



The Need for Nutrition in Food Banks August 2009

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Amid an economic crisis, more people are experiencing food insecurity and turning to emergency food programs to help make ends meet. Amid an obesity epidemic, more people are turning to nutrition experts and research to support behavior change and to combat this epidemic and its impact on society. The common ground of these two problems is in the emergency food supply. The challenge at the Food Bank For New York City is to balance these two concerns and address both hunger and obesity through our network of emergency feeding programs. This document looks to establish why the Food Bank considers nutrition quality in the food purchased and provided to the emergency food programs in New York City.

Obesity is a common problem in New York City, but especially in the low-income populations served by the Food Bank. In a 2006 study of New Yorkers, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene identified that 54% of New York City adults are overweight or obese.(1) This report showed that the prevalence of overweight and obesity was 1.3 times higher in low-income neighborhoods and concluded that "overweight or obesity is most common among adults with the lowest household income, and prevalence decreases with increasing income."(1) Obesity can lead to many health conditions, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and certain types of cancer. These conditions not only increase mortality, but also have a significant impact on the financial well-being of individuals and society due to the associated medical costs. In 2007, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene estimated the city's healthcare costs associated with diabetes alone to be around \$6.5 billion.(2) There are a number of contributing factors for obesity and diabetes, but prevention and management of these conditions rely upon lifestyle changes such as healthy eating and physical activity. By addressing one of the root causes of obesity and diabetes, improved food quality could ultimately lead to healthcare cost savings for struggling families.

It is widely recognized that nutrition is a key component in maintaining health status and preventing chronic disease. Proper nutrition can also support the body's ability to function at its highest capacity both physically and mentally. Dietary components such as iron, vitamin C, calcium and vitamin A support basic body functions such as muscle function, bone health, immune system function and the body's ability to repair tissues. At a basic level, these nutrients are important to support everyday work and help to maintain focus, energy and ability for the body to fight off illness. A recent study of the impacts of federal food and nutrition programs found a significant negative relationship between food insufficiency and intakes of ten key nutrients that contribute to overall health.(3) In addition, many other organizations have assessed the impact of dietary quality and have shown similar results with lower overall dietary quality and consumption of key nutrients in low-income populations. To address this problem and support a positive change in the population they serve, many Food Bank members focus on improving nutrition quality at their sites. The Food Bank's 2007 Hunger Safety Net report showed that 87% of all programs distribute fresh fruits and vegetables and 27% of the programs offer nutrition counseling for clients.(4) These increasingly common practices support the need to provide nutritious foods for the entire population by increasing the awareness of how food affects the body and thus client demand for nutritious foods.

The Food Bank For New York City believes nutrition should be a factor in food selection. By using nutrition and food quality as a guiding factor, the Food Bank is able to provide foods that combat chronic disease but are not available or affordable in low-income communities. The Food Bank's 2007 Hunger Safety Net report found that New Yorkers who experience difficulty affording food often live in neighborhoods where access to nutritious food is limited or lacking and can be described as "food poor."⁽⁴⁾ In addition to limited access to nutritious foods, it is also recognized that nutritious foods are often eliminated from the diet with limited funds for food purchase. In a 2008 World Food Security conference, Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, said: "Food choices are highly sensitive to price. The first items to drop out of the diet are usually healthy foods — fruit, vegetables, and high-quality sources of protein. ... Nutrient-poor staples are often the cheapest way to fill hungry stomachs."⁽⁵⁾ While it is well-known that fruits and vegetables provide needed nutrients to support overall health and prevent chronic disease, many families cannot afford the recommended amounts to support a healthy diet. According to a nationwide study of the affordability of fruits and vegetables, a low-income family would have to devote 43% to 70% of their food budget to fruits and vegetables to meet the government recommendations.⁽⁶⁾ The Food Bank fills a gap for those individuals and families that are experiencing problems affording needed food and who often live in "food poor" neighborhoods. Rather than providing more inexpensive, nutrient-poor foods, the Food Bank encourages emergency feeding programs to focus on foods that are either not affordable or not accessible in the community to best meet the needs of the clients.

The approach to food that considers nutrition quality is not a new concept. Retail establishments as well as non-profit and government entities around the country have increasingly begun implementing nutrition evaluation tools and guidelines to address the obesity epidemic and improve the nutrition quality of meals served. The Food Bank's approach to food distribution is supported by local, state and national guidelines and is in line with a number of programs nationwide that have successfully focused on nutrition quality in food distribution.

