A nutritious diet plays a critical role in managing many chronic illnesses. Yet, many New Haven, Connecticut residents struggle to put healthy food on their tables. A new initiative by the Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center is empowering patients to make more nutritious food choices. The community health center acquired grant funding, partnered with a local nonprofit food-supplier, and received guidance from the American Heart Association to create a fruit-and-vegetable “prescription program” for its clients. Under this program, clients receive nutrition counseling along with vouchers that can be used toward the purchase of produce at various farmer markets throughout New Haven. The program is helping patients to make better, more nutritious food choices, while increasing their access to affordable, healthy produce that can improve the quality of their lives.

The Challenge
According to 2016 figures from the Community Alliance for Research and Engagement, food insecurity is higher in New Haven’s low-income neighborhoods than other parts of the state. Thirty-five percent of neighborhood residents reported not having enough food to eat or enough money to buy groceries. Low-income residents are at a higher risk for developing obesity, diabetes, hypertension and other chronic health problems often related to poor nutrition.

“Food insecurity, a prominent social determinant of health, continues to be a critical issue in our community. The health center is excited to participate in a program which helps bring fresh fruit and vegetables to our patients.”

– Dr. R. Douglas Bruce, Chief of Medical Services at Cornell Scott–Hill Health Center
The Solution
The Cornell Scott–Hill Health Center has begun a new fruit-and-vegetable prescription initiative for clients who have, or are at high risk for, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Health center staff provide services to assist patients in making better food choices and patients are learning how those decisions can play a significant role in the management of their chronic illnesses. The Food Prescription Program will also provide clients with $3 vouchers that can be used for fruits and vegetables at any of the five farmers market or mobile market sites run by CitySeed, a nonprofit organization striving to improve access to fresh, local food for all New Haven residents.

Sustaining Success
The Food Prescription Program’s pilot year is funded by a grant that runs through December 2017. CitySeed will track the vouchers redeemed at its markets and determine how they were utilized. The organization will work with the Cornell Scott–Hill Health Center on surveys to help measure the overall efficacy of the initiative and determine areas that need refinement. At the same time, program coordinators will examine sources for a second round of funding to continue the program in a future farmer market season.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Initiating a fruit-and-vegetable voucher system at Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center has increased the purchasing power for patients who are at high-risk for diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure or high cholesterol. These patients are often the ones most in need of affordable, healthy produce. A more nutritious diet can help alleviate health problems and make management easier in the long run.

Results
The innovative Food For Health Prescription Program is expanding the ability of New Haven residents to purchase healthy produce. This healthy eating initiative helps clients at Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center understand how adhering to a healthy diet can help with the management of diabetes, cholesterol, high blood pressure and other health conditions. Patients referred to the center’s wellness education and outreach department first receive nutrition counseling. They are then eligible for a $3 voucher they can use to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at local farmer markets. Consumer education is critical, but so is improving the affordability of produce and reliable access to it. The initiative expects to distribute about 500 vouchers by the end of December 2017.

Get Involved
 Ensuring everyone has reliable access to affordable produce should be a priority for our community. For more information about the fruit and vegetable prescription program at the Cornell Scott–Hill Health Center, contact Carlah Esdaile-Bragg, Director of Marketing & Community Relations at 203-503-3276 or email her at Cesdaile-bragg@cornellscott.org.