



# Oregon Community Food Systems Network **Veggie Rx**

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Strategic Plan | September 2021 - 2025



## THE “ISSUE” - OUR HEALTH

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The question of diet has been elevated from a personal issue to a public health crisis. Two major forces have contributed to the crisis:

1. **The impact of poor diet on nutrition-sensitive conditions** such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
2. **The rise in income inequality and directly related to that, the increase in food insecurity.** These aspects are tightly linked: food insecure individuals are twice as likely to have diet-modifiable diseases such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.<sup>1</sup>

Providing sufficient calories to address food insecurity is missing the point that more than hunger needs to be addressed. For example:

***88% of SNAP participants report facing challenges to eating a healthy diet and 61% report the cost of healthy food as a barrier.<sup>2</sup>***

Common food security interventions, including food banks and food pantries, address food access, but not necessarily food quality, which is in part contributing to the increasingly high rates of obesity and diabetes among the food insecure in communities across the U.S. In the health care system, food security screening tools do not readily assess diet quality or nutrition, leaving a gap in proper nutrition to improve disease outcomes.

**Income inequity is reflected in households with higher rates of food insecurity than the estimated national average (12%). These include:** children (17%), those with children headed by single women (32%) or men (22%), Black households (23%), and Hispanic households (19%).<sup>3</sup>

***Additionally, food insecurity has been found to be associated with higher health care costs.<sup>4</sup> Those managing poor health and chronic illness sometimes have to choose between purchasing food and medicine, perpetuating the cycle of poor nutrition and poor health.<sup>5</sup> Households with children that experience chronic disease and special health care needs are more food insecure than households without these needs.<sup>6</sup>***

Poor diet has been linked to nutrition-sensitive conditions in countless studies:

- **Being overweight or obese leads to increased risk of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, high blood cholesterol, hypertension, stroke, asthma, and cancer.**
- **Half of all U.S. deaths resulting from heart disease, stroke, and Type 2 diabetes are linked to poor diet.<sup>7</sup>**
- **In the past 15 years, diabetes prevalence increased from almost 10% of the total population to 12% of the total population.<sup>8</sup>**

- **Diabetes also occurs at a higher rate in communities of color. Native Americans and Alaskan Natives develop diabetes at a rate more than twice that of white adults (15% compared to 7.4%, respectively), and the rate of developing diabetes for Hispanic and black adults is 12%.<sup>9</sup>**

***The concept of “nutrition security”, defined as having consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent or treat disease, can be used to address this health crisis more broadly.***

We propose that produce prescription programs offer a practical approach that fully integrates the concept of nutrition security. Having providers connect patients to such programs increases access to a wide variety of fresh, healthy, nutrient-dense foods, and improved nutrition education to those with nutrition-sensitive conditions who lack equitable access to such foods.<sup>10</sup>

Local food systems advocates are motivated to tackle this challenge and improve nutrition security across Oregon by facilitating healthy food access across their communities. Food systems and health care professionals are in a unique position to link fresh, locally-grown, and nutrient-dense foods with community-based organizations that provide health-related services, in an effort to shift diets away from those rich in processed, high fat, and sugary foods and beverages.

***We aim to positively influence health behavior and improve the lives of people in our community by providing increased access to healthy food, and education about the benefits of healthy eating fresh, local food.***



