

Nutrition Education: A Path Forward for EFNEP

Objective

Development of a shared vision for the evolution and future of federally funded nutrition education programs in light of the changing demographics in America, including steps for a path forward, specifically through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

Context

Nutrition education, as defined by professional organizations and federal agencies, is “any combination of educational strategies, accompanied by environmental supports, designed to facilitate voluntary adoption of food choices and other food- and nutrition-related behaviors conducive to health and well-being. Nutrition education is delivered through multiple venues and involves activities at the individual, community, and policy levels.”

Poor health disproportionately affects minority and low-income populations. Educational opportunities and resources are limited. Nutrition education efforts funded through NIFA and led by Cooperative Extension within the larger context of existing non-profit, public, and governmental programs, have a proven positive return on investment. As an example, individual states studies have shown health care savings ranging from \$3 to over \$10 for every federal dollar invested in EFNEP. By targeting the poorest of the poor, EFNEP achieves these and other benefits via a peer education model, by teaching low income families and youth how to improve their diets, be more physically active, stretch their food dollars, and handle their food safely. Consistently, annual data shows that more than 90% of adult EFNEP participants report improved behaviors following EFNEP. Since 1969, the program has reached 33 million low income families and youth, and taught them to improve their health by improving their nutrition, food safety, and physical activity practices. In 2016, NIFA provided \$67.9 million in EFNEP funding to 76 Land-Grant Universities. Using an evidence-based, interactive approach, EFNEP educators worked directly with 118,976 adults, 365,369 children and reached more than 340,000 family members indirectly.

As EFNEP approaches its 50th anniversary, it is important to have a conversation to determine what is essential for continued, ever greater programmatic success. Poverty demographics across the U.S. have shifted and the number of people in poverty has grown. Chronic disease associated with nutritional risk factors and health care costs have escalated. Low-income populations, like others, are seeking information in new and different ways. Yet, they still need and respond to EFNEP’s peer educator model which is relationship-based, culturally and age-appropriate, and tailored to their constrained circumstances. EFNEP has a proven track record for improved nutrition and physical activity behaviors, and yet, is challenged by long-term relatively flat funding and limited flexibility to adjust programming to meet changing poverty demographics.

EFNEP program dollars are awarded to 1862 and 1890 Land-Grant Institutions according to a statutory formula as follows: (1) FY 1981 bases (approximately \$10M in FY 1981); (2) \$100,000 to each institution; (3) a percentage of the increase in funding that exceeds the FY 2007 appropriated level distributed to the 1890 Land-Grant Institutions according to the pro rata population for each institution at or below 125 percent of the poverty level; and the remainder to the 1862 Land-Grant Institutions according to the

pro rata population for each institution at or below 125 percent of the poverty level. This ties the program to historical funding norms established in 1981 and 2007.

EFNEP was the nation's first federally funded nutrition education program. Subsequently, attention to nutrition education has occurred across USDA's food assistance programs, and through other public and private efforts. Of particular note is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net. Nutrition education through SNAP (i.e. SNAP-Ed), has been available through USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) since 1992.

EFNEP targets low income audiences with a primary focus on families with young children and youth, and provides audience-appropriate hands-on learning over time to facilitate improved food and physical activity behaviors, and thus health. SNAP-Ed targets all SNAP-eligible persons, including seniors, and supports a broad array of nutrition education and obesity prevention interventions and projects, including individual or group based nutrition education, health promotion intervention strategies; comprehensive, multilevel interventions; and community and public health approaches including policy, systems, and environmental change (PSE) efforts. The much larger SNAP-Ed program – FY 2016 appropriation of over \$400M – employs a variety of different types of organizations to carry out its mission.

Most, but not all, Land-Grant Universities conduct both EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programming through their Cooperative Extension mission. Cooperative Extension executes these programs and others within communities, and extends the work of partners through collaborative projects, joint grants, and sharing of resources. Examples include:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) grants and resources received directly and in conjunction with state, regional and county health systems;
- Additional USDA feeding programs, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the School Lunch Program;
- National, state-based, and local non-profit and other non-governmental organizations;
- Educational institutions;
- Other self-directed nutritional information programs and resources of widely varying accessibility and quality (information on food labels, the internet, social media).

EFNEP and SNAP-Ed are complementary and yet distinct in their reach, target audience, methods of program delivery, impacts, and outcomes achieved. Cooperative Extension is the sole implementer of EFNEP and a primary implementer of SNAP-Ed. Cooperative Extension has a key role in bringing about the collective action called for in the U.S. Dietary Guidelines – to make healthy choices easy, accessible, affordable, and normative – given its deep roots in community, strong ties to research and education, and program implementation of EFNEP and SNAP-Ed. Recognizing the importance of both programs and other related work that may be underway, it is necessary to focus this discussion on EFNEP, and to touch on other program efforts, only to the extent to which they may apply.

Questions

- Roughly 47 million people are in poverty in the U.S., which includes 18% of families with children and 19% of children ages 0-17. Given that EFNEP reaches approximately 500,000 adults and

youth annually, how might we most efficiently and effectively scale up the program to expand the program's reach while also maintaining its high rate of return (i.e. program impact)?

- How do we build on historical successes as we look to scale up to meet the demands of the future?
- What is needed to maximize the strength and capacity of the Cooperative Extension System? (1994s, reach across states, partnerships)
- What is needed to ensure that currently underserved sectors of the EFNEP population are also reached?
- What is the role of companion programs, such as SNAP-Ed and partner resources as we work to achieve this objective?
- How do we create a modern nutrition education program for our nation, commensurate with the current demographics and projected changes?
- How do we promote synergies in nutrition education by capturing efforts of all federal, state, local, and non-governmental programs?
- How are changing paradigms in how people seek out information and education affecting our educational models – and what changes are needed to better anticipate and prepare for the future (importance of storytelling, data, pictures, relationships, emergent technology, etc.)?
- What is needed to continue to get a good return on investment and to capture and communicate the public value of EFNEP (health care costs, employment opportunities)
- How do we enhance existing partnerships and develop new partnerships to achieve our vision?
 - What is needed to facilitate rather than hinder the development, success, and sustainability of such partnerships?
- What else could we do to strengthen and enhance EFNEP?