

## Family Living Programs

# Nutrition Education Program Reaches Low Income Families Across the State in 2005

### Situation

According to the 2000 Census, 9 percent of Wisconsin residents and 11 percent of Wisconsin children live 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 2004, there were 523,413 Wisconsin residents who participated in the Food Stamp Program—9.8 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 2004-2005, WNEP operated as 39 projects in 59 Wisconsin counties. WNEP Food Stamp Nutrition Education taught thousands of learners through 345,184 educational contacts during the year. Twenty-four percent of the participants were families with young children; 46 percent were school age youth; 20 percent were older adults; and 7 percent were adults between 18 and 65 years. Sixty percent of the participants were female. WNEP educators reached persons of many diverse cultural groups: 77 percent of participants were Caucasian, 10 percent African American, 3 percent Asian, and 4 percent Native American. Ten 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 2004-2005, WNEP provided community-based nutrition education programs in partnership with nearly 900 agencies, including public sector or government-funded agencies, private non-profits, schools, private sector agencies and others. WNEP entered into over 1,500 agreements with these agencies to provide nutrition education to food stamp-eligible individuals and families; half of the agreements led to in-kind matches in accordance with program guidelines.

WNEP is a major partner in the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Network, a statewide alliance of agencies working collaboratively so that low-income individuals and families receive consistent, relevant, accurate and effective nutrition messages. The Network sponsored a nutrition education campaign that was conducted by WNEP in 52 counties and the Great Lakes Intertribal Council. The campaign, "Stepping Up to a Healthy Lifestyle," encouraged learners to eat healthy and engage in daily physical activity. The campaign reached 14,734 adults and children through group lessons, interactive displays and demonstrations. A majority (69%) of the participants reported that they intend to make positive behavioral changes as a result of what they learned. In addition to

direct contacts, over 121,840 people were reached via handouts, posters, menu backs, newsletters and newspaper articles.

- **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. Over 1,100 low-income individuals and families participated in one or more lessons about the food guide pyramid, reading labels, and identifying whole grains. Learners were taught at job centers, in group homes and schools.

Learners participating in an evaluation before and after a lesson on identifying whole grains demonstrated an improvement in the ability to use the food label to choose whole grain bread - 68% of 591 learners could do this before and 91% of 601 learners could do this after. Learners participating in a lesson on reading labels for calories demonstrated an improvement in the ability to use the food label to choose a lower-calorie food – 41% of 381 learners could do this before and 81% of 390 learners could do this after.

Educators taught 505 adults and 302 adolescents a lesson about choosing foods with less fat when eating in 'fast food' restaurants. Adults were taught in job centers and senior meal sites, and teens were taught in schools. The lesson simulated choosing foods from a fast food menu, and provided an opportunity for learners to choose a new menu after learning about identifying more nutritious options from the menu. Pre- and post-lesson evaluations showed that the learners were able to reduce the fat content of their original menu choices by an average of 26 grams per meal. At the end of the lesson, 63% of the learners indicated at least one change they are willing to make when they eat in fast food restaurants.

- **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) (7,364 learners), and older adults (10,386 learners). Teenagers and adults without children were also a focus of food safety education efforts. 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 lessons:

- 27% of learners (2,061) stated that they would more often properly handle hot leftovers by refrigerating them in shallow containers for quick cooling
- 58% of learners (513) stated that they would more often use a dilute bleach solution to sanitize cutting boards and countertops.
- 54% of learners (216) stated that they would more often prevent cross contamination by separating raw meat, fish, and chicken at the grocery store from fruits, vegetables, bread and other items.
- 46% of learners (313) stated that they would more often prevent cross contamination by washing hands, cutting boards and countertops with warm soapy water after handling raw meat, chicken, fish or eggs.

- **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. Eleven percent (38,264) of all educational contacts focused on lessons related to helping learners better manage their food dollars and plan and buy food for their families. Sixty-five percent of teaching took place in group lessons; 34 percent happened in learn-while-you-wait settings.

Educators reached learners across the life cycle: 38 percent of teaching contacts were with young families with children; 31 percent were lessons for adults without children and older adult learners. Teaching on food resource management happened at WIC and other public health clinics, job training centers and Food Stamp offices, food pantries, family resource centers and senior meal sites. WNEP educators reached 4300 people in small group interactive lessons about managing food dollars. Over 80 percent 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 develop a food budget, 83 percent of 280 learners said what they learned would make it easier for them to get enough food or money for food. After learning about choosing low cost foods based on the Food Guide Pyramid, 91 percent of 269 participants could name a nutritious low cost food that they would buy for their family.

Consumers who are knowledgeable about healthful food choices and the importance of physical activity, who know about good food shopping practices and who have the skills necessary to make and use plans, will be better able to provide nutritious and adequate food for their families. Limited resource families who learn and practice these new behaviors will contribute to improved health and food security for their families. In the words of one learner from northern Wisconsin, "This will help me feed my kids."

## **Contact**

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