

Family Living Programs

Nutrition Education Program Reaches Low Income Families Across the State in 2006

Situation

In 2004, 10.7 percent of Wisconsin residents and 14 percent of Wisconsin children lived in poverty. In many more households, incomes are above the poverty line, but are still low enough to qualify families for government programs 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 2005, there were 552,066 Wisconsin residents who participated in the Food Stamp Program—10.29 percent of the population.

Response

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

During fiscal year 2005-2006, WNEP operated as 39 projects in 60 Wisconsin counties. WNEP Food Stamp Nutrition Education taught thousands of learners through 312,742 educational contacts during the year. Twenty-five percent of the participants were families with young children; 55 percent were school age youth; 12 percent were older adults; and 6 percent were adults between 18 and 65 years. WNEP educators reached persons of many diverse cultural groups: 76 percent of participants were Caucasian, 12 percent African American, 4 percent Asian, and 4 percent Native American. Eleven percent were Hispanic or Latino. Educational programs are offered in a variety of settings using group sessions, learn-while-you-wait, lessons for individuals and other strategies.

Outcomes

Working with Partner Agencies. During 2005-2006, WNEP provided community-based nutrition education programs in partnership with nearly 800 agencies, including public sector or government-funded agencies, private non-profits, schools, private sector agencies and others.

WNEP is a major partner in the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Network, a statewide alliance of agencies working collaboratively so that low-income residents receive consistent, relevant, accurate and effective nutrition messages. The Network sponsored a nutrition education campaign that was conducted in 53 counties and the Great Lakes Intertribal Council. This was the second year of the campaign, "Stepping Up to a Healthy Lifestyle," which encouraged learners to eat healthy and engage in daily physical activity. The campaign reached 25,867 adults and children through group lessons, interactive displays and demonstrations. In addition to direct contacts, over 136,675 people were reached via handouts, posters, newsletters, newspaper articles and radio programs.

Choosing Healthful Food. Over 73 percent (223,001) of all WNEP educational contacts focused on helping people choose more healthful food for themselves and their families. Learners were taught at job centers, WIC, food pantries, in group homes and schools.

Handling Food Safely. Food safety education is an important part of WNEP. The two primary audiences for food safety education were youth (ages 5-11), and older adults. Food safety lessons were offered primarily in partnership with schools (K-12), senior meal sites and programs, WIC clinics, Head Start and public health clinics. After a food safety lesson, learners were asked what they intended to do with what they had learned from the lessons:

- 61% of 283 learners stated that they would start, or more often, properly handle hot leftovers by refrigerating them in shallow containers for quick cooling.
- 61% of 858 learners stated that they would start, or more often, properly clean surfaces by washing cutting boards after each use.

Managing Food Dollars. A major goal of WNEP is to help limited resource families become more food secure by teaching them to track spending, manage food dollars and plan nutritious meals. Teaching on food resource management took place at WIC and other public health clinics, job training centers and Food Stamp offices, food pantries, family resource centers and senior meal sites.

Teaching at Food Stamp Offices and Job Centers. During the 2006 program year, 30 counties provided education at Job Centers, FoodShare offices and publicly-funded job training sites. Over 4000 educational contacts were made with learners at these types of sites. Money for Food lessons and evaluation tools were used to teach over 3000 learners. Over 80% of the learners reported that they had learned something or would do something differently after the lessons.

- After a lesson on using food stamps and other programs to put together a food budget, 201 learners were asked if they had learned something that would make it easier for them to get enough food or money for food—80% of the respondents said “yes.”
- After a practice activity on developing a family spending plan, 95% of the 555 learners reported that they intended to try to use a spending plan for their families.
- After playing a learning game on the benefits of meal planning, 76% of the 1191 participants indicated they would do more planning ahead for their meals.

Teaching in Schools and After School Programs. During the 2006 program year, 40 counties provide education to youths 5 to 17 years old either during the school day or at summer or after school programs. There were 143,756 direct teaching contacts with youths 5 to 11 years old and 27,299 direct teaching contacts with youths 12 to 17 years old. Educators provided a series of nutrition education lessons for youth at school, at libraries, public health clinics, neighborhood centers, summer feeding sites, Head Start agencies and Community Action Agencies.

Key messages taught were:

- Choosing a healthful diet, especially eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and whole grains.
- Balancing food eaten with physical activity.
- Planning meals and choosing snacks, especially those with less fat and sugar.

Children in the classes were asked a question before, and again after, the lesson to determine what they had learned.

