Hunger is a major health concern in New Mexico. The state ranks first nationally for child hunger and second for adult hunger. Yet, nearly 60% of adults in the state are overweight and more than a quarter are obese.

That’s what makes Albuquerque-based Presbyterian Healthcare Services’ 2015 NOVA Award winning Community Health: Healthy Eating initiative so integral to improving the health of its communities. The award honors hospital-led partnerships that improve community health.

After Presbyterian conducted a community health needs assessment in 2012, it identified healthy eating, active living and the prevention of unhealthy substance abuse as community health priorities.

The system works with health departments, community health providers, food pantries and neighborhood advisory boards to “integrate healthy foods into health care,” says Leigh Caswell, Presbyterian’s community health manager.

“We’re not implementing our own plan, we’re implementing the community’s plan,” she says. “We’ve been able to show up and be a convener and jump in where needed, and that’s kept the momentum moving forward.”

One major initiative is the subsidized community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. Presbyterian partners with MO-GRO (a mobile grocery store) and La Cosecha at the Agri-Cultura Network, a farmer co-operative in Albuquerque, and others to get high-quality, healthy food to families that qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. Instead of the standard $30 a week, they pay $10 a week for a box of fruits and vegetables, and families have the option to pay in food stamps as well.

“It’s about getting them food that will fill their fridge and their bellies,” says Anzia Bennett, La Cosecha’s program director. “We just knew we had to make it incredibly affordable.”

The program is also about access. Families can order fruits and vegetables online and have boxes delivered directly to their community sites. There is a medical clinic where community health workers enroll those nutritionally at-risk (like, for example, people with diabetes or heart disease) in the CSA program and work with dietitians to chart family goals.

Education is also crucial. Partners send out newsletters with recipes and tips and hold cooking classes and nutrition workshops to help build skills and capacities.

“It’s great to buy a box of produce, but it doesn’t help if you buy kohlrabi and eggplant and you don’t know what to do with it,” says Rebecca Baran-Rees, project director at MO-GRO. “That’s why we’re here to provide support.”

Continued on next page
Another major initiative in the works is a chronic disease and wellness referral center, where providers can refer patients via their electronic health records. The program connects patients to resources on food, including the Fruit and Vegetable Rx Program, chronic disease self-management resources and cooking education. Anyone can be referred to the program to help them manage or even prevent chronic disease.

“We saw that clinics needed this type of extra support for their patients,” says Caswell. “They don’t necessarily have the time to sit down with patients to talk about how to live a healthier lifestyle, but they can refer them for more information.”

Moving forward, Presbyterian has many other projects planned around community health and it’s taking a holistic approach: looking not just at their community’s traditional health, but also its fiscal well-being. “We provide 3 million meals a year just in central New Mexico,” says Caswell. “We’re looking at how if we just increased purchasing of local foods a little bit, it would have a huge economic impact and a huge impact on the health of the people we’re feeding.”

Community-supported agriculture helps make sure everyone gets enough healthy food.