



Banking on Better Health: California Association of Food Banks' Nutrition Education Program

A Case Study Report Summary

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Background

Food banks in California play a critical role in offsetting hunger, as people in need can go to them and their nonprofit partners to immediately receive a bag or box of food. There are approximately 60 food banks in California that supply an estimated 5,000 nonprofit community-based agencies, such as food pantries, with more than 200 million pounds of food annually. With the help of tens of thousands of volunteers, the community-based agencies then distribute the food to more than two million hungry and food insecure individuals each year in California.

In addition to making sure food is distributed to hungry and food insecure households, food banks in California are also taking steps to ensure the food that is distributed is increasingly healthier: many food banks are participating in food distributions that provide low income households with fresh produce; some food banks have banned sodas and no longer distribute them to food pantries/closets or clients; food banks are requesting healthier donations from donors and have created suggestion lists. Others are incorporating a variety of education strategies regarding healthy food and healthy lifestyle options into their activities for clients, and in some cases, for their donors and boards as well.

The California Association of Food Banks (CAFB), with 46 member food banks, represents a strong, coordinated and large scale infrastructure with outreach to low-income residents in 56 counties. Participation in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) program has enabled CAFB subcontracting agencies to expand and augment their nutrition education activities and has also reportedly influenced food banks to change their internal policies regarding food. The purpose of this case study is to document the experience of CAFB's *Network for a Healthy California (Network)* nutrition education project in order to:

- profile the variety of nutrition education strategies being used;
- highlight accomplishments and factors that contribute to their achievement;
- generate recommendations for future collaboration and discover possible areas for project strengthening; and,
- improve prospects for replication.

Methods

The case study draws upon several sources including regular project documents such as CAFB's progress reports and an on-line survey completed by representatives of the participating food banks, as well as site visits and in-depth interviews with staff of three food banks.

Findings

- **Barriers to eating more fruits and vegetables:** Nutrition education program coordinators participating in CAFB's program were asked: *what do you and others at your organization who provide nutrition education find to be the top three barriers for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption among your low-income clientele?* The two most common barriers mentioned by five of the six program representatives were cost and availability. Other identified barriers mentioned less often were: preparation issues (e.g., fruit or vegetables were "too much trouble to prepare" or people lacked "knowledge of preparation"); lack of familiarity/cultural barriers; perishability; saturation (e.g., one respondents felt that food bank clients become "saturated" with a particular food item because it is distributed by all the emergency food banks); taste (e.g., food bank clients were used to less healthy and more flavorful foods); peer pressure especially for children; and too few public forums.
- **Nutrition Education Strategies:** The agencies participating in CAFB's nutrition education project employ a wide range of nutrition education strategies at food distribution sites and in the communities they serve. From popular education skits engaging women standing in a produce distribution line to providing education materials to seniors at "brown bag" food distributions, food bank clients are being exposed to the importance of healthy diet and physical activity.
- **Member agencies integrate nutrition education into existing operations** by providing nutrition information and promotional materials in coordination with their
 - *Senior Brown Bag* and senior lunch program(s)
 - mobile pantries or mobile produce distributions that take food, including fresh fruits and vegetables, to community sites
 - *Kids Café* programs where they provide free meals and snacks to low income children through a variety of after school programs
 - *Backpack Programs* that give children at schools in low-income communities a bag full of child-friendly foods on Fridays so that they will be well nourished for their return to school on Monday
- **Each of the participating agencies also provides nutrition education and physical activity promotion to a great variety of community venues** including: schools, health fairs, festivals, organized sporting events, community forums, farmers' markets, grocery stores and migrant farm worker camps.

Promising or Best Practices

The nutrition program coordinators and educators shared many observations about the type of nutrition education materials and strategies they were finding worked best. The opportunity to share best practices and lessons learned was one of the benefits repeatedly mentioned of participating in CAFB's program.

- **Education Materials:** There was general agreement among program coordinators and educators that “good” or “effective” nutrition education materials were ones that were eye-catching and highly readable with practical information, recipes and strategies. Several educators also mentioned the value of videos as education tools. Materials with the following characteristics were specifically mentioned as being effective:
 - Large print, brief messages in colorful, reader friendly formats since many clients have low literacy or poor eyesight and are not eager readers.
 - Clear but not “geared down” because people want to learn.
 - Fact sheets – compilation of information for easy access.
 - Simple recipes tailored to the monthly commodity bag and that include fruits and vegetables.
 - Education on how to make canned foods healthier.
 - Materials that catch someone’s interest and start a dialogue.
- **Nutrition Education Reinforcement Items (NERI):** Program coordinators and, reportedly, clients also valued NERI such as kitchen items, water bottles, canvas tote bags and a specifically developed produce bag that had been available through the *Network*.
- **Opportunities for sustained interaction:** Classes or weekly produce distributions were thought, by some, to be most effective since the same people are seen which allows for a relationship to be built.
- **Interaction, immediacy, and relevancy:** Program coordinators also highlighted the importance of relevancy and integrating their education efforts with their other services to address clients’ immediate resource limitations. One coordinator observed “tackling issues is a matter of relevancy”. The nutrition education combined with the produce distributions was considered by some to be most effective because it allowed them to not only talk about nutrition but distribute fresh produce.
- **Partnership:** Creating partnerships was another effective strategy mentioned for strengthening their food banks’ nutrition education programs. Partners exchange materials, assist one another with trainings or workshops, provide specific nutrition expertise and, in some cases, coordinated services.
- **Trainings:** Several food banks offer nutrition conferences and/or trainings for their member agencies, including food pantries and soup kitchens. Conferences include smaller break-out sessions where participants are able to learn about various topics, ranging from making healthier beverage choices to local venues for physical activity.

- **Impact(s):** Program coordinators described how participating in CAFB's nutrition education program had impacted the nutrition education clients were receiving and how it affects the food banks' emphasis on nutrition. Most commonly, participating agency staff described how participating in the program had allowed them to expand and improve the nutrition education they were providing. In a few cases, participating food banks, are attempting to measure client impacts; however, most often the evidence is anecdotal with program coordinators referring to the change(s) they are seeing among clients and the positive feedback they receive.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The food banks and local agencies participating in CAFB's nutrition education program provide their clients with a tremendous range of nutrition education opportunities. The staff commitment, skill and enthusiasm are truly impressive at each of the participating agencies. The importance of healthy eating and physical activity are issues of growing concern and priority to food banks and their participating agencies. This case study also helped identify recommendations for strengthening the demonstration project:

1. Continue and augment training and networking opportunities for participating food banks
2. Continue to augment nutrition education materials and determine whether the *Network's* distribution mechanism could better serve the needs of food banks with large member networks
3. *Network*, CAFB and participating agency staff will need to work together to adjust to the new statewide policies governing nutrition education reinforcement items (NERI)
4. Engage USDA in dialogue regarding how the current Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) policy regarding volunteer time, and potentially donated food, hinders the food banks from growing their nutrition education programs
5. Look for opportunities for streamlining programmatic reporting
6. Improve outcome/impact evaluation



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The views expressed in this case study are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the California Department of Public Health, or collaborating organizations or funders.