

Stories from the Field: Georgia



Georgia Takes a United Front Against Food Insecurity and Obesity

Some call it America's "hidden crisis." Some call it food insecurity. Some simply call it hunger. When people think of hunger in America, they may picture a hungry, thin child. But have you ever envisioned that same hungry child being overweight?

Recent research suggests that hunger and obesity are not problems that exist in separate neighborhoods; they frequently occur in the same home, even in the same child. This is often the case in homes with little money or other resources to purchase adequate or healthy foods.

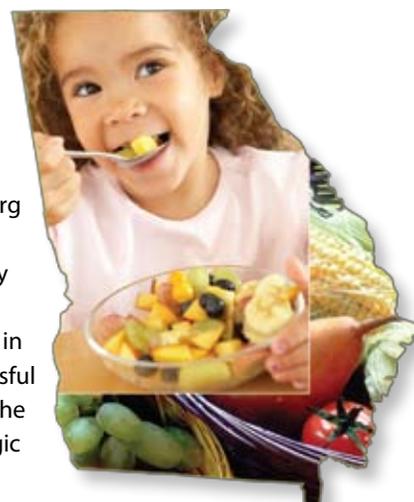
The statistics spell out the dilemma. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, in 2008, approximately 15% (17 million) of U.S. households were food insecure—meaning that at some point during the year, they had to skip meals to make ends meet. Others chose inexpensive, easily accessible, and often less healthful foods to eat. Paradoxically, one third of children in America are obese or on the road to becoming so.

In an effort to help put food on some of America's tables, the Georgia Nutrition and Physical Activity Initiative, in partnership with the Georgia Coalition for Physical Activity and Nutrition (GPAN), launched Share Our Strength (SOS) Operation Frontline in Georgia (OFL-GA). OFL-GA works with dietitians, financial experts, and culinary industry professionals to empower low-income families and children with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to prepare nutrition meals on a limited budget.

The specific resources (including personnel or funding mechanisms) that facilitated the implementation of OFL-GA included, but were not limited to, a Con Agra Grant that provided seed funding for three years, \$40,000 in matching funds from the Georgia Nutrition and Physical Activity Initiative, and an advisory board of SOS staff that provided guidance for program implementation.

OFL-GA's first set of programs began in the Pittsburg Community of South Atlanta. Community centers, after-school programs, and faith-based community organizations provided course sites for OFL-GA classes. OFL-GA had 278 graduates and 19 classes in the first four months of programming. This successful strategy was a direct result of state level support, the strength of the partnerships, and collective strategic planning.

GPAN staff have started to measure short-term and intermediate progress for OFL-GA. The program graduates have provided self-reported nutrition behaviors at three and six months post-intervention. The indicators showed an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption and reduced consumption of high-fat foods.



Overall, the program has accomplished some initial success and is growing in popularity. But according to GPAN staff, this has been a double-edged sword. Once the program was launched, the soaring demand was unanticipated and placed an enormous strain on start-up funding and program capacity.

According to Jim Calloway, Executive Director of GPAN, "In the planning stages the board made a strategic decision to launch the program in Metropolitan Atlanta and then move statewide through local GPAN Chapters. This left a void in the majority of rural cities and towns in Georgia. The challenge to cover the cost of the food for the program and to train the numerous corps of volunteers throughout the state remains a barrier."

To overcome this barrier, GPAN staff plan to coordinate with the Georgia Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to provide programmatic support for the implementation of the new WIC food package. GPAN also intends to provide cooking and budgeting classes for WIC program participants. With the support of WIC, GPAN will help ensure that the program continues to do its work.

Importance of Early Success

OFL-GA is a collaborative effort between state government and community organizations to end child hunger in Georgia. It allows the Georgia Physical Activity Initiative and GPAN to reach under-resourced families and envelop them with healthy food where they live, learn, and play. OFL-GA continues to positively impact program graduates' ability to select, purchase, and prepare healthy, low-cost meals. Graduates consistently show improvement in their eating habits, food-budgeting skills, and food safety practices—behaviors proven to reduce food insecurity and improve overall health.



Lessons Learned

- Garner support and greater funding for the program by recruiting community partnerships early.
- The demand for the OFL-GA program persists over its current capacity to deliver. Complete a community assessment to become familiar with the challenges and issues related to hunger, food insecurity, and poverty in the area to gain a realistic picture of the need and best implementation strategy for OFL-GA.
- Take proactive steps to keep the Advisory Board members engaged in the program to ensure continued support and program enthusiasm.

Contacts:

Donna DeCaille MS, RD, LD
Phone: (404) 657-6538
Email: dpdecaille@dhr.state.ga.us
Web site: <http://health.state.ga.us/nutandpa/>

Marcia Rafiq
Phone: (678) 476-3796
Email: m.rafiq@g-pan.org
Web site: <http://www.g-pan.org>