

LOCAL NEWS

# \$225k grant for Howard County to address diabetes, food insecurity



By **KIERSTEN HACKER** | [khacker@baltsun.com](mailto:khacker@baltsun.com)

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The Howard County Health Department has received a three-year \$225,000 grant from CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield as part of the organization's effort to work with communities to address diabetes.

Through CareFirst's Place-Based Grants Initiative, 31 groups and agencies across Washington, D.C., Maryland and Northern Virginia received a total of \$7.1 million in grant funding. The funding is meant to foster well-being and improve access to healthy, affordable food to tackle diabetes and other chronic health issues related to diet.

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CareFirst analyzed its healthcare members across the region, finding inequities and a high prevalence of diabetes and prediabetes, which often comes along with hypertension or cardiovascular disease, said Maisha Douyon Cover, a program officer with the Community Health and Social Impact team at CareFirst. In 2019, CareFirst made an initial commitment to addressing the root causes of these health conditions with the first phase of grants to bolster food access.

“And so that is the hope with this grant and this investment is working across a number of areas to really think comprehensively about food, food access, in a way that they could actually impact people’s health,” Douyon Cover said.

Howard County received a grant of \$50,000 in 2022 after realizing the need to establish a food council to help with food insecurity and applying for the grant, said Reena Rambharat, deputy director of the Bureau of Assessment, Planning and Community Engagement at the Howard County Health Department.

This second grant will help the agency continue the work of setting up a food council, with the proper expertise, a leading staff member and infrastructure to look at the most vulnerable areas in the county and establish plans. While a food council is new to Howard County, they have been successful in other counties around the state, Rambharat said.

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About one in six Howard County residents face food insecurity, according to the 2021 Howard County Health Assessment Survey, and one in four have concerns about affording food, rent and other essential costs.

The grant funding “could not have come at a more important time,” Rambharat said, as spending cuts from the state and federal government will have a hefty impact.

“We can’t ignore what’s happening right now. It’s a struggle because individuals, families, are losing their jobs, and all of that has a ripple effect on individuals being able to afford healthy and nutritious food, and it’s going to have an impact on health,” Rambharat said.

Rambharat said it’s “a good thing” that she’s heard from individuals and partners that county residents want to buy eggs, milk and produce. But it’s a matter of figuring out how to make those items accessible without forcing people to skip their other important costs like utilities.

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During the last six weeks, CareFirst has been able to gain a better understanding of how federal funding cuts are impacting the community, especially communities of color who are “probably most greatly impacted,” Douyon Cover said. The conversations the organization has had with communities aids its reponse in ensuring resources are available.

“Like food is everything, and so if people can have access and not have to worry about food, especially healthy produce, that may also help free up budgets,” Douyon Cover said. “And so, I think it allows us to deepen partnerships with communities, with the organizations that serve them and but then also meet that need.”

*Have a news tip? Contact Kiersten Hacker at [khacker@baltsun.com](mailto:khacker@baltsun.com) or @KierstenHacker on X.*

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