



Food Pantries Help HIV Clients

“Without food...people don’t take their medicine.”

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Vivent Health, an HIV care provider with locations across four states, says its clinics in Denver and Kansas City have reported an increased demand at their food pantries—and that meeting that need is an important factor in helping people with HIV reach and maintain undetectable viral loads.

People living with HIV who take meds regularly and maintain viral suppression enjoy better overall health, experience slower disease progression and are less likely to develop opportunistic illnesses. What’s more, people with an undetectable viral load don’t transmit HIV to others through sex, a fact referred to as treatment as prevention, or Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U).

What’s that got to do with food pantries? As Lyssa Towl, vice president of operations at Vivent’s Denver location, explains it to 5280.com: “Without food...people don’t take their medicine.”

As food prices have spiked due to inflation and while many HIV clients face economic hardships, it has become increasingly important for Vivent to provide robust and nutritious options to its clients.

In Kansas City, for example, Vivent Health staff told KSHB.com that demand at the food pantry has grown by 30%. “The numbers each month, each week, are on the increase,” said Caroline Huffman, vice president of operations for Vivent Health Kansas City.

Based in Wisconsin, Vivent Health also operates clinics in Colorado, Missouri and Texas. As one of the largest HIV providers in the nation, Vivent offers wraparound services, including dental care, pharmacies, case management, mental health care and the aforementioned food pantries.

“We believe food is medicine,” said Nicholas Clark, Kansas City’s food pantry coordinator. “You have the power to heal with food.”

Proof of that is in the data from Denver, especially when put in a larger context. Nationwide, 66% of people with diagnosed HIV were undetectable in 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In Colorado, the number is 61%. But at Denver’s Vivent Health, 96% of clients maintain an undetectable viral load.

