Food Is Medicine Coalition Hosts Virtual National Symposium to Grow Access to Medically Tailored Meals for Sick and Low-Income Americans

Nonprofit Leaders Seek to Transform Healthcare by Addressing Social Determinants of Health Through Medically Tailored Meals

New York, NY and Virtual (September 18) – With generous funding from the M•A•C VIVA GLAM Fund, this week the Food Is Medicine Coalition (FIMC), an association of nonprofit, medically tailored food and nutrition services (FNS) providers from across the country, hosted a three-day virtual symposium to share best practices for and celebrate achievements around growing access to medically tailored meals (MTM), a low-cost high-impact solution for sick and low-income Americans.

The Symposium is the culmination of the year-long staff development program for medically tailored food and nutrition services agencies across the country on advocacy, research and best practices for the MTM intervention at local, state and national levels, as well as a venue for updates and education about advocacy efforts for all member organizations nationwide. Of particular focus this year is the introduction of the Medically Tailored Home-Delivered Meal Demonstration Pilot Act of 2020 (H.R. 6774), adaptations organizations have made to manage through and succeed during COVID-19, and addressing systemic racism and health inequities in our communities.

Earlier this year members of the Bipartisan Food is Medicine Working Group, Congressman Jim McGovern (MA), Congresswoman Chellie Pingree (ME), Congressman Roger Marshall (KS), and Congresswoman Jackie Walorski (ID) introduced the Medically Tailored Home-Delivered Meal Demonstration Pilot Act of 2020. This bill would establish a Medicare pilot program to address the critical link between diet, chronic illness, and the health of older adults. This proposal will ensure that medically vulnerable seniors get access to lifesaving medically tailored meals in their home, while providing the outcomes data we need to build a more resilient and cost-effective health care system. Both goals are even more critical during the pandemic, as FNS providers endeavor to keep the elderly –especially those living with severe and chronic illnesses – healthy and at home. With little to no federal funding for medically tailored meals at present, this bill demonstrates progress toward sustainability for this unique service in the future.

“It is with great pride that we look back on a decade of convenings from this, our 10th annual Food is Medicine Coalition Symposium,” says Karen Pearl, chair of the Food is Medicine Coalition and President & CEO of God’s Love We Deliver. “FIMC agencies have made enormous strides this year in federal policy and are energized by H.R. 6774. Agencies have also done so much in their own hometowns, as they have pivoted to all new ways of operating during COVID-19, while continuing to transform healthcare by addressing social determinants of health.”

As essential service providers, FIMC agencies have been serving ever more clients during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to keep up with the demand and to keep everyone safe, medically tailored meal providers have innovated on the fly: screening volunteers and practicing social distancing, implementing no contact deliveries, streamlining menus to meet the growing need, and more. The COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting what medically tailored meal providers have known for 35 years: the right nutrition is key to helping those living with severe and chronic illnesses stay at home and out of the hospital.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also illuminated the deep impact of healthcare disparities on communities of color, who are at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19. Effectively addressing the social determinants of health such as access to healthy, nutritious food and housing, which are by products of racism and other forms of discrimination, has emerged as key to advancing the health of communities and combating structural racism.

The Symposium was full of sessions where participants discussed best practices in medically tailored nutrition, research in the field, and healthcare innovations projects from across the country. In order to continue to educate and elevate the capacity of the Coalition’s organizations, the Symposium included three additional learning tracks in addition to Policy — Nutrition, Operations and...
Development – each with their own offerings for staff from across the country focused on these areas. Topics included cultural competence, renal nutrition, and standards for medically tailored groceries in the Nutrition Track; databases, scaling, and shipping in the Development track; and Planned Giving, year-end planning, and event planning in the Development Track.

The Symposium featured a keynote on racial disparities and healthcare disparities by self-care expert & culture shift educator / podcast producer Janet Taylor, M.D. MPH. In addition to many expert speakers from the Food is Medicine Coalition, the Symposium featured speakers from: The Rockefeller Foundation, The Root Cause Coalition, Kaiser Permanente, Manatt Health, Nonprofit Finance Fund, The Aspen Institute, Tufts University, and the Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation at Harvard Law School, among others. Among subjects discussed during the Symposium included the Medically Tailored Meal Pilot Bill recently introduced into the House, Racial Justice and Health Equity, Conceptualizing Value in Healthcare Contracting, Research and Data Sharing.

The Symposium concluded with remarks by Congressman Jim McGovern, a longtime champion of the Food is Medicine Coalition and member of the Bipartisan Food is Medicine Working Group, and with a dinner and cooking demonstration from chef, television personality, and author Chef Amanda Freitag.

The Coalition speaks for the growing body of scientific research that shows chronically ill patients who receive FNS-based care experience better health outcomes. These studies have also found medically tailored nutrition is an inexpensive solution that significantly reduces healthcare costs for the sickest among us. Saving one night in the hospital, can feed an ill individual medically tailored meals for six months. The FIMC National Symposium underscores the power of this commonsense, non-pharma-based treatment.

In sum, the Symposium is a way to unite the advocacy goals of food and nutrition service providers from all over the country, to share new and emerging research on food as medicine, to energize and learn.

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About the Food is Medicine Coalition

The Food Is Medicine Coalition (FIMC) is a coalition of nonprofit medically tailored meal providers who serve people in communities across the country who are too sick to shop or cook for themselves. Medically tailored meals (MTMs) are delivered to individuals living with severe illness through a referral from a medical professional or healthcare plan. Meal plans are tailored to the medical needs of the recipient by a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN), and are designed to improve health outcomes, lower cost of care and increase patient satisfaction. MTMs are delivered to an individual’s home. Collectively, in the last year, FIMC served over 12 million meals to 57,000 people across multiple states and the District of Columbia. Of those that received meals from FIMC in the last year, over one-third of our clients (35%) were living with HIV/AIDS, 18% have cancer, 12% have cardiovascular disease, and 11% have diabetes as their primary diagnoses, but the plurality of clients lives with multiple diagnoses. Most of our clients are unable to shop, cook or even eat the food offered by many other emergency food providers, and often require the assistance of family or caregivers.

About God’s Love We Deliver

God’s Love We Deliver cooks and home-delivers nutritious, medically tailored meals for people too sick to shop or cook for themselves. Founded in 1985 as a response to the AIDS pandemic, we now serve people living with more than 200 different diagnoses. To support the health and well-being of our clients, we provide ongoing nutrition assessment, education, and counseling, and advocate for food and nutrition support. God’s Love is a non-sectarian organization serving individuals living with illness, and their children and caregivers. With a community of more than 17,000 volunteers, we deliver 2.2 million meals annually. All services are free to clients and full of love. For more information, visit godslovewedeliver.org.