

UK Works to Fight Hunger in Kentucky

By Aimee Nielson, University of Kentucky The mAGazine

To survive, many turn to friends and family, visit local food pantries, apply for government assistance, and use what little money they have to buy cheap, processed food that doesn't meet their nutritional needs. As a result, they're fatigued, they gain weight. They don't necessarily "look" hungry, but their body is starving for healthful, fresh, nutrient-dense food.

"There are people out there working very hard, and they still can't make ends meet," said Ann Vail, director of the School of Human Environmental Sciences. "Our family and consumer sciences specialists and agents are on the front lines trying to teach those with limited resources how to meet their nutritional needs."

More than 611,000 Kentuckians, or one of every seven, received assistance last year through the state's food bank network according to the Hunger in America 2014 report. Of those, the household median annual income was \$9,150 and only 35 percent were employed. Even more startling, only 15 percent of food bank clients were "food secure," meaning they had adequate amounts of safe and nutritious food at all times.

More than 69 percent have to choose between food and medical care, and more than 90 percent make food purchase decisions based on price over health.

"The recession led to rising numbers of people who, for the first time, had to apply for state and federal assistance," Vail said. "At the height of the recession, nutrition assistance recipients doubled in some counties."

A New Way to Fight Hunger

Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a partnership with the college to establish the National Rural Child Poverty Nutrition Center.

The center will use cutting-edge solutions in child nutrition to reduce food insecurity in states with the highest number of persistently poor rural counties. Children are the most vulnerable group in rural counties.

"Part of our core mission as a land-grant institution is to improve the lives of our citizens," said Dean Nancy Cox. "We are honored the USDA has chosen us to be their partner in this extremely important endeavor to reduce child food insecurity in persistently poor rural counties in Kentucky and several other states."

Once programs begin, the Rural Child Poverty Nutrition Center will work to coordinate existing child nutrition programs and create solutions to target child food insecurity.

Traditional Programs Still Work

Extension specialists and agents are pivotal in administering the Kentucky Nutrition Education Program, which targets those with limited resources and encompasses two USDA programs: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program (EFNEP). More than 810,000 Kentuckians, representing over 18 percent of the state's total population, receive SNAP benefits. These numbers place Kentucky in the top ten SNAP states.

"The goals of these programs are to teach our clientele how to plan nutritious meals on a limited budget, safely handle food, and improve their food preparation skills, as well as encourage behavior that is essential to a healthy lifestyle," said Debra Cotterill, NEP director.

To drive home those messages, county agents and assistants facilitate cooking classes and champion Farm to School partnerships. They cultivate community gardens and teach clients how to create and stick to budgets.

Raising two daughters on her own,



Ali Sanders knows the realities of a tight budget. Last fall she was accepted into a housing project in Bourbon County through Community Action. As part of that program, Sanders is required to attend monthly life skills classes. When she realized the local Cooperative Extension office was offering nutrition classes at the same location, she decided to try it.

"We have been able to learn about so many things," she said. "We've learned to make healthy substitutions for things we already eat—whole wheat pasta instead of the enriched flour varieties. We tried eggplant. I would have never tried eggplant, and now I buy it all the time; my girls love it too."

Sanders said the classes, led by Kacy Wiley, the UK SNAP-Ed assistant in Bourbon County, have affected the way she thinks



Nutrition classes led by Kacy Wiley (l) have changed the way Ali Sanders (r) shops and cooks. Photo by Stephen Patton

when she shops and cooks, and they have helped her create real change at home.

"A lot of us [in the classes] have grown up in the mountains or the country, and we've always been the meat and potatoes kind," she said. "Kacy has challenged us to think outside that box. I realized I cook the way I was taught, and that's probably what my girls will do. That's a big deal to me. I want to teach them to lead healthy lives as children, so they will be healthy adults. I want us to be the change."

Revamping Recipes

The college's Department of Dietetics and Human Nutrition is partnering with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture in Plate It Up, a program to provide healthy, great-tasting recipes using Kentucky Proud products. Assistant professor and director of

Healthy Behaviors Make Healthy Communities

An ongoing social marketing research project is yielding some interesting results about the way people feed themselves and their families.

"We thought we really wanted to encourage more family meals at home," said Jackie Walters, extension specialist for nutrition. "We do want to do that, but this study has shown us that we need to put more emphasis on what they are cooking at home. We want families to be cooking things that are good for their health."

Walters said the biggest barriers to cooking at home are cost, time, and health status. Limited resource individuals sometimes rely heavily on processed food, because it lasts longer, but nutritional quality suffers.

To that end, many agents are getting involved in the policy and decision-making councils, coalitions, and programs in their areas as a result of a national Policy, Systems and Environmental Change Interventions initiative.

"Everything we do in the NEP is in an effort to improve health outcomes. That, in turn, will impact the economic health of our state," Cotterill explained. "Healthier kids have better test scores, and that means more kids going to college and ultimately having more profitable careers. It all comes together for a better Kentucky."

Students Tackle Hunger

When Denise Schaeffer came to UK to study in Dietetics and Human Nutrition, her work with the Student Dietetics and Nutrition Association made her aware of the prevalence of hunger in Kentucky and beyond.

Schaeffer, a junior, is the association's co-chair for hunger. She's attended the Universities Fighting World Hunger Summit in Guelph, Canada, and the Food, Waste, and Hunger Summit hosted by the national Campus Kitchens Project to find ways to improve UK's newly launched Campus Kitchen. The student service organization, supported by Dietetics and Human Nutrition faculty, was created to battle hunger in the Lexington area.

