



## Blue Cross and Blue Shield rolls out pharmacy for healthy food

by Michelle Leach

To get a finger on the pulse of one's health, look to his or her ZIP code — not genetic code. This stark notion motivates Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska's involvement with improving workplace and community health through partnerships with the likes of Live Well Omaha and WELLCOM.

"If you don't have access to fruit and vegetables [and] healthy food, you can be at a health disadvantage," said Executive Vice President Dr. Joann Schaefer, a past chair of Live Well Omaha's board of directors. "We know that a poor diet makes some health conditions much worse."

Enter the Food Pharmacy Program, which Schaefer said allows for food to be dispensed

"like a pharmacy."

This approach, Schaefer noted, can improve patient health while lowering costs — especially for those with chronic conditions like kidney disease.

"This program is just getting started," she said. "We think the implications are exciting because food will be used as medicine."

Existing pharmacies in other parts of the country and world allow patients to pick up healthy food at a designated site (sometimes within a hospital) and receive guidance on how to make better nutritional choices.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield's case managers are also using food security and other "social determinants," such as safe housing, education, food security and transportation, every day, according to Schaefer.

Combined with public data, this information forms the "Community Health Hub," which Schaefer said can also be accessed by state and local health officials.

"The idea is to develop programs based on the data that target the needs of a community," she said.

For example, if members can't get to a doctor, the Think clinic has an arrangement with a company to provide transportation to patients.

As "Nebraskans serving Nebraskans," Schaefer emphasized involvement in efforts that are innovative and "move the needle" — to improve the health of its members and the communities they live in.

"It's about adding good years to people's lives," she said.