

## Health and Nutrition Education

### **Situation:**

Improving the health of New Hampshire residents through healthy eating and active living helps individuals and families fight disease, disability, disparities in health status, and even death. Diet quality and physical activity play a vital role in overall health. In fact, research shows that diet is associated with the leading causes of death, many of which are preventable, including heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and several types of cancer. Cardiovascular disease and cancer together account for almost two thirds of all deaths in the United States. Despite the importance of diet, however, Americans fail to achieve Dietary Guideline recommendations which lower their disease risk.

Given rising rates of obesity in the Granite State, UNH Cooperative Extension is committed to looking at ways to optimize the health of the state's residents by reducing risk factors through education focused on encouraging physical exercise and diet/healthy lifestyle choices. Individual, group and community coalitions are all ways to get important messages and education to the public. In addition, low-income individuals have higher rates of overweight and obesity.

### **UNH Cooperative Extension's Response:**

UNH Cooperative Extension's Nutrition Connections Program, Family and Consumer Resources and 4-H Youth Development staff implement nutrition and health programming. Activities target physical activity, nutrition, community involvement and obesity awareness and prevention. Ellen Rondina, Extension Educator in Family and Consumer Resources in Strafford County, works on a statewide initiative called *Healthy Eating, Active Living New Hampshire (HEAL NH)* that identifies and integrates the vast network of obesity prevention/reduction resources and programs throughout the Granite State. In addition, she offered a 3-week Food Stamp Nutrition series to Transitional Housing program staff at Community Partners.

David Leonard, with Extension's Nutrition Connections program in Strafford County, works with individuals and families in their homes, groups at social-service agencies, family day care providers, and school-aged children at income-eligible schools. In Strafford County, 717 youth and 411 adults with 415 family members participated in Nutrition Connections programming during the 2008 program year.

In 2002, New Hampshire's annual economic cost for its 52,000 cases of type-2 diabetes was at least \$400 million in direct medical services, lost work days, and disability (*Diabetes Care*, 3/03). During FY '08, David Leonard provided diabetes nutrition education to 23 Avis-Goodwin Community Health Center patients with type-2 diabetes (13 through group series and 10 through in-home series). This marks his sixth year of collaboration with Avis-Goodwin in response to the clinic's request to fill a critical gap for their busy staff by teaching and motivating low-income diabetes patients to eat better and exercise more.

### **How We Make a Difference:**

Research has documented the effectiveness of the Nutrition Connections program for increasing the nutritional well-being of the families it serves. A national survey in 2007 showed that 92 percent of those "graduating" from these programs improved their diets, learned how to eat better for less, control weight, be more physically active, and reduce risk of chronic diseases and food-borne illness. This included an increase of about 1.4 servings per day of fruits and vegetables.

Overall, people who participate in Nutrition Connections programming in Strafford County are making improved health/nutrition choices for themselves and their families. The implications to making smart nutrition choices are financial, emotional and physical. Nutrition Connections helps people become more self-reliant and more independent. We provide the information to people so they have the tools, awareness and knowledge to make healthier choices.

- 210 preschoolers became more motivated to eat fruits and vegetables. Teachers reported increased fruit/vegetable intakes at snack and meal times.
- 495 elementary school children learned how and why to make healthier food choices, improve dietary diversity, and become more active. Teachers reported more fruit, vegetable, and whole-grain snacks and less junk food brought from home.
- 143 adults, including 28 with diabetes, learned how to eat better for less, control weight, be more physically active, and reduce risk of chronic diseases and food-borne illness.
- Graduates increased their combined fruit/vegetable intake and for 83% the average USDA Healthy Eating Index score increased from 67% (entry) to 85% (exit).
- 167 adults learned key ways to save money at the supermarket and improve their diets.
- 29 childcare center employees and family daycare providers enhanced their nutrition and food safety skills.
- 36 Clinical Lab II students at UNH grasped the serious health impacts of type-2 diabetes and how to debunk common diabetes diet myths.
- 68 Strafford county employees improved their fitness levels, weight control and productivity, and reduced their risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease.
- 50% in the “Lead Me to MyPyramid” series held for the Transitional Housing group at Community Partners reported they already changed their behavior and are eating more fruits or are thinking about making the change.
- 100 adults attended food safety education programs (designed to teach food service workers proper food handling techniques and ways to reduce the risk of foodborne illness). End-of-program evaluations indicated 95% of participants answered 10 out of 12 end-of-program questions correctly.
- Nutrition Connections saves states and families money. Several cost-benefit analyses in several states document that for every dollar invested in programs such as Nutrition Connections, benefits can reach as high as \$10.64 from reduced health care costs. Another study showed that for every dollar used to implement the program, \$2.48 is saved on food expenditures, reducing the need for emergency food assistance.

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