

NCCDPHP Success Story

King County Food Pantries Offer and Promote Healthier Options

By Kate Ortiz

Public Health Challenge

In King County, Washington, heart disease and stroke are the second and fifth leading causes of death, respectively. High blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke, is more common in some racial and ethnic minority groups and among people with low income or food insecurity. Consuming less sodium is recommended to reduce high blood pressure, but people with food insecurity may be unable to afford or access healthy food and may rely on foods offered in food pantries. These foods are often nonperishable, highly processed, and high in sodium. With food pantries serving more than 1 in 9 King County residents in 2018, increasing the availability of healthy, lower-sodium foods in these venues may contribute to lower blood pressure for their clients.

Approach

The Healthy Food Environments project provided training, technical assistance, and funding for supplies to 12 food pantries in the South King County Food Coalition (SKCFC). The project supported two strategies: (1) behavioral design changes that use marketing and product placement to encourage customers to choose healthy, lower-sodium foods and (2) development of nutrition standards to guide procurement, distribution, and food environment decision making. A nonprofit hunger relief agency, the county extension-based SNAP-Ed program, the county public health department, and university-based evaluators helped implement these strategies.



At A Glance

People with food insecurity are at higher risk of chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, yet have less access to lower-sodium foods. Through the Healthy Food Environments project, emergency food organizations in King County worked with public health and university-based partners to reduce sodium in foods distributed at food pantries. Twelve pantries received training, technical assistance, and funds to implement nutrition standards and behavioral design strategies, making lower-sodium items more accessible for 65,000 people.

“This opportunity forced us to move faster than I think we would've if we didn't have the opportunity and to think about our nutrition policies and what kind of food we want to distribute.”

- SKCFC Food Pantry Manager

Results

In the project's first 2 years, 12 implemented behavioral design strategies and adopted a set of coalition nutrition standards to make lower sodium food more accessible for 65,000 people. Behavioral design changes included shelf placement, displays, signage, and lights to prominently display and preserve the quality of healthy foods and new layouts to improve the customer flow and look more like a grocery store. These changes supported customer choice while promoting healthy, lower sodium options (whole-grain breads, canned products, and produce). In interviews, food pantry managers expressed in how changes improved clients' experiences and described increased discussion among staff and volunteers about the foods and services they provided. These developments supported the pantries in developing the nutrition standards.

What's Next

The SKCFC plans to use its coalition-level nutrition standards as a communication tool to share with donors, volunteers, and the community about why healthy food donations are important and how to work with food banks to provide healthy, lower-sodium foods. Individual SKCFC food pantries also plan to use the coalition nutrition standards as a model for creating policies to guide their own procurement and other decision-making. The Healthy Food Environments project plans to expand to work with other food pantries across the county and share resources across Washington State through Northwest Harvest's statewide network of 375 hunger relief partner programs.

Find Out More

This project was supported by CDC Cooperative Agreement CDC-RFA-DP16-1607. Learn more about Healthy Food Environment project' partners:
<https://www.northwestharvest.org>,
<http://www.skcfc.org>,
<https://www.washington.edu/research/research-centers/center-for-public-health-nutrition/>,
<https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health.aspx> .

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Web site

<http://nccd.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>

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<https://wwwn.cdc.gov/dcs/ContactUs/Form>

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