- Before the lessons, 45 percent of 850 students were able to choose the best way to get a variety of fruit in a day, and 62 percent knew the correct response after the lessons.
- Before the lessons, 44 percent of 2400 students were able to choose the best way to get a variety of vegetables in a day, and 52 percent knew the correct response after the lessons.
- Before the lessons, 66 percent of 1,200 students knew how many servings from the milk group to consume daily, and 89 percent knew the correct response after the lessons.

- Before the lessons, 62 percent of 2,400 students were able to identify the healthiest fast food choice, and 88 percent identified the correct response after the lessons.
- Before the lessons, 56 percent of 2,700 students were able to identify how to wash their hands properly, and 87 percent knew the correct response after the lessons.

A major emphasis was to teach children in kindergarten through fifth grade about fruits and vegetables. After the lessons, WNEP educators sent surveys to approximately 2000 parents/primary caregivers of these children. 409 parents/primary caregivers returned completed surveys.

- 58% of the parents/primary caregivers reported that their children were more willing to taste new foods or foods that he or she usually doesn't eat.
- 54% of the parents/primary caregivers reported that their children have been eating more fruit; 41% reported that their children have been eating more vegetables.

Teaching at Senior Dining Sites. Older adults who make healthier choices live longer and better lives. However older adults consume inadequate amounts of key nutrients, and low-income older adults tend to have poorer diets than their higher-income peers. During 2006, WNEP made over 32,000 teaching contacts with older adults at Senior Dining Centers and Senior Housing Sites in 44 counties. Nutrition educators discussed a variety of topics with seniors, including eating more fruits and vegetables, storing and handling food safely, paying attention to portion sizes, choosing healthy snacks, and balancing food with physical activity.

In 2006, educators collected comments from older adults participating in nutrition education at 47 dining centers, and dining center managers from 82 dining centers completed questionnaires. 71 of the dining center managers said they had observed or heard evidence that participants at their site had learned something new; 44 of the managers said they had observed or heard evidence of nutrition-related behavior change.

Participant comments include: "I learned so much today. I thought I knew all about whole grains," "I use canola oil and olive oil for baking and cooking, now. I used to use only butter," "I never wash grapes; I didn't know I was supposed to. Now I will," "I give the handouts to my children because they cook for me, they need to know how to cook without adding fat meat to vegetables."

Teaching at Food Pantries. During 2006, WNEP made nearly 20,000 teaching contacts with learners at food pantries and emergency feeding programs across the state. Food pantries serve learners of all ages: children, youth, adults and seniors.

In 2006, 10 Wisconsin counties participated in evaluating WNEP education at food pantries. Educators staffed displays at food pantries, which focused on encouraging food pantry clients to choose, and use, healthy foods that were new or unfamiliar to them. A total of 610 learners participated in the evaluation project. Educators shared a display, recipes, preparation tips and samples of new or unfamiliar foods with food pantry clients. Foods included powdered milk, squash, apples, figs, canned cranberries, canned green beans or peas, whole grains, dried garbanzo beans, canned salmon and canned sweet potatoes. After the brief lesson, clients were asked if they would choose, and use, the food item if it was available for them to eat or prepare at home—and responses (yes/no/unsure) were recorded. The percentage of learners responding 'yes' to the educator's question ranged from 64% to 93%, depending on the food item presented.

Teaching at WIC. During 2006, 46 WNEP counties provided educational programming at WIC clinics reaching 27,818 WIC participants with brief lessons in the waiting area. After a lesson, the participant was asked one or two questions to assess either knowledge gain or participant intent to change their behavior as a result of the lesson.

- Educators taught nearly 400 WIC participants about the importance of eating fruit. After the lesson, 66% of the participants were able to state a good reason why fruit should be included in their food choices each day.
- Educators taught over 500 WIC participants about fruit and how to include fruit in daily food choices. After the lesson, 77% of the participants said that they were going to try to eat more fruit each day.
- Educators taught over 140 WIC participants how to use WIC foods in their family meals and snacks. After the lesson, 92% of the participants said that they had learned something that would make it easier to use WIC foods in meals and snacks. Participants said, "I can use WIC beans to make soup like bean or pea soup" and "I like the idea of using a crock pot to cook WIC beans so a meal is ready at suppertime with little fuss."
- Educators taught nearly 550 WIC participants about the importance of eating a variety of vegetables. After the lesson, 72% of the participants were able to state a good reason why a variety of vegetables should be included in their food choices each day. One participant said, "Vegetables help us to stay healthy and fight disease; they are important for the whole family."
- Educators taught over 350 WIC participants about vegetables and how to include them in daily food choices. After the lesson, 92% of the participants said that they were going to try to eat more vegetables each day.

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