**Bend Farmers Market | Source: High Desert Food & Farm Alliance**

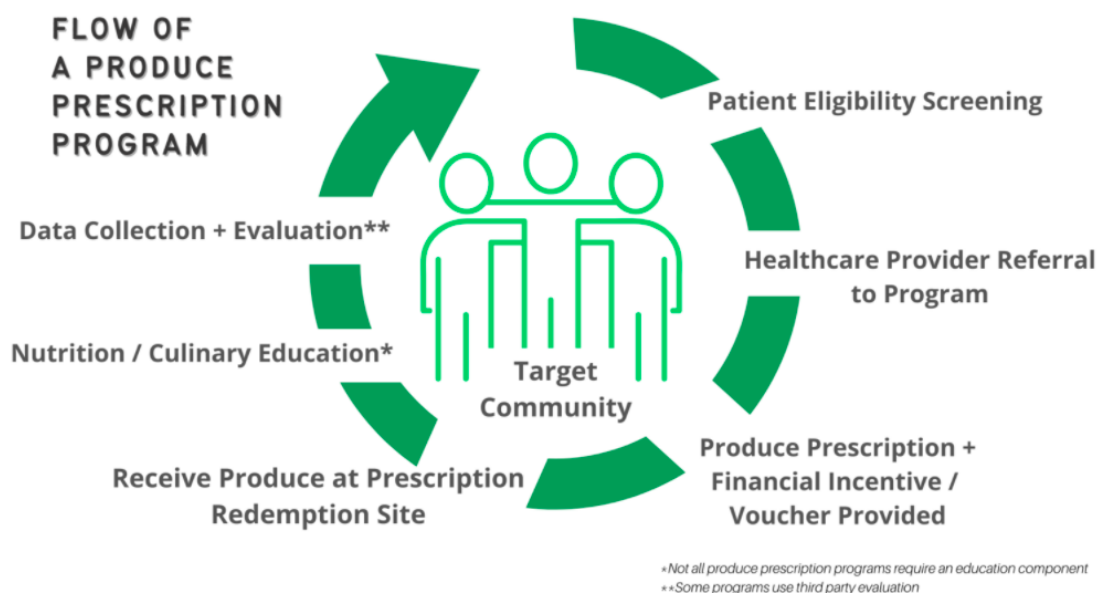
## OCFSN VEGGIE RX GROUP

The [Oregon Community Food Systems Network](#) (OCFSN), a collaboration of 56 nonprofit organizations and public health allies, is dedicated to strengthening local and regional food systems to deliver better economic, social, health, and environmental outcomes across Oregon. A working group of OCFSN has broken ground by partnering with health care providers across the state of Oregon to launch produce prescription programs, which are referred to as “**Veggie Rx.**”

Veggie Rx is a produce prescription program used as a medical treatment or preventative service for patients:

- **Patients are eligible due to a diet-related health risk or condition, food insecurity, or other documented challenges accessing nutritious foods, and are referred by a health care provider or health insurance plan.**
- **These prescriptions are fulfilled through food retail and enable patients to access healthy produce\* with no added fats, sugars, or sale at low or no cost to the patient.**
- **When appropriately dosed, Veggie Rx programs are designed to improve healthcare outcomes, optimize medical spend, and increase patient engagement and satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>**

*(\*As defined under section 10010 of the Agricultural Act of 2014, Public Law 113-79. These concerns include but are not limited to obesity, diabetes, and food insecurity. Some programs also offer nutrition counseling, cooking education, and promote physical activity alongside increased access to fresh and healthy food).*



Source: National Produce Prescription Collaborative (NPPC)



A critical aspect of Veggie Rx sustainability is effective program evaluation. This process entails identifying program impacts and improved health outcomes in the specific communities served, where program improvements can be made, and how to expand programs in years to come. The OCFSN Veggie Rx working group is continually looking for ways to improve the program data collection process.

In the most recent evaluation report of Veggie Rx programs ([Veggie Rx - 2019-2020 Program Results](#) and the [Executive Summary of Statewide Evaluation – Veggie Rx 2019-2020](#)), success is reflected across several dimensions based on participant feedback, with an emphasis on improved physical and mental well-being:

1. **Physical Health:** improved accessibility of nutritious foods, reported weight loss, more energy, reported improvements in critical biomarkers, and willingness to seek regular medical care.
2. **Mental Health:** improved mood and reduced depression, feelings of empowerment with access to and ability to select from a variety of fresh produce, reduced social isolation, and improved connection to community and the outdoors.
3. **Lifestyle:** reported positivity and excitement in selecting and preparing new, healthy foods, overcoming fear of new foods, and nutrition knowledge leading to new eating behaviors and increased integration of produce into regular meals.
4. **Financial Benefits:** increased affordability of produce and ability to save money for other essential bills during program participation.
5. **Family Impacts:** strengthened family connection to healthy food and enjoyment in shopping and eating new foods, reported family weight loss and new healthy behaviors by adults and kids, and feelings of positivity and optimism by the whole family.

*Building upon this data, the overarching vision for the working group is to broadly integrate Veggie Rx into Oregon's health care system as a powerful tool for combating diet-related chronic disease and food insecurity.*

