Redwood Health Center Hopes to Grow a Healthier Community with Onsite Garden

Tuesday, May 29, 2018

Drive by the Redwood Health Center in the next few months and you might see peppers, spinach, and tomatoes growing near the parking lot.

Look more closely and you might also see first-time gardeners growing food that could help change their lives.

Redwood is using the garden to try to help patients with uncontrolled diabetes regain control of their health. The question is whether growing food will make it easier to eat well and stay healthy.

“In integrated medicine we’re always thinking about what’s going to make it easier for the patient to comply with their treatment plans,” said Megan Whitlock, a behavior specialist and social worker at the Redwood Health Center.

In 2017, the center received Imagine Perfect Care money to build and irrigate a garden on a small, unused plot of land next to the clinic. In its first season, the garden had a small number of patients and staff growing food.

This year is more ambitious. Staff are planning to use the garden as part of a quality improvement study around uncontrolled diabetes for 13 patients.

The study will examine how capable individuals feel in making lifestyle changes and handling their own treatment. Growing their own food will be among the self-help tools available. Education about gardening, weight loss, nutrition and diabetes will be offered.

Counseling will address the emotional and motivational barriers around making lifestyle changes.

“People with chronic illnesses often have depression and anxiety,” said Whitlock, who is the study’s principle investigator. “If they don’t see improvement in their health and they put effort into it, they may be discouraged from making future efforts.”

But the hope is that the garden can help more than just this small group of patients — perhaps one day growing larger to serve other underserved groups such as refugees.
“I see this garden project overall becoming a way to connect to the greater community,” said Scott Hunt, the clinic manager. “That helps us connect to the patients in the area.”

Not only is the garden to connect with patients, it will potentially be used to help staff as well. Whitlock has been working with the Resiliency Center to find ways to prevent staff burnout. This year, one plot will also be used by staff who could eventually create a recipe book provided to patients — allowing providers to share their knowledge in a new way.

For the current study, patients will have complete control over what they grow but will be encouraged to plant low-starch, low-sugar options.

The study will run from April to October. Staff know that despite all the support, these first-time gardeners may be challenged by the physical labor and the need to find transportation.

Nevertheless, participants say they are excited to plant those seeds and get going.

“This garden creates a lot of enthusiasm in both patients and staff,” Whitlock said. “We can’t wait to see what it will bring this year.”

By Julia Lyon