

Nutrition Education Program Reaches Low-Income Families Across the State



“I learned that I don’t have to spend a lot of money just to get what I need to eat.”

—Waukesha County participant in UW-Extension nutrition education program

“I will start to plan meals; it looks like it will save me money.”

—Dane County participant in UW-Extension nutrition education program



Situation

According to 2007 Census data, 10.8% of Wisconsin residents live in poverty. In many more households, incomes are above the poverty line, but are still low enough to qualify families for government assistance, such as food stamps.

Statewide unemployment rates continue to rise and use of emergency food sources, such as food pantries, is at an all time high. Food stamp participation is also on the rise. In spring 2009, more than 530,000 Wisconsin residents participated in the Food Stamp Program—approximately 7% of the population.

Response

The University of Wisconsin-Extension Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) responds to the diverse needs and resources of low-income populations by implementing community-based nutrition education programs. A major portion of WNEP relates to Food Stamp Nutrition Education—a partnership between the Food and Nutrition Service of USDA, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, and the University of Wisconsin-Extension Family Living Programs.

During fiscal year 2007-2008, WNEP programs were offered in 64 Wisconsin counties. Educators made 343,018 educational contacts during that time. Twenty-two percent of the program participants were parents of infants or children; 54% of the participants were school age youth; 8%

were older adults; 7% were adults without children; and 9% were pre-school children.

WNEP educators reached citizens from many diverse cultural groups. People of color comprised 26% of all participants: 12% were African American; 4% Asian; 3% Native American; and 7% other races. Fourteen percent of the educational contacts were with persons who were Hispanic or Latino.

Outcomes

WNEP staff worked in concert with public sector and government-funded organizations, non-profits, schools, private sector groups and other agencies to provide community-based nutrition education programs throughout Wisconsin.

Teaching school-age youth. Forty counties provided nutrition education to youths ages 6 to 17, either during the school day or at summer or after-school programs. In most cases, nutrition educators provided these classes in schools, but to reach even more learners, they also taught at libraries, public health clinics, neighborhood centers, summer feeding sites, HeadStart and Community Action agencies, as well as school and community gardens.

• *Youth learned to make healthful food choices.*

—After attending classes taught by WNEP educators, school-age children showed increases in their knowledge about healthy eating.

For example:

—Before the lessons, 59% of more than 300 students could identify the healthiest fast-food choice; 77% selected the healthiest choice after the lessons.

—Before lessons, 58% of nearly 236 students were able to choose the best way to get a variety of vegetables in a day; 98% knew how to make more healthy choices afterwards.

—Before the lessons, 52% of 195 students could select the healthiest beverage—for example, between milk and soda; 98% were able to select the best choice afterwards.

• *Youth set and reached goals for eating more fruits and vegetables.*

—Teaching children in kindergarten through fifth grade about the need to eat fruits and vegetables was an important goal for nutrition educators. After the classes, 932 children in third to fifth grade chose a goal related to eating more fruit and vegetables and 789 reported success in meeting their goal.

• *Youth learned important food safety concepts.*

—Before the lessons, 55% of more than 700 students knew they should wash their hands before preparing a sandwich; 94% knew they should wash up after taking the lessons.

—Before taking nutrition education lessons, 59% of nearly 850 students were able to identify the correct way to wash their hands; after the lesson, 90% identified the correct hand-washing procedure.

• *Parents reported that their children were eating more fruits and vegetables.*

—After completing a series of lessons in selected classrooms, WNEP educators in several counties sent children home with a survey for

their parents. Completed surveys were returned by 957 parents; 52% of them reported that their children were more willing to taste new foods; 31% reported that their children asked them to buy a fruit or vegetable that they usually didn't buy; 50% reported that their children were eating more fruit and 38% reported that their children were eating more vegetables.

Working with parents. Educators reached 11,147 parents of infants or young children in 2007-2008 at a variety of locations, including low-income elementary schools. In addition, newsletters covering the nutrition education topics being taught in school helped facilitate family discussions about making healthy eating choices.

Teaching at WIC (Women, Infants and Children) clinics. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—better known as the WIC Program—serves to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk by providing information on healthy eating and referrals to health care. UW-Extension nutrition education programs made 29,615 educational contacts at WIC clinics from October 2007 to September 2008.

• *WIC participants learned to stretch their food dollars and use food available through WIC.*

—Educators taught thousands of low-income adults at WIC clinics about preparing and storing foods they obtain through WIC, such as dry beans, cereals and juice. After the lessons, 422 learners were asked if they had learned something that would make it easier to use WIC foods in family meals and snacks; 81% said they had.

• *WIC participants learned about the importance of eating whole grains and incorporating physical activity into their lifestyles.*

—After the lessons, 76% of 491 learners reported that they would eat whole grains more often, and 82% of 169 learners said that they would try to get the recommended amounts of physical activity.

Empowering disabled adults. UW-Extension nutrition educators made more than 4,000 contacts with food-stamp-eligible disabled learners at day centers and group homes. Lessons helped build learners' skills and confidence in planning healthy meals, shopping for food at the grocery store, being physically active, and handling food safely.

Collaborating to improve food security. Nutrition educators facilitated or participated in 29 local hunger prevention coalitions serving 32 Wisconsin counties. UW-Extension staff played key roles in cultivating new coalitions, providing ongoing consultation and support, enhancing communication and documenting activities and successes.

...

In 2008, WNEP's important role in providing help and education to Wisconsin's limited-resource families and individuals was recognized with a University of Wisconsin Board of Regents award for academic staff excellence.

For more information, contact:

Beverly Phillips
State WNEP Coordinator
Family Living Programs
University of Wisconsin-Extension
608-262-0384
beverly.phillips@ces.uwex.edu
www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/index.cfm

