



# Exploring How Nutrition Can Be Applied to Traditional Harm Reduction Strategies through Interprofessional Service Collaboration



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## Introduction

The Public Health Student Interest Group (PHIG) fostered a student-driven, community-engaged, interdisciplinary approach to programming focused on nutrition as a means of harm reduction. Our initiatives combined experiential learning and direct service, including case studies that integrated principles of social determinants of health and connected themes with local resources, speakers who are bring healthy eating to hospitals, and direct service activities with New Haven Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen (DESK).

## Objectives

1. Address harm reduction as a noun, adjective, and verb as it relates to nutrition.
2. Educate both community members and our interprofessional team on the importance of nutrition and how to talk about it effectively.
3. Empower medical providers to address nutrition during medical visits in an individualized, culturally appropriate way.
4. Underscore the importance of addressing and tracking social determinants of health by providers in preventive care and across all specialties.

## Background

In Connecticut, 1 in 7 people experience food insecurity, one of the highest rates in New England,<sup>1</sup> which significantly impacts health. Nutrition plays a key role in many cardiometabolic conditions including heart disease and diabetes.<sup>2</sup> Despite its clear impact on health, still only 14% of healthcare providers feel comfortable discussing nutrition with their patients.<sup>3</sup>

To that end, our group used harm reduction principles under the theme of nutrition to not only better understand how nutrition impacts health but also how to have those conversations with patients and act to minimize the disparity.

## Acknowledgments

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- Shanthi Rao, MSW, Rubby Koomson, APRN, Anthony Messina, PA-C, and Eileen McMurrer, M.Ed. (UST/AHEC Scholars Program IG Consultants)

## Lessons

- The PHIG met monthly to explore how harm reduction principles can be further applied to nutrition.
- Community service events were held in partnership with Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen of New Haven, CT.
  - **See below** for specifics of each meeting and event.

Meetings	Highlights & Learning Points
11/17/25 - Intro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of harm reduction as a noun, verb, and adjective in the context of public health</li> <li>• Discussion of interest group goals: desire to do something hands-on, actionable, and impactful</li> </ul>
12/15/25 - Case Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of potential community partners: decision to move forward with DESK in New Haven</li> <li>• Review of social determinants of health via discussion of hypothetical local case studies</li> </ul>
01/26/26 - Guest Speaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• David Juros: Operations Manager for Food4Health Clinic at Hartford Hospital</li> <li>• CT is experiencing increasing levels of food insecurity</li> <li>• Emphasized importance of tracking social determinants of health for effective care plans</li> <li>• Programs like Food4Health are preventive, in line with harm reduction</li> </ul>
02/25/26 - Documentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watched "Food Justice" from PBS and discussed how the concept relates to harm reduction</li> </ul>

Community Events	Summary of Activity with DESK	Results
02/04/26 - Kit Assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Made substance use harm reduction kits for distribution</li> </ul>	~300 kits assembled
03/11/26 - Pantry Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assisted with set-up &amp; breakdown of weekly Olive St Food Pantry</li> <li>• Assisted with distribution of non-perishables, meat, and fresh produce to guests</li> </ul>	151 guests serviced (133 returning & 18 new guests)
03/26/26 - Dinner Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assisted with set-up and clean-up of nightly dinner service</li> <li>• Assisted with distribution of meals to guests</li> </ul>	324 meals served

## Community Partner

*Downtown Evening SOUP KITCHEN*

Please visit [www.deskct.org](http://www.deskct.org) for more info & volunteer opportunities!



## Implication

The group engaged in reframing harm reduction to employ its principles as a multifaceted concept and as a means for action.

- As a noun, the group identified nutrition as an often-overlooked part of harm reduction, despite its massive impact on the development of cardiometabolic conditions in the USA and the world.<sup>2</sup>
- As an adjective, our group focused on what defines core healthy nutrition and how those principles can be implemented in a clinical setting.
  - This discussion was deeply guided by Food4Health Founder David Juros.
- As a verb, the group made substance use kits, distributed healthy food, and served dinners with DESK.
  - Each event touched on the relationship between mitigating poor outcomes through action whether that be safer injections or nutritional counseling that aligned with an individual's chronic conditions.
- Overall, the group developed a strong sense of harm reduction principles as they relate to nutrition. Through this experience, team members are better equipped to not only engage in conversation with community members regarding nutrition, but also to effectively connect them with local resources that may help them.

## Challenges & Future Directions

Through the conversations and experiences, the group discovered how difficult it can be to prioritize nutrition. While volunteering, the group observed that many individuals struggled with making healthy decisions and managing finances. Similarly, unhoused individuals often have little say in the meals they eat. These challenges inevitably shift discussions with patients. Limited ability to obtain structured feedback from community members and providers due to lack of continuity also presented a noteworthy limitation to this project.

In the future, the group hopes to support programs like the Food4Health Clinic at Hartford Hospital to reduce barriers to nutrition through service-learning opportunities with CT AHEC.

## References

1. Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, and Opportunity. (2025). State of food insecurity in Connecticut 2025 report. <https://wp.cga.ct.gov/cwceio/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/State-of-Food-Insecurity-in-Connecticut-Report-2025.pdf>
2. Mozaffarian D, Aspry KE, Garfield K, et al. "Food is medicine" strategies for nutrition security and Cardiometabolic Health Equity. *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. 2024;83(8):843-864. doi:10.1016/j.jacc.2023.12.023
3. Krishnan, S., Sytsma, T., & Wischmeyer, P. E. (2024). Addressing the Urgent Need for Clinical Nutrition Education in Postgraduate Medical Training: New Programs and Credentialing. *Advances in nutrition* (Bethesda, Md.), 15(11), 100321. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.advnut.2024.100321>