



MealTimes



Cover Story

A Full Plate

“My diagnosis was real heavy and real hard for me emotionally,” says Norel. “It’s one of those things that, as a queer person, you’re always told to be afraid of. A lot of times we are told that our life is over.”

While Norel has asked to keep his health diagnosis private, he shared that he’s noticed people treat him differently since his diagnosis. But one thing that’s helped him feel supported is access to fresh, nutritious food and the friendly faces at Project Open Hand.

“It’s kind of like seeing a friend,” he says. “The people that work with Project Open Hand, they are so nice. It’s more of like a greeting, more of like a, ‘Hello, I haven’t seen you since last week.’”

When he eats nutritious foods, Norel says that he feels better both mentally and physically.

“Project Open Hand has positively affected my health because now I have better, healthier options around me,” he says. “Sometimes I need to eat something because of my medication. There will be times that I’m looking through the fridge and I think, ‘Thank God I have an apple from Project Open Hand that can carry me over.’”

This is the power of medically tailored meals and the services that Project Open Hand provides. With meals designed by our team of Registered Dietitian Nutritionists to meet the specific medical and nutrition needs of people living with serious health conditions, these meals aren’t just “healthy.” They’re evidence-based, science-backed nutrition interventions

that help people like Norel to manage their critical health conditions and improve their quality of life.

For people living with chronic illnesses, medically tailored meals have been shown to increase medication adherence (how likely someone is to take their prescribed medications) significantly, which is critical for maintaining viral suppression and overall health. For Norel, the impact is personal and profound.

He also notices a difference in his energy levels.

“It gives you more energy because, honestly, sometimes with a lot of processed foods, you feel more exhausted. But Project Open Hand’s food is more balanced and nutritious, and that boosts my energy levels.”

Norel was referred to Project Open

“We have enough to struggle with already, especially if you have a chronic disease. You already have enough on your plate.”

Hand through the Shanti Project. He now receives weekly deliveries of frozen meals and medically tailored groceries.

“Who says no to groceries?” He laughs. “The fruits, veggies, and grains – they make a real difference.”

For people managing chronic conditions, medically tailored meals also reduce hospital stays and readmissions, and reduce medical costs overall, helping people to recover more quickly and avoid costly emergency care.

With food prices continuing to rise, Norel says the stress of affording groceries weighs heavily on him.

“But knowing that every week I could go to Project Open Hand – it really takes a load off mentally,” he says.

“Especially when we talk about lower-income people, one of the biggest sources of anxiety is what you’re going to eat when you get home from your job. So, knowing that you have something to come home to – something to eat – it’s very powerful.”

He wishes more people had access to the kind of support he receives.

“Sometimes I get disappointed that there aren’t more Project Open Hands around the world. It makes me feel like I’m very blessed.”

“We have enough to struggle with already, especially if you have a chronic disease. You already have enough on your plate,” he says. “Food is how you take care of yourself. And when you have a chronic illness, it’s one of the most important things you need to do to take care of yourself.”

“You need to have food that works for you,” Norel adds, “because a lot of times when you’re lower income and have a chronic illness, food can work against you.”

That’s why Project Open Hand’s support is so vital to clients like Norel. This science-based, evidence-supported approach to nutrition supports people living with complex health conditions, helping to improve health outcomes, medication adherence, and lower healthcare costs – while at the same time, giving people like Norel the dignity and stability of having access to nourishing meals.

To support more clients like Norel, make a donation at www.openhand.org/donate.

by Kimberly Kollwitz, Director of Communications and Government Affairs



Paul's Letter

Dear Friend,

Project Open Hand's 40th anniversary celebrations have come to a close. But with that milestone behind us, it means an opportunity to look ahead to the next forty years with renewed purpose and vision.

When Ruth Brinker founded Project Open Hand in 1985, her dream was to serve the people who needed it most, those living with HIV/AIDS, at a time when it wasn't popular to do so. We have kept that dream alive in everything we do at Project Open Hand, even as we have expanded to serve even more people, bringing in folks living with cancer, heart disease, kidney failure, and more.

