

VOLUNTEERS HELP NEIGHBORS ACHIEVE GREATER HEALTH THROUGH BALANCED EATING AND MEAL PREPARATION

The Partnership for Healthy Eating was formed this summer (2018) to examine the problem of poor nutrition among people residing in Englewood. It is well documented that a major diabetes epidemic is sweeping America and the rate of obesity has increased exponentially.

"The CDC estimates that, if current trends continue, the number of US adults with diabetes could rise from one in ten to one in five, or even one in three by 2050."

In response to these alarming statistics Englewood Hospital's Population Health Department embarked upon a local study to ascertain the conditions of local residents. The study revealed that in Englewood 26% of the population is Hispanic, while the number of Hispanics in all of NJ is 18%. There is also a high number of African American residents suffering from illnesses related to poor nutrition.

Other important facts are:

- 52.5% of Hispanic women and 45% of Hispanic men will have diabetes in their lifetimes (20% more than Caucasians).
- Hispanic people are about 50% more likely to die from diabetes than whites.
- The number of Hispanics without health insurance has grown from 29% in 2013 to 40% in 2016 while the number of Whites without health insurance has drastically decreased.

A group of community leaders, calling themselves the Partnership for Healthy Eating, was concerned about these alarming statistics and decided to look at how the problem might be addressed locally. Experts from the two local food pantries confirmed that many of the people securing food from them fall within the target population. Members of this partnership believed that one effective way of curbing this burgeoning health problem was to create a community-based nutrition education program to be offered to low-income residents of Englewood with major health conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

Partnership members from all walks of life convened to explore in greater detail some of the major challenges faced by frequenters of the food pantries in the area. At first the participants in the discussion were the leaders of both food pantries in Englewood, representatives of Englewood Hospital's Population Health Department, retirees recruited from the Bergen County Volunteer Center, and representative of Englewood's Age-Friendly Coalition. The convener of the group was The Community Chest. Since its initiation the membership of the Steering Committee of the Partnership has increased by 100%, adding a number of food industry professionals who are providing invaluable advice to the program. Discussions revealed that not only is the number of people regularly seeking food increasing, but the health conditions of these people are more serious as well. Many of these conditions are attributed to unhealthy eating habits.

Program

The plan is to create a monthly dinner program during the school year (10 per year) to which food pantry consumers and their families will be invited. Groups of up to 40 people will be held in easily accessible locations such as churches or community rooms. The churches will be asked to host the dinners but will not be required to pay for any of the expenses. They will be asked to assist the chef with preparing the food, welcoming the guests, setting up for the dinner, serving and cleaning up. As of this writing 6 commitments have been secured from local churches.

The goal of the evening is to teach the guests how to prepare a well-balanced dinner on a limited budget. Nutritious dinners will be prepared for the attendees and their families by a team of experienced professionals including a chef and a dietician. While serving the guests, chefs will demonstrate how the meal was prepared and will work closely with the nutritionist to educate the diners about healthy and nutritious food preparation. Attendees will be sent home with recipes and bags of food containing the ingredients for the dinner so that they can replicate them at home.

During the dinner sessions special programming will be available for children of all ages. This is intended to provide an opportunity for parents to be able to pay close attention to the information being discussed during the dinner meeting. The children will be located in a room near to the parents and will be supervised by local teens and seniors who will volunteer to work with them. There will be a short program on the topic of healthy eating for the children as well to expose them to the benefits of eating healthy foods. This programming will take place in a location in close proximity to their parents.

The primary referral sources for the dinners will be both food pantries - the Office of Concern and the Center for Food Action - located in Englewood. Staff of each pantry will be given a supply of "invitations" that they will distribute to people coming to the pantry for food. The total number of people attending each dinner is 40, including children. Since agency staff knows the clientele well, they will be able to identify those people most in need of nutrition education. They will also be able to explain to the attendees the value of attending the dinners and to encourage them to attend. Secondary sources of referrals will be the hosting congregations and the SNAP (Food Stamps) and WIC (Women Infant and Children's) program participants in the area.

Educational materials on nutrition including menus, recipes and tip sheets on meal preparation for children and special events, have been gathered by Englewood Hospital's nutrition educators. They will be available in multiple languages and provided at no charge. The literature will be distributed to people through the food pantries and other places. (e.g. local churches) but is also available to all residents of Englewood upon request.

People wishing to get more information about nutrition will have the opportunity to attend a variety of classes at no charge. These classes will be offered by the hospital's nutrition department. Some classes will be located at the food pantries themselves to make access easier for working people.

Staffing/Volunteers

The beauty of this program is that it is staffed almost entirely by community volunteers. This includes chefs, nutritionists and people skilled in other areas that are needed to operate a program of this size. This is in the spirit of The Chest that has as its tagline "Neighbors Helping Neighbors". An outreach has been made via print and social media to expand the size of this group. Other communications will be sent to local agencies, service groups and houses of worship in the area. Partner agencies (noted earlier) will also be asked to aid with communication.

Program Evaluation

All people attending the dinner will be asked to complete a brief survey on their experience while attending the program. The survey results will be reviewed regularly and recommendations will be used to make ongoing program improvements.

Volunteers will also be asked to evaluate their experience working in the program and to offer suggestions for program improvement.

The Community Chest has been in existence in Englewood for 85 years. Started during the Depression by a group of concerned neighbors, the Chest has dedicated itself to addressing pressing health and social issues that have arisen over time and plagued low-income residents. As the population demographics have shifted, different issues have taken priority and The Community Chest has addressed many of them through its grant making process.