## OVERVIEW OF OREGON VEGGIE RX PROGRAMS

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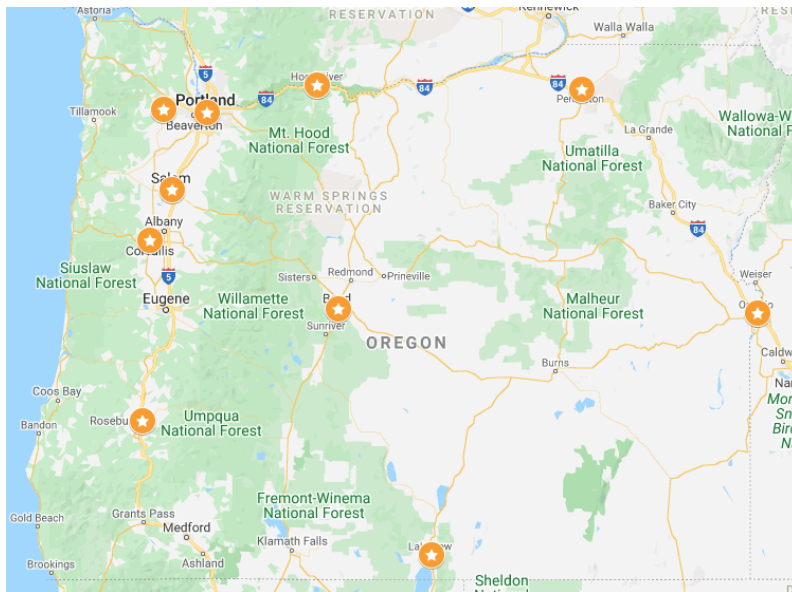
Veggie Rx programs have been operating in Oregon since 2014. Unlike other food assistance programs such as Double Up Food Bucks (DUFb) or the Farm Direct Nutrition Program (FDNP) that also promote locally grown fresh foods, most Veggie Rx programs do not require participation in SNAP, WIC, or other government benefit programs.

In this way, Veggie Rx can support families who may not qualify for programs because of income eligibility or immigration status. For example, children who are enrolled in OHP may qualify for a Veggie Rx program and their whole family or household will receive Veggie Rx program benefits.

In 2020, we conducted a survey to identify commonalities and unique attributes of Veggie Rx programs across Oregon. 10 program managers responded, providing data from 11 programs:

- **1,300+** patients were enrolled in Veggie Rx programs affecting **~3,000** household members
- Patients range in age from **youth to seniors**
- **80%** of programs run from **3-12 months**
- **80%** of patients access **fresh produce from their farmer** via tokens/vouchers
- **~\$320** was spent per participant resulting in **~\$500K** spent in support of local growers & local economies
- Most programs provide some form of: **nutrition education, a social component, are funded by Coordinated Care Organizations (CCOs), and address diet-modifiable disease or other chronic diseases**
- 3 fundamental aspects that are consistent across all Veggie Rx programs: **1) they serve food insecure Oregonians, 2) provide fresh produce as the primary benefit, and 3) connect with health care**

The starred locations below represent the 11 Oregon Veggie Rx programs surveyed in 2020. Our network also collaborates with similar programs along the SW Wash. and Idaho borders.



2020 Surveyed Oregon Veggie Rx Programs | Source: Google Maps

## VEGGIE RX “INDUSTRY”

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## National

Veggie Rx and similar programs are gaining steam across the country, in various forms. While all are centered on the common principles of providing access to fresh food for patients with nutrition-sensitive conditions, the delivery of programs varies based on the location. Models include:

- Food pharmacies and pantries
- Health care partnerships with grocery stores and food retailers
- Integration of nutrition education into leading medical education programs

The [National Produce Prescription Collaborative \(NPPC\)](#) is a promising effort, started in 2019 and funded by [Wholesome Wave](#), as an initiative to strengthen Veggie Rx programs across the country. NPPC facilitates regular convenings of program managers to foster information sharing, program evaluation, and policy advocacy, to further the integration of food as medicine into traditional health care models.

Research demonstrates a clear link between diet and chronic diet-related disease and reduced health care costs for participating patients. However, the use of food as medicine is not yet broadly integrated into mainstream health care as a primary care mechanism, at the national level or here in Oregon.

## Local

Oregon is applying to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for a new five-year Medicaid waiver, also known as the 1115 Demonstration.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the waiver is to reform our state's Medicaid program, which is a state-level and federal program.

The Oregon Health Plan (OHP) is Oregon's Medicaid program, which is provided by the Coordinated Care Organization (CCO) to deliver health care to people who have low income.

A federal waiver creates an opportunity for the OHP to:

- Build on our state's health care transformation success
- Create a more equitable system

Oregon's current 1115 waiver expires in 2022, and the Oregon Health Authority has recently begun presenting the strategies and ideas for inclusion in the 2022-2027 waiver:

- Oregon is planning to significantly expand eligibility criteria for those who wish to enroll in the OHP, and focus on health equity in all policy strategies.
- It is anticipated that more and more populations may become eligible, which will increase the number of people who might be eligible for Veggie Rx programs and other health-related social needs that are funded by community benefit dollars such as health related services flex (HRSF) funds.