As you'll read in this latest issue of MealTimes, Norel's story is a powerful reminder of why our work matters: "You need to have food that works for you, because when you're lower income and have a chronic illness, food can work against you," he says.

For people living with serious health conditions, our medically tailored meals aren't just healthy; they are evidence-based nutrition interventions that help to reduce hospital stays and readmissions, and reduce overall medical costs. These meals can take a

mental load off of our clients, and allow them to focus what matters—healing.

And our commitment to improving our work continues, too. Our newly launched Community Food Council (CFC) is helping us to shape menus that reflect client preferences and encourage clients to truly enjoy the meals we serve. This is just one of the ways we're integrating community voice into our programs.

Our 2025 Client Satisfaction, released in December, shows the impact this has:

- 94% of clients agree that our services help them improve or maintain their health
- 94% agree our services help them worry less about accessing healthy food
- 90% say they're treated with kindness and respect by our staff and volunteers
- 84% agree our nutrition education helps them meet their health goals.

Also of note last year, we released the third edition of *trEATment Magazine*, which speaks to the clinical impact our work has on our clients. The most recent issue of the magazine is focused

on long-term HIV/AIDS survivors, and was released at a World AIDS Day press conference in December. Later that evening, we held a packed Open House event where our community partners, clients, and neighbors came together to celebrate our successes and look towards the future.

This year, we're excited to continue building on our momentum. We will be rolling out a new menu for clients living with high-risk pregnancies, exploring opportunities for meal retail (while maintaining our current services), and continuing to innovate through initiatives like the CFC.

As we look now to the next forty years, I know that we can ensure that Ruth Brinker's vision continues to live on for decades to come.

With gratitude,

Paul Hepfer
Chief Executive Officer



Celebrating Two Successful Events

trEATment Magazine #3 Release



The newest edition of *trEATment Magazine* is available online. In the latest edition of the first-of-its-kind publication, learn about the critical role medically tailored meals play in supporting individuals living with HIV/AIDS and how it sparked the "food is medicine" movement.

Download your copy of *trEATment Magazine*:



World AIDS Day Press Conference and Open House



To mark World AIDS Day and celebrate our 40th anniversary, Project Open Hand hosted a press conference highlighting four decades of supporting the HIV community. The event featured a panel of HIV/AIDS experts, a client story, and the unveiling of the newest issue of *trEATment Magazine*. Coverage appeared on KPIX, KTVU, NBC Bay Area, KRON 4, and more.

Later that day, we welcomed guests to an Open House at our 730 Polk Street Grocery Center, where attendees enjoyed guided tours and refreshments provided by generous community partners. We're grateful to the agencies who joined us—PRC, AIDS Legal Referral Panel, SF AIDS Foundation, Maitri, and San Francisco Community Health Center—and to our food partners Bi-Rite, Brenda's, Café Buenos Aires, Linea Caffe, and Outta Sight Pizza for making the event even more special.

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Project Open Hand
meals with love

Project Open Hand's mission is to improve health outcomes and quality of life by providing nutritious meals to the sick and vulnerable, caring for and educating our community.

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FOOD=LOVE



Spotlight: Nutrition Focused Physical Exam training for Project Open Hand Registered Dietitians

Late last year, the Project Open Hand Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN) team joined a group of 18 RDNs from partners with the California Food is Medicine Coalition (CalFIMC) for a two-day, hands-on training on the Nutrition Focused Physical Exam.

What is NFPE?

According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the Nutrition Focused Physical Exam (NFPE) is a tool in the RDN's toolbox that can more accurately identify malnutrition and therefore "decrease the length of stay, falls, pressure ulcers, infections, complications, re-admissions, and overall health care costs." NFPEs give RDNs supporting data and a snapshot of the client's current nutrition, allowing them to more accurately provide a nutrition diagnosis of malnutrition. While NFPE is only one component of the overall nutrition assessment performed during intake, it helps identify or flag clients who are showing signs of malnutrition and intervene quickly.

