

Wellness at Retail: The Continuing Story

Expanding the delivery of health and wellness services thru retail channels has been a long-term trend in the United States. In our last article, [Wellness at Retail: An Introduction](#), we traced highlights of this trend, including: the evolution of the health food industry into mainline grocery, i.e. Whole Foods; the integration of traditional healthcare services into large format retail, i.e. the appearance of clinics in chains like Kroger and Target; and the collaboration of retailers and insurance companies in the promotion of healthy eating, i.e. Go365 by Walmart and Humana.

Since then, this trend has continued and, like everything around us, been deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Pharmacy, and grocery in particular, have emerged as cornerstone brick-and-mortar retail formats, compelled to protect employees while serving increased customer demand. These essential retail workers have emerged as frontline heroes, risking their lives by reporting to work, and the retailers have assumed leadership roles within their communities, in protecting the public by providing PPE to staff and requiring all shoppers to wear masks.

Many retailers have initiated new health and wellness offerings or expanded existing programs during the current crisis. Major retailers like Walmart and CVS⁽¹⁾, as well as independents like SpartanNash⁽²⁾,



have assisted in providing testing. Online nutrition services are expanding rapidly as grocers, like ShopRite⁽³⁾ and Stop & Shop⁽⁴⁾, have added digital dietitians, nutrition coaching, recipe demonstrations and other services. And Weis Markets has taken it a step farther with the addition of a video-chat platform providing counseling on the management of chronic conditions, like diabetes and high blood pressure, along with other nutrition services.

The development of produce purchase incentives for lower-income shoppers has been expanding over the past 5 years, but is accelerating rapidly now. The 2018 Farm Bill expanded its USDA SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) produce match incentive thru GusNIP (Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program) Grants, named after one of the founders of the Wholesome Wave Foundation and a pioneer in healthy food incentives. Through the program, popularly known as Double Up Food Bucks, SNAP recipients receive matching funds for the purchase of fresh fruit and vegetables. And this produce purchase incentive model has expanded beyond the USDA, into the budgets of large cities like Seattle, WA and Boulder, CO, signaling an increase in available funding for these programs.

COLORADO RANCH MARKET
3333 N ACADEMY BLVD
COLORADO SPRINGS

COLORADO RANCH MARKET

DOUBLE UP FOOD BUCKS COLORADO

Double Up Food Bucks Voucher

Fresh Produce purchased with SNAP earns you DOUBLE!
Earn up to \$20 per day at participating locations.

Present this to the cashier with your next purchase (within 60 days) to apply it towards fresh produce.

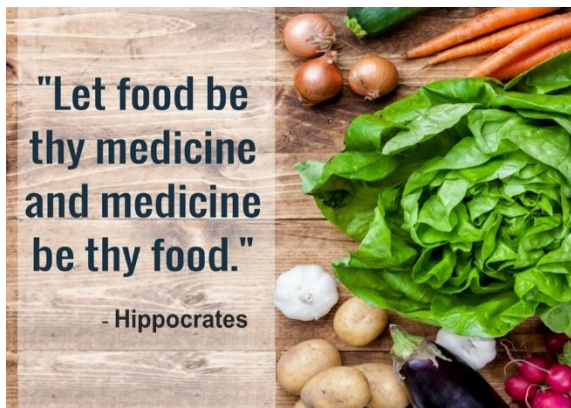
Voucher must be used on a single purchase.
For one-time use only. No refunds. Not redeemable for cash.

Voucher Amount: \$16.86
SNAP Customer ID: xxxxxxx0009
Expires: 09/13/2020
Voucher ID: W7XSKUFI

STORE: 01520 REGISTER: 003 CASHIER: 0040
TICKET#: 0151 15JUL2020 12:47:41
THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING WITH US

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The expansion of these programs has been given a powerful boost by the creation of the National Grocer Association's Technical Assistance Center, the product of a collaboration between the NGA, the USDA, the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, and the Fair Food Network⁽⁵⁾. The Center's goal is to assist in the creation of an infrastructure that will enable the expansion of SNAP produce incentives into grocery retailers, especially in the independent market which traditionally serves the working class and SNAP consumers. These consumers, who suffer disproportionately from diet-related conditions like diabetes, obesity and high-blood pressure, often struggle to ensure their families consume enough fresh produce, making these programs vitally important. Snap2Save, a digital services development firm, launched an automated produce incentive program in partnership with LiveWell Colorado, a GusNIP grantee, at a Leever's Supermarkets' store in Colorado Springs, CO, and has seen fresh produce, as a percentage of total SNAP shopping basket, increase by 37% over a 4-month period.



These factors are converging into an emerging trend of Wellness at Retail, the development of food prescription programs. With food prescriptions (also known as FoodRx), healthcare providers prescribe fresh produce for at-risk patients, thru vouchers for free produce that are redeemed at participating grocery stores. The concept grew out of the Food-As-Medicine movement, which brought to modern medicine the wisdom that Hippocrates memorialized 2500 years ago - "Let Food Be Thy Medicine and Medicine Be Thy Food". The advent of outcome-based healthcare, where

providers are responsible for the outcome of a patient's treatment (not just incremental fee-for-service encounters), has given FoodRx an additional boost, as providers acknowledge that food purchases can directly impact healthcare outcomes.

