While messages abound telling us to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables each day, the average American eats only three and a half servings. Though people give many reasons for this, most of the barriers they note are self-imposed. Low fruit and vegetable consumption is particularly prevalent among low-income families. Low-income families have cited difficulty of preparation, expense and perishability as barriers for not consuming more fruits and vegetables. Furthermore, low-income parents may be unwilling to spend limited food dollars on fruits and vegetables that they are unsure their family members will eat.

Barriers to eating fruits and vegetables can be tackled in several ways. Programs such as WIC and the National School Lunch Program provide free or reduced-price foods, including produce, to members of lower-income families, thereby alleviating the price and accessibility-related barriers. Point-of-purchase education, such as the supermarket-based 5 A Day program, positively influences eating behaviors and can increase fruit and vegetable consumption. Building self-efficacy — that is, self-confidence — in one’s abilities to make healthy choices is associated with increased intake of fruits and vegetables. Demonstrating techniques for preparing fruits and vegetables and providing opportunities for hands-on practice may enhance self-efficacy and increase consumption. Encouraging family members to participate in intervention programs has also been shown to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.

Community gardens can break down barriers to eating fruits and vegetables. Also, they offer numerous other benefits to participants. “Community gardens are common ground for growing plants that feed, heal and give aesthetic pleasure. They are civic spaces where people work and recreate to nourish themselves, their families and friends. Most gardeners take satisfaction in having filled some part of their diet with food they have grown themselves.” The Kane Street Community Garden brought together educators, volunteers and families to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among a low-income population in Wisconsin.

Kane Street Community Garden

Inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption was common among low-income parents participating in the WIC program in La Crosse County, Wisconsin. Barriers to consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables included the high cost of produce in a limited budget, lack of knowledge of preparation methods, unfamiliarity with numerous fresh fruits and vegetables and family members not liking fruits and vegetables. Program initiatives were established to overcome these barriers.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Kane Street Community Garden was established to increase the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables among low-income residents of La Crosse County, Wisconsin. Goal objectives were to establish a community garden on a vacant site, begin free distribution of community garden produce and provide opportunities for learning to prepare fresh fruits and vegetables. The time frame for planting the garden, harvesting, hosting cooking classes and evaluating the program ran from June to October 1998.

METHODOLOGY

In the winter of 1997-98, the Hunger Task Force of La Crosse established a subcommittee to oversee the planting of a community garden in a low-income neighborhood.
Department donated a parcel of land for the garden. Volunteers prepared the garden for planting as part of a local community volunteer day. AmeriCorps volunteers were recruited to help the garden committee oversee garden maintenance and harvesting. Produce was harvested and distributed to low-income families free of charge two nights a week throughout the harvest season; any remaining produce was donated to local food pantries and free meal sites. Preparation tips, recipes and fact sheets provided by Cooperative Extension staff members at the garden on harvest nights. Produce samples were offered to encourage families to take home unfamiliar fruits and vegetables. Local media aided in publicizing the garden and soliciting donations of money and materials. The garden was publicized through WIC sites, the Salvation Army, the local food pantry, community centers and senior meal sites.

RESULTS

The 1998 growing season ended with 5,006 pounds of organic produce grown and distributed. One hundred twenty-five community residents volunteered to work or help in the garden, and 95 low-income families helped harvest. Six community organizations distributed surplus produce to needy families. Of the low-income families that responded to a survey, 71 percent stated that their fruit and vegetable consumption had increased.

QUESTIONS

1. Low fruit and vegetable consumption is particularly prevalent among:
   a. Children
   b. Low-income families
   c. Immigrants
   d. College students

2. Which strategy was cited for overcoming barriers to eating fruits and vegetables?
   a. Place supermarket ads in a local newspaper
   b. Tell students to eat more fruits and vegetables
   c. Distribute point-of-purchase education materials
   d. Educate physicians

3. What was the goal of the Kane Street Community Garden?
   a. To supply food to low-income residents
   b. To increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables among low-income residents
   c. To increase variety of fruits and vegetables in the community
   d. To put vacant land to good use

4. In the Kane Street Community Garden project, what percentage of low-income residents surveyed said that their fruit and vegetable consumption increased?
   a. 71 percent
   b. 65 percent
   c. 40 percent
   d. 20 percent

5. What was the greatest challenge in running the Kane Street Community Garden?
   a. Language barriers
   b. Weather
   c. Pests
   d. Funding

LESSONS LEARNED

“As with many new projects, securing sufficient funding was and continues to be one of our biggest challenges. We’ve decided to expand the garden and sell a portion of the additional produce to raise additional funding for on-going support. We also decided to hire a part-time coordinator to protect the volunteers from burn-out.”

— Linda Lee
Treasurer
Hunger Task Force of La Crosse

REFERENCES