

IMPROVING THE OVERALL HEALTH OF STAMFORD'S WEST SIDE



A Prescription for Improved Wellness and Healthier Neighborhoods

A healthcare evolution underway in Stamford's West Side neighborhood is changing the way its residents view and access health, education and social services. It's being driven by a coalition of human service providers, local organizations, residents, and community and corporate volunteers who have joined forces to create the Vita Health & Wellness District. Vita, from the Latin term for "life," is a collaborative effort of Charter Oak Communities (COC), Stamford Hospital and the City of Stamford. Together they are implementing health and wellness initiatives that will have far-reaching implications for the entire Stamford community, and may serve as a model for cities across America.

The Vita district comprises two key census-tract areas adjacent to Stamford Hospital, with a one-mile stretch of Stillwater Avenue running through the center. The neighborhood has struggled economically and had a high crime rate, in addition to the highest concentration of chronic health conditions in the City. Now, however, it is transforming itself into a cohesive mix of commercial and residential properties, with small markets and restaurants, private homes and apartments. Additionally, attractive new mixed-income residences have replaced the Vidal Court housing project that once sat on the land where the new Stamford Hospital is being built.

The West Side required more than a facelift – it needed to be reinvented. Early talks and a shared vision evolved into a strategy for sustainable, long-term change. The vision that has become Vita, explains Vincent J. Tufo, executive direc-



Fairgate Farm Production Manager Maxon Keating demonstrates how to pick beets at a Farm to Table Family Workshop in the Summer 2015. The buildings in the background consist of residential units at Fairgate, a Charter Oak Communities-operated apartment community.

Vita Health and Wellness District Community Collaborative Team Leaders (l-r): Vincent Tufo, Charter Oak Communities CEO; Pam Koprowski, Stamford Hospital's Public Affairs Consultant; Leslie Sexer, Vita Health and Wellness District Administrator; and Greg Kearns, Stamford Hospital's Director of Planning

tor and CEO of Charter Oak Communities, resonates with residents and partners enthusiastic about improving the health of the whole community.

"Vita is being designed to help the people who live and work in the community be as healthy as possible," said Tufo, noting that creating and maintaining healthy housing is integral to the innovative Vita model. "By improving living conditions, including housing, access to health care, availability of nutritious foods, workforce training and planning public spaces for physical fitness activities, Vita is addressing a wide spectrum of 'place-based' health initiatives that are strongly influenced by where people live."

AN URBAN FARM, AND MANY PARTNERS

As Vidal Court was being replaced with modern, energy-efficient residential communities, several blighted properties were razed to create a thriving, organic, volunteer-powered urban farm that produced close to 5,000 pounds (80 varieties) of fruits and vegetables in 2015. Volunteers -- most from the neighborhood -- take home healthy foods they've helped grow; what remains is shared with local agencies including Inspirica, the New Covenant House, and Scofield Manor.

Together with Stamford Hospital and Optimus Healthcare, the Farm sponsors community events and farm-to-table workshops focused on nutrition and educational outreach. Farm coordinators also



partner with organizations like the Boys and Girls Club and local schools to promote hands-on activities and age- and culturally relevant learning programs.

Another Vita initiative is the Stamford Community Collaborative, in which local agencies and service providers from different sectors work to improve the health of the community. The Collaborative targets physical fitness, parks and green space, education, counseling, nutrition, economic self-sufficiency, mental health, senior services, housing and the environment, and obesity prevention. They are engaged in a three-pronged approach that addresses lifestyle and social/environmental factors; access to primary, specialty and preventive services; and the coordination of patient care among hospital, outpatient providers, and home care.

"These groups share resources, strategies and creative energy, focusing their efforts around a common vision for the Vita community," said Greg Kearns, director of Planning at Stamford Hospital. "Over time we look forward to continually implementing a variety of programs and services that will have a positive impact on the health of the community, physically, emotionally and economically."

A neighborhood association, the West Side NRZ, gives the 1,900 residents of COC's owned-housing communities on the West Side a continued voice regarding public safety, beautification and community activities. Additionally, a new West Side Merchant's Association represents area business interests. Financial literacy, workforce preparation, one-on-one counseling and job-training programs are provided through COC's resident services partner, Family Centers. Another educational initiative -- the Parents as Co-Educators project, in collaboration with Family Centers, Childcare Learning Centers and Neighbors Link -- helps prepare immigrant parents to support the academic success of their children.

"We are fortunate to live and work in an area that's abundant in resources designed to help residents live healthy, productive lives," said Family Centers' President Bob Arnold. "By tapping into the expertise of the agencies and service providers that serve our community, Vita is creating a culture reliant on focused collaboration to achieve a common goal."

To learn more about the Vita programs, partners and activities, go to www.vitastamford.com or you can check out and like the Vita Facebook page at www.facebook.com/VitaStamford.



An evening yoga class (including chair yoga) taking place at Fairgate Farm this past summer; the new Stamford Hospital, on schedule to open in the fall of 2016, is in the background.