Funding for non clinical services by CCOs pay for health-related services that address the social inequities that are created by social determinants of health. There are a few examples of programs in Oregon that have been able to access such funds to support Veggie Rx programs through their local CCOs, the organizations that provide Medicaid Insurance. The opportunity exists for Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to enroll eligible patients through program managers who are licensed as traditional health workers.

Care Oregon (a CCO in the tri-county region), started authorizing two Veggie Rx programs in 2020 to offer OHP members food support through Health Related Service Flex Funds.

- They have also been working with healthcare partners and CBOs to expand who can “authorize” a produce prescription, as some individuals are not considered directly engaged with more traditional healthcare providers.
- With Health Share of Oregon and its other health plans, CareOregon recently began piloting a way for community health workers housed under CBOs to obtain licenses to be able to submit requests directly.

*As Veggie Rx programs continue to grow, there is room for improvement around data collection and evaluation demonstrating effectiveness and impact. This will ideally lead to increased awareness of the “food as medicine” approach, sustainable program funding, and committed support from Oregon’s health care organizations to more fully integrate this model into our health care system.*

## VEGGIE RX STRENGTHS

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The OCFSN Veggie Rx group has identified the following strengths and opportunities to grow Oregon’s Veggie Rx programs:

1. **Robust Network & Partnerships:** Long-standing and new program partners meet monthly with the goal of expanding access to statewide Veggie Rx programs. This group includes skilled nonprofit leaders, researchers, health care policy makers, and health care providers. There is a wealth of knowledge across our collective and a desire to establish sustainable programs.
2. **Receptive Political Climate:** Oregon is a relatively progressive state when it comes to supporting preventative health care strategies across our communities. There is increased motivation from the state to reduce health care costs, particularly in the Medicaid program. For example, some Veggie Rx programs have received support via CCOs and Community Benefit dollars.
3. **Successful History of Strong Programs:** Veggie Rx programs serve increasing numbers of patients year after year. New programs are being launched annually.
4. **Clear potential for improving human health and decreasing health care costs:** Qualitative surveys reflect patients’ strong positive program experiences and improved health.



Quantitative surveys show improved food security and social engagement, decreased medication use, and increased fresh food intake all potentially leading to preventative care that is less cost prohibitive from both a patient and institutional perspective.

5. **Diversity of Programs Across Oregon:** Programs operate independently under similar principles but nimbly adapt to meet unique community needs by varying patient access points, prescription subsidies, currencies, data collection, and program components.



Hood River Farmers Market | Source: American Communities Project

## VEGGIE RX CHALLENGES

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The OCFSN Veggie Rx group has identified the following challenges for expanding its programs across Oregon:

1. **Administrative Capacity:** Resources - people and budgets - are limited, which makes program management, evaluation, and expansion difficult.
2. **Funding & Scalability:** Primary funding partners include CCOs, mainstream health care providers and hospitals, and private foundations but programs struggle to apply yearly for funding of programs. Inclusion of Veggie Rx as a health related service need with sustainable funding is a major goal of this workgroup.
3. **Cohesive Evaluation Strategy and Metrics:** Preliminary findings show that vegetable prescription programs lead to improved health outcomes. However, more funding is needed to

stimulate additional collaborative evaluation with program metrics that are consistent across programs and assess program processes and impact on health outcomes and health care costs.

4. **Insufficient Program & Veggie Rx Brand Awareness:** Program marketing is managed at an individual level and a strategic statewide approach for marketing and communications does not currently exist.



"Let Thy Food Be Thy Medicine Plant Powered Lettering" | Source: Behance

## OREGON VEGGIE RX VISION & MISSION

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### Vision

*We envision an Oregon where all people have equitable access to fresh food, provided by thriving local farms and local food systems. Fresh food is seen as the primary food - and as medicine - to restore health and reduce health care costs for all residents, with support from the health system.*

### Mission

*We work in collaboration with produce prescription programs, local food growers, and multiple health care systems across Oregon, to reduce the incidence of diet-related disease and improve nutrition security. We do this by promoting health and well-being across our communities, through increasing access to fresh, nutritious food and healthy food knowledge, and strengthening our local food system.*

