

## **Public Health Policy Brief**

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### **Statement of Purpose**

A healthy lifestyle requires understanding basic nutritional principles, eating a balanced diet that includes fresh produce and minimal processed foods, and knowing how to cook healthy meals. The goal of this policy brief is to outline the next steps towards providing nutrition information for low-income residents of the City of Oberlin for whom food prices and access are barriers to a nutritious diet. This information must be practical and comprehensive, and it must be coupled with increased efforts towards food access.

### **Evidence**

Food access is a major public health concern in rural communities. According to a study by the US Agriculture Economic Research Service, around 700,000 households in rural towns do not have enough food. In rural Ohio towns, food scarcity issues have resulted in increased rates of obesity, demonstrating the connection between low levels of income and unhealthy eating habits.<sup>1</sup> In the City of Oberlin, access to healthy foods and nutrition information is not available to those who need it most.

The Oberlin Public Library, Oberlin Community Services (OCS), and free meals programs at Grace Lutheran Church and Christ Community Church could play a vital role in making nutrition information and nutritional food accessible to low-income residents of Oberlin. The Oberlin Public Library supplies residents with books outlining healthy eating habits for children and adults. However, there is no participatory education available on nutrition, such as cooking classes or workshops. OCS serves near-by neighborhoods with a monthly food distribution from Second Harvest Food Bank of Lorain County and a Choice Food pantry where residents can pick up other food donations. Last year alone, Second Harvest distributed almost 1.7 billion pounds of food to families in need.<sup>2</sup> The food for the OCS pantry and free meals programs comes from donations by local supermarkets, local farmers' surpluses, community event leftovers, and OSCA co-ops after closedown. OCS buys perishable items from IGA to supplement the donated food. Due to budget restraints, OCS serves mostly non-perishable and processed items with long shelf lives. There is no national standard for nutritional content of free food distribution.

### **Interviews/Community Support**

We interviewed OCS staff members, cooks and volunteers serving meals, and recipients of free meals to assess the quality of nutrition at these programs. At the Hot Meals program, the cooks decide on meal content. At the choice pantry, recipients select their food supermarket style. The quantity allocated to each individual corresponds to family size. The Meals on Wheels program receives food from the Allen Memorial Hospital before driving it to residents in need. Cooks, OCS staff, and meal recipients disagree on the need for nutrition content facts at each meal. A cook stated that beggars can't be choosers; an OCS staff person wondered if customers really cared. A meal recipient was concerned that the food did not meet her nutritional needs.

According to Kathryn Burns, food preparation is the biggest challenge for low-income residents who are trying to maintain a healthy diet. Choice pantry customers often don't know how to prepare the food they have selected if it is not processed or pre-made. Cooking workshops offered in the past were unpopular, possibly because of stigma and/or time constraints. Recipes and the services of a nutritionist are offered at the pantry upon request, and college students have experimented with community gardening. However, Ms. Burns believes that cooking and eating habits are learned from childhood and hard to break. Experiential learning is the only way to change such lifestyle choices.

A staff member from the Oberlin Public Library agrees that cooking classes and nutrition workshops would be useful to the community. The Public Library would be interested in offering space for nutrition education uses if a community were to approach them.

### **Case Studies:**

Various urban and rural areas have recently become dedicated to implementing nutrition education programs that directly reach low-income families and individuals.

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and currently exists in all 50 states. The program is directed at low-income adults and includes classes on basic nutrition education, managing food stamp dollars to make healthy meals, food safety, and cooking classes. The classes are held at a wide variety of venues to reach as many different groups as possible.

In Cleveland, EFNEP educators worked with City Fresh to provide nutritional information at local produce pick-up locations. ENFEP educators set up learning tables at Fresh Stops with bi-lingual information on nutrition and recipes, tips on understanding nutrition labels, and fruit and vegetable samples. Surveys showed a resulting increase in adequate fruit and vegetable intake.

The Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Program (PA TRACKS) is a community-based program geared exclusively towards individuals and families receiving food stamps. The education programs are based on the Food Guide Pyramid and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The curriculum includes food safety, food budgeting, cooking, healthy eating, and medical conditions related to nutrition. Experiential learning is emphasized, though passive education (posters, handouts, flyers) is also incorporated.<sup>3</sup>

In Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service runs a series of Community Nutrition Education Programs. Health educators go to individual homes and teach lessons on participant-selected topics. Most recipients of federal food assistance are eligible to participate. Interviews conducted with participants show that after participating, 45% fewer participants ran out of food before the end of the month, and children in 35% of families ate breakfast more often.<sup>4</sup>

### **Framework/ Where to go from here:**

Legislation is one option for improving the nutritional quality of free meals programs. Locally, the Oberlin City Council could require free meals programs to follow nutritional guidelines. However, this could discourage organizations with low funding, such as OCS, from providing free meals at all. Instead of legislation, we propose that community members and Oberlin College students work with these organizations to enhance the quality of food provided and the availability of nutrition information.

At the Grace Lutheran Church Hot Meals program, church families take turns preparing and serving the meals. Oberlin students and other Oberlin residents could work with church members to create nutrition guidelines for meal preparation that would also be shared with meal recipients. These guidelines could be developed easily from governmental resources such as Nutrition.gov. The church could stock the kitchen with cookbooks so that families have access to recipes.

The groups serving free meals could encourage the participation of meal recipients in the meal preparation. Cooking classes could also be held at the same location as food pantry distribution so customers could learn how to cook the food available to them without sacrificing convenience. These workshops could also be held at the Public Library or another neutral meeting place.

Since many free meals programs in Oberlin have a limited budget, another project is obtaining produce and perishable food through alternative means. The organizations could join City Fresh and obtain produce shares at the lowest rate or obtain leftover produce from local farmers. These kinds of community partnerships will be essential to improving the nutritional quality of free meals without requiring major budget increases.

Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whyhunger.org/news-and-alerts/why-speaks/518.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.panutritiontracks.org/public/fsne.asp>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fcs.okstate.edu/cnep/about/mission.htm>