The UK group is an affiliate of the national The Campus Kitchens Project, which provides a sustainable approach to reducing food waste on college campuses while providing healthy meals to those struggling with hunger. They recover unused, quality food from UK Dining, as well as from local restaurants, the UK Horticultural Research Farm, farms, and farmers' markets. Trained volunteers cook and store the donations according to established food handling regulations.

Schaeffer said her goal is to be involved



After revamping old recipes to make them more nutritious, Dietetics and Human Nutrition students hold taste testings in the cooking lab in Erickson Hall. photo by Matt Barton

undergraduate studies, Tammy Stephenson, said students take an experimental foods class and focus on tweaking traditional meals to make them more nutritious.

The students revamp the recipes, test them in class, and then conduct taste panels to determine which recipes end up on Plate It Up recipe cards. Extension agents use the cards to help their clients learn to plan healthier meals. The Nutrition Education Program has identified several simple recipes using a limited number of ingredients that are especially helpful to limited-resource individuals.

"The study reinforced what we already knew," Walters said. "Most of our SNAP-Ed clients aren't able to make those dollars stretch, and they run out of nutritious food before the end of the month. We can teach them to make good decisions, but if their environment is not supportive, it's impossible for them to keep making those good decisions."

Walters said that even if clients want to make healthy choices, sometimes they don't have a car and live too far from a store that has the right kinds of foods.



Denise Schaeffer. Photo provided by Denise Schaeffer



Photo by Matt Barton

with Campus Kitchen by helping collect food from dining halls this fall and to continue working through the Student Dietetics and Nutrition Association to raise money and food and ultimately make UK students more aware of hunger.

“The students’ energy has really propelled this project through a phenomenal first year,” said Sandra Bastin, chair of the Department of Dietetics and Human Nutrition. “We’ve had 20 students step up and take charge of the efforts. Each one of them brings something unique to the project, but they all share a common desire to help others.”

“When we opened our Campus Kitchen, I got interested in collecting unused food in our dining halls to give to the elderly in our community who don’t have access to food,” Schaeffer said. “The moment I heard the statistics about children, elderly, and many others who have limited access to healthy food, it really sparked my interest to fight hunger.”

During the first six months of operation, students spent 1,439 hours recovering 1,878 pounds of food and serving 2,069 meals; including 230 meals to older adults and 360 meals to children and youth.

“Student volunteers use their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills to develop partnerships, glean, plan menus, run cooking shifts, organize fundraisers, and teach nutrition,” said Amanda Hege, director of community outreach for the Department of Dietetics and Human Nutrition. “Campus Kitchen is cultivating leaders to develop solutions to end hunger.”

Student volunteers deliver meals, education, and hope to the Martin Luther King Jr. Academy for Excellence, Arbor Youth Services Homeless Shelter, Lexington Housing Authority, and Central Christian Church apartments, and meals and groceries to the homes of older adults in Lexington. One meal recipient shared, “I am now able to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables. This program changed my life.”

Organizers are planning to integrate with other hunger-fighting organizations on campus like the Big Blue Pantry, a student-run, student-serving food pantry.

“All these programs and initiatives show our commitment to addressing hunger and food security locally and throughout Kentucky,” Vail said. “The enthusiasm of our faculty, staff, and students is infectious, and it reassures me that we can make a difference in the lives of the people we serve.”

Questions

1. Why are some people who may not “look” hungry actually be starving?
2. What are some statistics about Kentucky residents who received government assistance?
3. Using context clues, what does “food secure” mean?
4. What are TWO goals of the USDA’s Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program Education (SNAP-ed)?
5. What is Plate It Up? How can it help with combating hunger?
6. Why do some SNAP recipients rely more on processed foods to cook at home instead of more nutritious foods?
7. How can improving the health and nutrition of Kentucky also improve the economy of the state?
8. How does UK’s Campus Kitchen help fight hunger in Kentucky?



Beefy Stuffed Peppers

1 cup uncooked, whole wheat couscous
1 small tomato, diced
½ cup garbanzo beans
1 teaspoon dried Italian seasoning

¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
1 teaspoon salt
½ cup low fat shredded mozzarella cheese

4 large bell peppers
½ pound lean ground beef
1 tablespoon chopped green onion
1 tablespoon minced garlic

Cook couscous according to package directions. **Preheat** oven to 350 degrees F. **Combine** cooked couscous, tomato, beans, Italian seasoning, pepper, salt and mozzarella cheese in large bowl; set aside. **Remove** the tops, seeds and membranes from peppers. **Cook** peppers in boiling water for 5 minutes; **drain** upside down on paper towels. **Cook** beef until lightly browned in skillet. **Add** minced garlic and green onions to beef and sauté until

soft. **Drain** fat. **Toss** beef mixture into the couscous mixture. **Stuff** bell peppers evenly with mixture. **Place** in a lightly greased 9 x 9 inch baking dish. **Bake** for 15-20 minutes or until peppers are tender and cheese is melted.

Yield: 4 servings

Nutritional Analysis: 280 calories, 6 g fat, 2.5 g saturated fat, 35 mg cholesterol, 790 mg sodium, 36 g carbohydrate, 7 g fiber, 6 g sugar, 21 g protein



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