## GOALS

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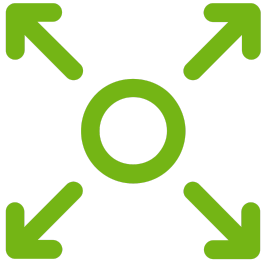
In order to achieve its strategic vision, the working group has identified several goals, in order of priority:


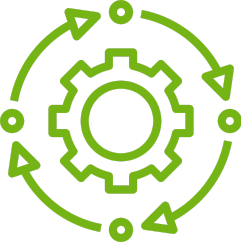
1. **Develop Shared Administrative Capacity**
2. **Establish Program Evaluation Strategy**
3. **Systematize & Streamline Statewide Program Operations**
4. **Develop Marketing & Communications Tools**
5. **Engage in Research-Based Policy & Advocacy Activities**
6. **Develop Sustainable Growth & Funding Plan**

## ACTIVITIES

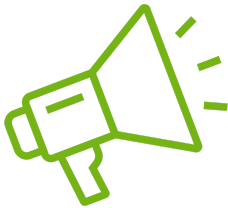
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The working group will achieve its strategic goals by focusing on the following suggested activities:

GOAL	SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
<p><b>1. Develop Shared Administrative Capacity</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Facilitate Veggie Rx Working Group and manage communications, listserv, scheduling, meeting updates, and ensuring progress towards the strategic plan and goals are being made.</li><li>● To streamline operations and reduce redundancy across programs, there is a need to establish consistency through shared tools and processes, drawing from frameworks such as a <a href="#">Collective Impact</a> approach.</li><li>● Possible resources to expand bandwidth:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Rare AmeriCorps</li><li>○ Medical students</li></ul></li><li>● Tap into knowledge of OHSU Rural Health Students:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Research what's happening in the Medicare world and how Veggie Rx could be included.</li></ul></li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Find out how things are getting funded.</li> <li>○ Explore how to systematize programs across the state.</li> <li>● Keep a pulse on what’s happening outside of Oregon - national scene, policy efforts.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Establish Program Evaluation Strategy</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How can evaluation be a tool for patient empowerment and centering the needs of those affected by food insecurity and chronic disease?</li> <li>● Establish target data and evaluation metrics to affirm the effectiveness of current programs and lay the groundwork for launching future programs.</li> <li>● Refine patient survey tools and approach to capture most beneficial data for program improvement and growth.</li> <li>● Identify which research goals will garner future support including health outcomes, financial savings, etc.</li> <li>● Tap into knowledge from national partners on effective evaluation practices.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Systematize &amp; Streamline Statewide Program Operations</b></p> 	<p><u><b>Program Operations</b></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Survey Oregon programs to understand different components of programs (what makes us the same/different). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Create new program orientation/onboarding plan, to improve shared leadership and capacity</li> <li>○ FTE desired for collaborative projects/work, including evaluation.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Explore use of an app such as Fresh Connect that could be used across all programs to improve process efficiency: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ User Experience: what should the app do/feel like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Create user/client journey map or service blueprint for each program to identify areas of program inefficiency, opportunities for process improvement across programs, and Oregon’s best practices.</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Evaluation/data collection.</li> <li>○ Enrollment/survey capability: facilitate enrollment, make data collection easy and compliant.</li> <li>○ Purchasing: incorporate vouchers into app and used electronically.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u><b>Payment</b></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Integrate vouchers into grocery POS system. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ OFB is working with DUFB in grocery stores - could VeggieRx also be included?</li> <li>○ Could VeggieRx be connected to EBT if participants who don’t have SNAP?</li> <li>○ Online ordering system (GGFN giving a lump sum to participants and pre-order system that spends down on their account).</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Explore feasibility of a common currency across programs: <a href="https://jointangelo.com/">https://jointangelo.com/</a></li> </ul>