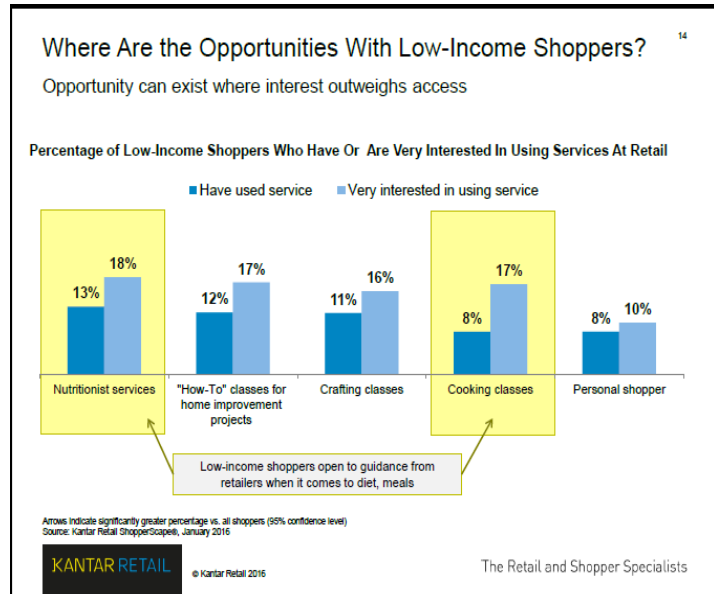
Grocery retailers have also taken notice - and action. In 2019, Giant Food Stores partnered with insurer Ameritas-Caritas and non-profit DC Greens to launch a FoodRx pilot program in the Washington DC area⁽⁶⁾. In February 2020, on the brink of the pandemic, Kroger announced the launch of a FoodRx test in their home market of Ohio. During an interview in April 2020 with HealthLeaders Media, president of Kroger Health, Colleen Lindholz charted Kroger's path from their Opt-Up app - to food prescriptions - to a plan to build connections into leading EMRs (electronic health records), such as Cerner and Epic⁽⁷⁾. This is a key step in connecting shopper purchase behaviors with formal patient records, and a huge step forward for the Food-As-Medicine movement.

Independent grocers and digital service providers are also getting into the game. Food City, headquartered in Abingdon, VA is considering a FoodRx pilot with a group of researchers from the University of Tennessee, and Leever's Supermarkets is testing a FoodRx application developed by Snap2Save with Clinica Tepeyac, a local Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), in Aurora, CO, with plans to expand to their Denver Save-A-Lot stores in the near future. Another innovative product is

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InComm's Healthy Food Card, thru which healthcare payors can load funds on rechargeable cards distributed to patients for the purchase of healthy foods at participating retailers.

Many of these developments in the delivery of health and wellness services thru retail channels were underway prior to COVID-19, but like online shopping, Zoom meetings and inane TikTok videos, these trends have been supercharged by the pandemic. The current crisis has highlighted shocking disparities in general population health, as well as the delivery of healthcare services to Americans⁽⁸⁾. Lower-income consumers and minorities are becoming sick and dying at higher rates than the general population, due to these disparities and the fact that they are often frontline workers. And significantly, it is lower-income consumers (58 million families with household incomes under \$50,000) who are more comfortable receiving health and wellness information thru retail channels.



These developing programs indicate just how dynamic the evolving environment is regarding the delivery of health and wellness services thru retail channels. From COVID-19 testing - to telehealth and nutrition - to electronic healthy food incentive programs, grocery and pharmacy retailers are playing a more vital role than ever in our nation's health and wellness. Their initiative and creativity underscore their commitment to the health and wellness of their shoppers and communities, yet these efforts are widely dispersed and not uniformly available. However, the delivery of affordable healthcare and effective health and wellness programs to all Americans is a national issue. Perhaps there is room, and it is the time, to build a national network of healthy food education, incentives, and rewards, available to all citizens.

- (1) [Walmart, Target, CVS and Walgreens Will Loan Space for Coronavirus Test Centers](#) - Fortune
- (2) [5 SpartanNash Pharmacies Offer Free COVID-19 Testing in West Michigan](#) - Shelby Report
- (3) [ShopRite Goes Live With Dietitian Online Chat Service](#) - Supermarket News
- (4) [Stop & Shop Launches Online Dietitian Program](#) - Supermarket News
- (5) [USDA Taps NGA Foundation for Produce Incentive Grant](#) - Supermarket News
- (6) [Produce Rx: Using Prescriptions to Improve Affordability of Healthy Foods](#) - Trust for America's Health
- (7) [Kroger Health President Talks 'Food as Medicine,' Prescription Drug Prices](#) - HealthLeaders Media
- (8) [Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups](#) - CDC, Centers for Disease Control