Malnutrition is Associated with Increased Morbidity and Mortality

Several of the populations served by Project Open Hand are at increased risk for malnutrition, including older adults, people living with heart failure, those receiving dialysis, people experiencing

food insecurity, people living with cancer, and other chronic conditions.

Malnutrition in hospitalized patients is associated with increased morbidity and mortality, but is often under-identified or only identified during a hospital stay.

Gaps in identifying malnutrition often occur during transitions of care, such as when clients move between healthcare settings like doctor's offices or supportive service programs. Following ASPEN guidelines, CalFIMC organizations are working to implement age appropriate and validated malnutrition risk screenings in all care settings, including our offices, to provide nutrition assessment, intervention, and monitoring as appropriate.

Malnutrition is linked to higher healthcare costs, longer hospital stays, and increased readmissions—patients with malnutrition have a 50% higher 30-day readmission rate compared to those without.

Malnutrition Assessments at Project Open Hand

Project Open Hand clients meet with our RDNs for a nutrition assessment, including an NFPE exam in our San Francisco or Oakland Grocery Centers. This approach uses advanced clinical tools like NFPE to identify malnutrition across diverse chronic conditions and stages of disease.

As community-based RDNs, Project Open Hand will continue integrating clinical nutrition assessments into care through NFPEs as a critical part of our comprehensive evaluations. NFPEs detect physical signs, such as muscle and fat loss, micronutrient deficiencies, or fluid imbalance, issues that might otherwise go unnoticed.

NFPE improves diagnosis accuracy, guiding precise nutrition therapy beyond self-reported intake. It also strengthens referral pathways between healthcare providers and Food is Medicine programs by closing the loop between screening and intervention. Findings inform meal tailoring and education strategies, ensuring medically tailored meals meet individual needs. By identifying malnutrition in under-assessed populations, we promote health equity and responsive care.

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by Katie Jackson, RDN, Chief Nutrition Officer and Kristi Friesen, RDN, Senior Manager of Nutrition Services

Community Food Council Convenes for the First Time



Project Open Hand recently launched our newly formed Community Food Council, a group made up of volunteers, staff, clients, and culinary professionals united by a shared goal: to integrate community voice into menu design and development and to strengthen our food programs.

Council members shared thoughtful contributions that laid a strong foundation for the meaningful work ahead. Together, we're shaping a menu that feels authentic, reflects cultural preferences, and encourages clients to truly enjoy and consume the meals we serve.

We're energized by the momentum this council is building – stay tuned for more updates as this important initiative continues to grow!



Project Open Hand Plate Clubs

Make a difference. MealTimes offers special acknowledgment to Project Open Hand supporters who have made gifts totaling \$1,000 or more from July 1, 2025 through September 30, 2025. If you have questions about this list, please contact donations@openhand.org or 415-447-2300.

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From Our Kitchen to Yours

Kale and Bean Soup Recipe

If you only have 30 minutes, this soup is for you! Simple, hearty, delicious and on the table fast! For a complete meal, serve it with your favorite grain.

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 yellow onion, chopped
- 4 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 ½ teaspoon salt
- pepper, to taste
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 cups cooked garbanzo beans, or a 15-ounce can of white beans, rinsed
- 2 tablespoons fresh rosemary or 2 teaspoons dried rosemary, chopped
- 1 bunch kale, thick stems discarded and leave chopped into bite size pieces (~8 cups)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

Directions

1. Wash and chop your vegetables and herbs. Set aside.
2. Heat oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add celery, onion, salt, and pepper. Cook for about 4-6 minutes, stirring occasionally until the vegetables are tender.
3. Add the beans, rosemary, and 6 cups of water. Cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes.
4. Stir in the chopped kale and cook for 5 minutes more, until the kale is wilted.
5. Remove soup from heat and add lemon juice.
6. Scoop a small amount of cooked grains, if using, into your bowl and add the soup. Serve with love!

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MealTimes



Cover Story

A Full Plate

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