	<p><b><u>Marketing &amp; Branding</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Establish a shared program definition?</li> <li>● Consistency in name of programs (Veggie Rx vs. Produce Rx, etc.) and terminology (e.g. “voucher” vs. “prescription.”)</li> <li>● Use state logo (see #4) for all programs to build brand awareness.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Leadership &amp; Capacity Building</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Form strategic committees to focus on specific projects and tools to promote Veggie Rx programs, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Marketing</li> <li>○ Program Management &amp; Evaluation</li> <li>○ Advocacy/Policy</li> <li>○ Fundraising</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Establish best practices and approaches utilizing resources from national Veggie Rx programs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Develop Marketing &amp; Communications Tools</b></p> 	<p><b><u>Marketing Operations</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop program toolkit to promote Oregon programs, provide resources to interested food systems and health care partners, and cultivate fundraising opportunities.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Branding</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop unified branding across Oregon Veggie Rx programs.</li> <li>● Use one logo across all programs to build brand awareness and consistency; important to use the same logo to reflect a statewide collective.</li> <li>● Helpful for orienting new programs as they become established.</li> <li>● Incorporate tagline for logo, such as “<i>Food as Medicine.</i>” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Customization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Logo editable to customize per market w/ county, city, location, program name, etc. or keep as solely “Oregon.”</li> <li>■ Option to use alongside individual program logos.</li> <li>■ For programs adjacent to Oregon/along the border, use a different shape of different state as background, and/or “NW Veggie Rx” and highlight color of state.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b><u>Marketing &amp; Communications Strategy</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop marketing strategies to increase broad awareness of Veggie Rx program across multiple sectors.</li> <li>● Generate informational templates based on toolkit info that would be used to target specific target audiences (client, providers, medical institutions, funders).</li> <li>● Who do we want to communicate to and why? What stakeholders do we need to share information with? Who is interested in becoming a partner? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medical institutions - pitching it to fund and operate programs</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Insurance companies</li> <li>○ Medicare - basic plan (free) vs. medicare advantage (purchase)</li> <li>○ Clients</li> <li>○ Healthcare providers</li> <li>○ Partners and funders</li> <li>○ General public</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Engage in Research-Based Policy &amp; Advocacy Activities</b></p> 	<p><b><u>Policy Research</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Identify current policy and advocacy activities that support sustainable funding for Veggie Rx programs and identify what we as a collaborative need to prepare to be able to join those efforts.</li> <li>● Support research effort to identify how programs are being funded and what Medicare Advantage currently reimburses, and how Medicare funding could support Veggie Rx programs. Connect with the National Produce Prescription Collaborative.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Advocacy</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advocate for Medicare Advantage and then Medicare plans (Basic) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Currently covers “Medical Nutrition Therapy” (provided by Registered Dietitians) for patients with diabetes or chronic kidney disease. .</li> </ul> </li> <li>● In 2018, several members of the working group developed a letter for the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) in response to a call for input on CCO 2.0, advocating for additional contracts supporting Veggie Rx programs starting in 2020.</li> <li>● Advocate with OHA and regional CCOs to approve Veggie Rx as a health-related service need and utilizing CHWs to enroll eligible clients.</li> <li>● Explore opportunities to expand access to and funding for Oregon Veggie Rx programs through the next application process for the Oregon Medicaid 1115 Demonstration waiver, active from 2022 to 2027.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Partnerships</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Keep a pulse on what’s happening outside of Oregon - national scene, policy efforts</li> <li>● Track and identify mechanisms for working with public policy partners to further awareness and support of Veggie Rx programs including advocacy, campaigns, letters, and other forms of policy engagement.</li> <li>● Establish a Veggie Rx working group Policy subcommittee to connect with the OCFSN Policy working group, to better understand how to collaborate on policy efforts.</li> </ul>

## 6. Develop Sustainable Growth & Funding Plan for Veggie Rx Programs



- Establish innovative and sustainable funding strategies and mechanisms.
- Explore best practices and approaches for fundraising sustainability from successful national Veggie Rx programs.
- Align program design with CCO incentive metrics to strengthen CCO funding pipeline.
- Evaluate opportunities to integrate Veggie Rx programs into other systems such as public health and social services including WIC, SNAP, VA, and senior services.

## TIMELINE

The timeline for accomplishing these goals is from **September 2021-2025**, which also aligns with the strategic plan for the larger OCFSN organization. Specific timing and planning for each activity will be determined following the adoption of the strategic plan and formulation of project committees, who will be responsible for developing project plans for their designated goals and activities.

## ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Following adoption of the strategic plan, working group members will prioritize strategic activities, organize into project committees, and formulate work plans to work on monthly to accomplish specific tasks. Monthly working group calls may shift to a different schedule to accommodate project committee calls and work sessions.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

The Veggie Rx working group recently formulated a strategic planning committee, which is open and welcoming of new members. The current committee is comprised of the following OCFSN members:

- **Kaely Summers, Chair**  
Health Equity Manager, Adelante Mujeres
- **Marielle Slater**  
Evaluation Consultant, cultivaré llc
- **Dana Taylor**  
Dietetics & Nutrition Student and Local Food Volunteer

# Oregon Community Food Systems Network

## **Veggie Rx**

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Forest Grove Farmers Market | Source: Ecotrust

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