

Hollywood Food Needs Assessment: Research and Recommendations on Improving Access to Healthy Foods For Three Low-Income Populations

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Funded by California Nutrition Network

Overview of the Hollywood Food Needs Assessment

From October 2002 through September 2003, the California Nutrition Network funded the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness to administer a Food Needs Assessment for the Hollywood area of Los Angeles. Specifically, the Assessment collected information from focus groups, surveys and community meetings, as well as an inventory of grocery stores to determine what were the barriers to obtaining sufficient food and to eating 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day among three low-income groups living in the area. Those groups are the homeless (and at-risk), low-income families, and low income seniors. The Assessment was unique in that the work was primarily undertaken by the Hollywood Community Action Network (Hollywood CAN or HCAN), a group of homeless and at-risk individuals mentored by the L.A. Coalition. In this way, the Assessment was true to the spirit of community-based research. The project had some rich, unexpected results in forming new partnerships among nutrition and anti-hunger advocates, as well as involving some of the poorest people in Hollywood in a project designed to lead to improvements in their lives.

The findings of the Assessment reflect the general state of affairs regarding both fruit and vegetable consumption and access to the nutritional safety net designed to end hunger in the United States:

- Only 17% of all the participants surveyed eat 5 servings of fruit and vegetables per day, and 38 % report eating fruits and vegetables at a rate of less than once per day.
- Only 20 % of all participants surveyed are currently receiving food stamps; another 64% (mostly seniors) has never applied for the program. There remain a lot of misconceptions about food stamps. It should be noted that 22% of the populations studied are receiving SSI (Supplemental Security Income) payments, which in California make them ineligible to receive food stamps.
- Emergency food providers in the area are aware of incidence of diet related disease among the populations they serve, and do attempt to accommodate them. Two food lines give fresh fruit to homeless participants. Two others offer salad or cooked vegetables.
- Housing is a large factor in peoples' access to an adequate healthy diet, in two ways:

One fifth of housed individuals pay over half their income for rent, leaving them a budget that often does not meet their food needs.

Homeless individuals (and those temporarily housed in hotels) have nowhere to cook and store food. This limits the amount they can buy economically and increases their dependence upon food lines (charitable food distribution) for regular, prepared meals, locking them into a schedule around which their lives must rotate.

The five largest barriers that people felt they had to getting adequate nutritious food were

- Food in the stores is too expensive given the person's income (listed by all groups)
- The rent is too high so people buy less food or food of lesser quality (families and seniors)
- Lack of knowledge of resources including food stamps and other free food programs (listed by all groups, but less so by the homeless)
- Persons on SSI cannot qualify to receive food stamps in California
- Lack of cooking facilities, storage and refrigeration (homeless only)

In spite of this, all populations are aware of the health benefits of eating fruits and vegetables (80% of the total of all three groups agreed with the statement that they were sure fruits and vegetables consumption helps prevent disease) and list them along with fish as the food they most desire but cannot afford or obtain. (28% of the total of all three groups described fruit or vegetables, and 14% of all three groups listed fish or seafood).

The Hollywood Community Action Network (HCAN)

The HCAN was formed in 2000 at the urging of a homeless individual in Hollywood, in coordination with the L.A. Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness and with considerable logistical support from the Lord's Lighthouse hot meal and social services program of the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood. The L.A. Coalition, in a commitment to involving homeless people directly in the campaigns designed to help them, had formed the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) in late 1998. The LA CAN's membership and mission are centered around the large homeless and low-income population in downtown Los Angeles. Hollywood is "home" to another sizeable population of homeless (and people who live on the verge of homelessness or in hotels with no cooking facilities.) When the HCAN was formed it began campaigns to protect the civil rights of people living on the street who were being pressured to leave the area due to its gentrification in the late 1990s. It has undertaken community-based research since then, having done three housing assessments. One of those cataloged vacant lots that could be used for affordable housing: another surveyed the population to determine income and needs. The HCAN had a small active core, but in two years over 40 people were involved in it to some degree. It built up a collegial relationship with Los Angeles Councilmember Eric Garcetti, elected in 2001.

