

The Case for EFNEP

Kids in low-income families skip meals because they can't afford to eat. A pregnant teenager doesn't get adequate nutrition, putting her unborn baby at risk. A young family simply runs out of food. More and more, this is becoming reality in the United States. Ironic, isn't it? This, in a country often called the breadbasket of the world.

And yet, Americans are getting fatter. Researchers are beginning to understand the connection between hunger and obesity, and how these seemingly contradictory conditions can co-exist in the same families and even in the same individuals.¹ As we deal with this paradox, we also must face the serious health issues related to obesity and poor nutrition: heart disease, hypertension, stroke, some types of cancer, and diabetes. And health care costs are skyrocketing.

It will only get worse in a country that cuts funding for EFNEP, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. We cannot let that happen. The people of the United States — and the people of *your* state and my state — need EFNEP.

I am here today to make the case for EFNEP — and in the spirit of not adding to the alphabet soup of acronyms you are hearing during your time here in D.C., let me state again: EFNEP is the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program.

EFNEP = Best Practice

In Iowa, we value healthy people — and we put that value into practice with Extension nutrition education. EFNEP truly is a *best* practice for improving the health of our people — in Iowa and throughout the United States. It's a best practice both in fighting obesity, as well as in helping low-resource families get the most for their food dollar. EFNEP was implemented nationally 40 years ago to help youth and young, low-resource families develop skills and knowledge about nutrition and managing finances, thus helping them become more self-sufficient. EFNEP uses local paraprofessionals as trained instructors — neighbors helping neighbors. The program reaches families with limited resources, multi-cultural audiences, and pregnant women in both one-on-one and workshop settings. EFNEP also reaches youth in schools and provides material that teachers can use to further spread nutrition education.

It's particularly important that EFNEP works with youth from a very early age. Research has shown a link between nutrition and children's cognitive

¹ The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity in America, a Joint Report by the Center on Hunger and Poverty and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC),
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/hunger/reports/hungerandobesity.pdf>

development, performance, and ability to concentrate. EFNEP works with the parents and caregivers of infants and preschoolers to provide them the good start they deserve.

The issue of overweight and obese children is a national concern. The number of overweight youth has increased significantly in the last few decades. Extension nutrition programs like EFNEP help youth develop into healthy adults by making good choices related to diet and physical activity. Youth learn the importance of smart choices from every food group, physical activity as part of daily life, and food safety as it relates to food handling. EFNEP also encourages kids to eat breakfast and gives them the opportunity to taste new foods.

Nutrition activities provide skill development in reading and language arts, math, and science plus nutrition and health. In Iowa, our primary curriculum incorporates reading and language arts skills in 85 percent of the lessons, math skills in 60 percent, and science skills in 25 percent.

Funding

EFNEP is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service. The funds provide for the employment and training of professional and paraprofessional aides to engage in direct nutrition education of low-income families and youth. As much as possible, EFNEP hires paraprofessionals from the local target audience. There is some variation between the states on the number and proportion of youth served versus adults. The states also follow different models for supervising and training the paraprofessionals.

One reason that the program has been successful is that the states are able to leverage the resources they have and put the money where the most need is. Also, as the population has changed and nutrition education has advanced, the EFNEP program has been able to change as well. In addition, EFNEP is fortunate to have a core of committed staff who believe in the mission in all 50 states and in American Samoa, Guam, Micronesia, Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

EFNEP Works

EFNEP reaches people who need our help. Let me share some Iowa data from fiscal year 2007. Of the Iowa adults and pregnant teens who participated in EFNEP, 82 percent were at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level. Ninety-two percent of the families participated in one or more food assistance programs such as Food Stamps; Women, Infants, and Children (better known as the WIC program); Head Start; or School Breakfast and Lunch.

Pure and simple, EFNEP works. The results are behavior changes for better nutrition in adults and youth.

- In fiscal year 2007, just over 1,800 adults participated in EFNEP in Iowa. Ninety-two percent of the 1,100 who graduated made a positive change in one or

more nutrition practices, such as — they planned meals, they made healthy food choices, they read nutrition labels, or their children ate breakfast. Eighty-eight percent made a positive change in one or more food resource management practices — for example, they compared prices, they did not run out of food, or they used a grocery list when shopping. In addition, 66 percent of graduates made a positive change in one or more food safety practices.

- More than 10,000 Iowa youth participate in EFNEP every year and are changing their nutrition behavior as well. Ongoing evaluation of our youth program indicates youth have increased their knowledge of nutrition, have increased their knowledge and practice of food safety guidelines, and are more willing to try new foods.

But don't take it just from me; take it from Iowans who have participated in EFNEP and Extension's nutrition education.

- One Iowan said, "I never realized how much fun it could be to feed my family, how good I feel when I can stretch our food dollar throughout the month, and how rewarding it is to know that I can help my son grow strong by buying the right kinds of foods."
- A pregnant woman said, "I learned what I eat makes a difference in both my health and that of my unborn baby. Now I select the foods that are healthy for both of us."
- A parent said, "We eat a lot better now since I've learned so much from you. My daughter eats more food since you told me not to give her so much juice. Now she loves vegetables!"
- Another participant said, "I save time and money by planning ahead and prioritizing my hectic schedule. My family is eating balanced, nutritional meals on a regular schedule, and I feel more relaxed and in control."

If that doesn't convince you to support EFNEP, then listen to the kids.

- A note from one youth said, "Thank you very much for coming to our class. I learned a lot about nutrition. I can't believe there is so much sugar in some food. Now I eat healthier after school. I also learned to exercise every day."
- A third grader said he will ask his mom to help him make the smoothies he tasted in class. He knows he needs to change some of his eating habits. He's been eating junk foods for snacks, but he now sees healthy snacks as an alternative.

Teachers believe in the power of EFNEP as well.

- A fifth grade teacher said, "Your teaching is working! I noticed many students checking the nutrition labels on the snacks they received ... You are making a difference in their choices."
- A second grade teacher said, "The activities were fun, interesting, educational, and at (the students') level."
- A principal reported, "When you are here teaching nutrition, the kids want to come to school."

EFNEP's Return on Investment

Nationally, EFNEP reaches well over 500,000 youth and adults every year. In fiscal year 2006, EFNEP reached nearly 560,000 individuals. But these aren't just

statistics — they're people; people who need these basic skills and have the desire to improve their lives.

I am reminded of the Chinese Proverb; *"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."* When we educate people to help themselves, everyone wins. Cost-benefit studies show that when we invest in EFNEP, we save in health care costs. Let me toss out a few numbers: For every dollar invested in EFNEP in Iowa, health care costs can be expected to decrease by \$8.03. A study of Midwestern states showed health care costs decreasing by \$8.82, and in a Virginia study, by \$10.64. Over all, every state showed a positive benefit for participants.

Make the Case for EFNEP

I ask that you make the case for EFNEP with your legislators. Frankly, it's an easy case to make. Here is a program that reaches our country's low-resource families and youth who are in greatest need; a program that helps them develop skills and knowledge about nutrition, as well as get the most from their food dollar. In addition, investing money *now* in EFNEP helps us save health care costs later. So I encourage you to support and advocate for the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program — for your state, for my state, and for the United States. Thank you.

NASULGC is the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. CARET is the Council for Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching.