

Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program helps low-income families make healthier food choices

About 1 in 14 Wisconsin low-income residents receives Food Stamps, and many more qualify. UW-Extension county educators help Food Stamp-eligible families make healthier food choices through more than 1,000 community partner agencies.

Situation:

According to 2000 U.S. Census data, about 9 percent of Wisconsin adults and 11 percent of children live in poverty. Many more households have incomes low enough to qualify families for government assistance programs such as Food Stamps.

Poverty is closely linked to hunger — a *real* problem in Wisconsin. Emergency food pantries and soup kitchens report that demand is now chronic and at an all-time high. Wisconsin Food Stamp use is increasing at record rates.

In 2001, Wisconsin had 365,400 Food Stamp recipients — 7 percent of the population. As need grows, UW-Extension Cooperative Extension has the research base, culturally appropriate educational materials, networks and expertise to help Food Stamp-eligible families, children and older adults at risk for hunger.

Response:

The Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) responds to the diverse needs and resources of low-income families by offering nutrition education programs in a variety of community settings using group sessions, learn-while-you-wait, lessons for individuals and other strategies. Bi-lingual nutrition educators help reach underserved families using culturally reviewed educational materials in English, Spanish and Hmong.

WNEP is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, and University of Wisconsin-Extension. During 2002-2003, WNEP provided nutrition education programs in partnership with nearly 1,000 community agencies, including public sector or government-funded agencies, schools, private non-profit and other service agencies.

WNEP entered into more than 1,000 agreements with these agencies to provide community nutrition education to Food Stamp-eligible individuals and families. Half of these agreements led to in-kind matching support, in accordance with program guidelines.

With these community partners, WNEP operated as 39 projects in 58 Wisconsin counties. Nutrition educators reached nearly 300,000 people at risk of poverty and hunger:

- 61% of participants were female.
- 45% were school-age youth.
- 30% were families with young children.
- 15% were adults age 65 or older.

Community-based educators also reached underserved families most at risk:

- 12% of participants were African American.
- 9% were Latino/a.
- 6% were people with disabilities.
- 4% were American Indian.

Impacts:

More than 60 percent of WNEP educational contacts focused on helping people choose healthier food for themselves and their families, emphasizing fruits and vegetables, and selecting lower fat foods when eating away from home. About one-fifth of teaching contacts focused on how to manage food dollars and plan nutritious meals, reaching 1,500 people in small-group lessons. Handling food safely made up another 15 percent of educational contacts.

Educators taught 284 adults a lesson about choosing restaurant foods with less fat. Pre- and post-lesson evaluations showed that participants were able to reduce the fat content of their menu choices by an average of 21 grams per meal.

Educators reached 825 older adults with a series of lessons on choosing a healthy diet, eating plenty of fruits, vegetables and grain products, choosing and preparing foods with less fat and sugar, and balancing the food they eat with physical activity. As a result of these lessons, 80 percent could think of at least one thing specific they are doing differently.

About 1,000 children participated in lessons about the value of fruit in the daily diet. Before the lesson, only half of the children knew how many servings of fruit they should eat each day. After the lesson, 64 percent knew the correct response.

Success story:

WNEP is a major partner in the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Network — agencies allied to ensure that low-income individuals and families receive consistent, relevant, accurate and effective nutrition messages.

The network sponsored a nutrition education campaign for two months in 47 counties, promoting physical activity to Food Stamp-eligible parents of young children. The campaign reached nearly 19,000 adults and children through group lessons, interactive displays and demonstrations. As a result of what they learned, a majority reported they intend to make positive behavioral changes. More than 338,000 people received this information via handouts, posters, menu backs, newsletters and newspaper articles.

See also the program impact report “Food security education helps lessen hunger among families and children at risk.”

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