute food; they became centers of community learning and support. They provided a space where residents could access healthy food, learn about managing diabetes, and connect with resources for medication management. This approach was effective because it was data-driven. The collaboration used data to understand the needs of the community, tailor their approach, and measure the impact of their efforts. This data-driven approach is crucial for social innovators, as it ensures that interventions are effective and resources are used efficiently.

While federal social safety net programs exist, a majority of struggling families find themselves with insufficient income to meet their daily and basic needs but with too much income to qualify for financial or government support, leaving people to rely on local food pantries and other food access programs to survive. Sharing Excess directly serves 66 zip codes in the greater Philadelphia area.^v While we ensure our service areas cover the most vulnerable communities, we also make our food accessible to anyone to reduce stigma around food distribution - we never ask individuals to "prove" their need and actively encourage community members to share our food with their neighbors. Since we have operated in West Philadelphia for over five years, Sharing Excess was able to bring a key advantage to this pilot project: the cultivation of community trust and robust partnerships with the communities we serve. This has allowed us to work effectively within the community and make sure our initiatives with ADA are supported

and welcomed. By distributing flyers door-to-door within local neighborhoods and collaborating with trusted community figures such as pastors from local churches, we effectively spread the word about our pop-up events. This approach not only amplified our reach but also fostered a sense of community ownership and trust in the initiative.

1022 people attended the pop-ups and received food, and 803 surveys were collected in total across the pop-up dates. Through conversations with attendees, we estimate the actual reach of the food was much wider since many people took food to share with family, friends, and neighbors. Over a third of respondents who had taken prescription medications for diabetes in the past 12 months showed signs of cost-related medication underuse based on their responses about medication access. Of those who came back for a follow-up pop-up, 35.4% reported seeing a healthcare provider about their risk test or following up with ADA resources. Of those who completed the risk test, 45.4% of respondents were high risk.

The findings also suggest grassroots marketing and increasing visibility of the pop up through branding and live music was effective. 57.9% of respondents heard about the pop-up because they were walking or driving by. 26.2% heard via word of mouth or their church. 85.6% of respondents who provided their zip code were local to the pop-up site areas.

The Strength of Cross-Sector Collaboration

This project was significantly strengthened through Sharing Excess's collaboration with ADA and OptumRx, extending beyond increasing the visibility of the pop-ups and contributing to reduced food insecurity in West Philadelphia. Residents who attended the pop-ups were able to engage with our student ambassadors and team members to discuss diabetes risk and learn more about the ADA. Everyone who attended was directed to the ADA website to explore more resources and encouraged to follow up with a medical professional about the results of their risk test or with any questions they had about diabetes. By asking questions about medication access and discussing interest in online prescription access, we were also able to explore barriers to medication access and potential solutions. The sponsorship of these pop-ups allowed our team to invest in increased marketing, high-quality reusable branded bags, and increased food sourcing, creating great community events.

This comprehensive approach, combining on-the-ground food distribution with strategic health education, exemplifies the transformative potential of cross-sector collaborations. It shows that when organizations with different strengths come together, they can address complex social issues more effectively than they could alone. This partnership's success lies in its ability to create a model that is adaptable, scalable, and deeply impactful, making it an excellent case study for social innovators and organizations aiming to foster high-impact change through social innovation.

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