

coming clean

Health Equity Impact Convenings Impact Story Healing New Mexico Food Deserts

Physicians are always saying we need to eat healthier to be healthier. But it's not always that easy. In Albuquerque's dry, hot, South Valley there are a number of "food deserts" – areas without grocery or big box stores selling affordable and good quality fresh food. Many residents must rely on dollar stores and other discount retailers for their food, which don't often carry fresh (let alone organic) fruits and vegetables. But thankfully community leaders Dr. Will Kaufman of Frist Choice Community Health Care and Richard Moore, Program Director of Los Jardines Institute (The Gardens Institute) have joined forces to tackle this issue. The men have a shared vision to make fresh vegetables available to patients and the South Valley community in general.

Richard Moore has been a leader for environmental health and justice in Albuquerque and nationwide for over 50 years. Los Jardines Institute is a working farm as well as a hub for community education, engagement and activism. Los Jardines is committed to fostering new leadership to sustain the movement and therefore places a large emphasis on providing training and experience for youth (i.e. how to be farmers and suppliers) that also links with elders in the community to reinforce the importance of intergenerational working, learning and being connected to the land.



First Choice Community Health Care primarily serves those living in the middle to lower income communities in the greater Albuquerque area and takes a comprehensive approach to health care – looking at a variety of indicators such as environment, workplace, family and diet. They have 9 clinics in 3 counties, including one in the South Valley. Notably, Mr. Moore, along with other local leaders, helped get what is now the Community Health Center off the ground some 44 years ago and continues, with others, to guide the development of the Center's wellness ecosystem.

Mr. Moore and Dr. Kaufman paired up on a panel at Health Care Without Harm's CleanMed conference in Dallas, Texas in April to showcase their partnership. According

to Health Care Without Harm, “CleanMed is the premier national environmental conference for leaders in health care sustainability who are on the leading edge of greening the health care sector. It’s the one time each year for businesses with environmentally preferable products and services or nutritious, sustainable foods to connect with the health care leaders who make purchasing decisions for their facilities.” The majority of the South Valley’s First Choice patients not only live in food deserts, but live in communities where other stressors to health are prevalent. The Agri-Cultura Network (ACN), which includes Los Jardines Institute, parks mobile vendor trucks at several of the clinics a couple times a week to educate patients on the benefits of eating well and offer discounted produce and coupons for organic produce at the farm co-op. But Moore and Kaufman’s plan is bigger than that. Their shared vision is to create a bottom up process for getting fresh, organic vegetables to the patients who come to Frist Choice for health and wellness care and the community as a whole.

Currently, they are working on a process to source more food from the local farmer co-op, Agri-cultura Network (ACN), rather than from larger, more established farms. The ACN has 9 member farms and 16 more that are part of the network. Collectively, they are supplying local school systems with fresh organic produce year round. By engaging smaller farms first like those in ACN first, the school system contracts (and others) open up more opportunities for more farms to participate in the process, bringing more revenue to smaller farms, which allows them to make needed improvements and expansions to increase their supply in the coming years. This increases the fresh food available to patients of First Choice, to schools and the greater community, through farmer’s markets, mobile trucks and other avenues.

Crediting a principled, bottom-up process of design, implementation and evaluation for the new First Choice campus, Moore and Kaufman see the value of bringing that model to scale to improve health and bring more high quality employment opportunities to the South Valley, thereby building the community as a whole and positively impacting the overall health and wellness of residents.