

Background Sheet: CSAs and Health Care

What is a CSA for Health Care Program? CSA for health care programs provide a subscription to weekly food shares for households with a goal of preventing diet-related health conditions and/or in response to an existing condition or clinical indicator of risk. Referrals come from a health care provider's office. Programs last approximately 12 - 16 weeks, primarily in summer although some programs have extended seasons.

How CSA Shares Complement Other Food & Health Care Programs: Food programs connected with health care can be divided into meals-based and ingredients-based programs, and often have an emphasis on either prevention or treatment (although some also work across the care continuum). Vermont's CSA programs are ingredients-based, and most frequently focus on prevention, although they could be applied to treatment goals as well.

Two distinguishing features of a CSA format are the length of the program, engaging patients over the course of several months, and the range of fresh produce provided in the share. These attributes provide opportunities to work with patients on exploring new foods and finding new ways to incorporate fresh produce into their diets, supporting longer term dietary change.

CSA programs also emphasize contracting with local farmers, including planning out the share components ahead of the growing season, and making connections between share participants, growers, and the larger community of people supporting food from local farms. This relationship supports local economic and community development.

Programs in Vermont: Vermont has CSA for health care partnerships active in Addison, Bennington, Chittenden, Lamoille, Orleans, Rutland, and Washington counties. Some counties, such as Orange and Windsor, have pilot programs with prescribed food boxes that are similar to CSAs but with less emphasis on direct contracting with local farmers. The new CSA and Health Care Community of Practice (launched as a Farm to Plate Community of Practice at the end of 2021) helps existing programs learn from each other and provides a way for organizations exploring new programs to learn about this opportunity.

From CSA programs that make their project impact data publicly available, we estimate:

- 750 shares statewide over the course of a year.
- ~ 2,000 individuals served (based on average participating household size)
- 23 farms with season-long contracts to produce for CSA shares, plus farm products added through gleaning, donations, and one-time purchases. UVMHC additionally contracts with the Intervale, which aggregates products from multiple farms.
- The NOFA-VT Farm Share program is not included in these numbers as it is not connected to health care providers. Last year this program worked with 52 farms, providing 280 subsidized shares to 685 individuals.

Opportunities for future growth include expanding the share seasons, expanding the amount of food purchased (both overall and the ratio of purchased to donated), adding new farms, adding more households, and exploring partnerships for expanded services, such as nutrition education, addressing access barriers (eg transportation), and wellness coaching.