In New York City, the mayor recently prioritized nutrition quality by releasing nutrition standards for city agencies. These standards include detailed criteria for individual food items and overall components of a meal. The guidelines encourage foods with lower salt, fat and calories, while increasing positive meal components such as fiber and total servings of fruits and vegetables ⁽⁷⁾. While non-profit organizations such as the Food Bank are not bound by these standards, they provide a framework for all New York City organizations to follow.

The New York State Department of Health was one of the first organizations to focus on the nutrition quality of emergency foods, through the establishment of the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) in 1984. The HPNAP program provides funding to food banks and emergency feeding programs around the state for the purchase of foods that meet approved nutrition guidelines. In addition to meal guidelines and standards for reimbursable foods, they stipulate that 5% of the funds be spent on fresh produce and that 2% of all funds be spent on fluid milk with a fat content of 1% or less. As part of this project, funding is provided to major contracts for nutrition staff to help assess the nutrition quality of foods distributed and to provide nutrition education to the feeding programs.

The approach in New York State is not entirely unique but has been supported by changes on a national level and in other regions. The USDA commodity foods program recently made a significant change in their food processing criteria to begin offering low-sodium canned vegetables, whole-grain pasta and low-fat milk. In addition, the five-year strategic plan created by Feeding America, the national food bank organization, prioritizes nutrition. This plan seeks to increase not only total pounds of food secured, but also the percent of total food classified as nutritious to 75%, up from 70% in recent years.

The Food Bank For New York City aims to provide foods that contribute to an overall healthy diet and support the dietary restrictions and preferences of various population groups. The foods offered through the Food Bank can be incorporated into a healthy diet as outlined by the United States Department of Agriculture's MyPyramid and Dietary Guidelines for Americans. MyPyramid focuses on staple foods or basic meal components that fall into one of the five food group categories and provides daily guidance to meet recommendations for proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamin and minerals. The Dietary Guidelines are meant to provide a more in-depth look at recommendations on overall diet makeup and components to encourage or discourage. These tools are created by a committee of experts and are a source of dietary recommendations for policymakers and health providers that are based on the latest scientific information. Both MyPyramid and the Dietary Guidelines are used to guide federal nutrition programs. Likewise, these guides are the basis for the food selection at the Food Bank and for recommendations to provide healthy meals and pantry bags through the member programs.

While the MyPyramid guidelines can be hard for families to follow with limited budgets and limited access to nutritious products, the Food Bank helps programs overcome the affordability challenge through its focus on staple foods and quantity food purchasing. The Food Bank list offers basic food components such as rice, cereal, beans, vegetables, fruits, juice and canned and frozen meat and fish to the agencies for purchase. Since these items are minimally processed, many companies and many brands can meet the product criteria. To bring in the items at the lowest cost, item specifications are developed and sent out to a number of vendors before purchase. The Food Bank provides food to approximately 1,000 member programs, which allows for quantity purchase and further reduces the cost of each item. In the past few years, the Food Bank has made a number of changes to improve the nutrition quality of its items without increasing the cost. For example, when low-sodium beans were introduced, the agency advisory committee agreed that they were willing to pay up to 10% more for this change. However, the cost secured was actually \$0.01 less per case than the regular-sodium option. The Food Bank remains committed to making improvements to the nutrition quality of the wholesale food items available without significantly increasing the price of the item.

The Food Bank strives to provide foods that most adequately address hunger, obesity, access to nutritious foods and nutrient density while following the lead of local, state and national program models and recommendations on healthy eating patterns. Most importantly, the foods provided fall in line with what Americans are looking for in their foods: healthfulness. According to the International Food Information Council, healthfulness is still one of the top three reasons people choose to buy a certain food (the others are taste and price). In addition, 64% of Americans reported changing their diet to improve healthfulness.⁽⁸⁾ When considering the many complex factors involved, the Food Bank's approach is relatively simple: emphasize basic staple foods. Staple foods tend to provide the best nutrition value per dollar, are minimally processed, are often inexpensive and allow the client flexibility in preparation. If the client does not eat the food, it is not serving the purpose of providing nutrition value and addressing hunger. As an organization that provides food for millions of New Yorkers who have complex factors affecting their food choices, the Food Bank plays a major role in making the most out of the food dollars spent by considering nutrition in food choices.

References

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