The Hollywood Food Needs Assessment was an ideal tool for involving the HCAN members in community-based research and bringing them some income. This is always a challenge due to the multiple problems faced by the members: mental illness, past substance abuse, and homelessness. Yet they consistently produced work of high quality and contributed many original ideas to the Assessment. Several HCAN members were key throughout the assessment: others worked occasionally on surveys and setting up community meetings. The group developed a sense of ownership of the project and is now involved in the preparations to implement the recommendations of the Assessment.

Target Area for the Assessment

The target community for the Hollywood Food Needs Assessment is the general area of Hollywood, defined as the area bounded on the north by Franklin Ave.: the west by La Brea Ave., the south by Melrose Ave., and the east by Vermont Ave. This area is home to 250,000 people, with 51% being immigrants. In spite of its association with glamorous movie stars, Hollywood is a low-income area: 72% of the population are renters. The per capita income of the area is \$17,387, and 22% of residents live under the poverty line. Twelve percent of Hollywood's population are seniors, and nearly one fourth of the nursing homes in the city of Los Angeles are in Hollywood. Of the senior population, nearly 14% live in poverty. At the lowest end of the economic scale there is a homeless population numbering in the hundreds of adults and the largest concentration of homeless teenagers in the U.S.

Methodology

For purposes of the assessment, low income was defined as at or below 185% of poverty or \$16,613 per year for one person, \$34,040 a year for a family of four. HCAN undertook the collection of data through these means:

- Surveys of retail grocery stores in Hollywood, collecting information on the prices of staple items chosen by appropriateness for people in the target populations (for example, peanut butter included as a source of protein for people with no cooking facilities) and the stores' certification to accept food stamps, and other criteria, including the availability and number of different types of produce. The surveys were conducted on one day by ten teams of two persons each, entering each store and marking the data. That in itself was a rewarding process: the teams found stores that wanted to participate in the WIC program, for example, but didn't know how to get involved.
- A community map of grocery stores in the area which was used to crystallize the notion of "Hollywood" at presentations and gave a visual of the number and distribution of stores.
- An inventory of other food outlets (restaurants and fast food stands) in the area, which were too numerous to put on the map. This data was collected at the same time as the survey of grocery stores.
- An inventory of food pantries, hot meal programs, senior congregate meal sites, and other free or low-cost food in the target area. This was made into an informational flyer that has since been widely distributed and used by other large social service agencies and even the police as a referral tool.
- Collecting information from local food pantries on their days, hours of operation, and what was served or offered in bags.
- Focus groups of members of the target populations to attempt to find out if food access was a problem and what was the root of the problem.
- Surveys of the target populations. The surveys were created over a period of weeks by HCAN members, and consultants offered advice. It should be noted that two surveys were used: one was a "pilot" survey of 90 homeless individuals and the second was an improved version used for an additional 67 homeless individuals as well as 76 families and 75 seniors. Unless otherwise specified, results in this report do not include the 90 "pilot" surveys.

The surveys were conducted over three months at the following locations for the target populations:

May 25	Lord's Lighthouse program, First Presbyterian Church	Homeless (Pilot)
June 7	Breakfast Club at St. Thomas Episcopal Church	Homeless
June 25	Hollywood Farmer's Market, Sears Parking Lot	Families
June 26	LA Free Clinic	Homeless/Families
July 6	Lord's Lighthouse program, First Presbyterian Church	Families
July 9	Hollywood Farmer's Market, Sears Parking Lot	Families
July 23	Hollywood Senior Multipurpose Center	Seniors
July 31	Senior Meal Program at city building, Fountain/Wilcox	Seniors
August 4-7	McDonald's, Hollywood, and area parks	Seniors

- Community meetings, which centered around information on food stamps, including the change-over from paper stamps to EBT, as well as the current results of the Assessment. One community meeting was held with each target group. There was one additional

community meeting at the beginning of the project that targeted charitable food providers and was the primary source of information on their programs.

Feb. 8	Project Angel Food	Charitable Food Providers
August 17	Lord's Lighthouse, Presbyterian Church	Homeless
August 28	Hollywood Job Center	Families
September 19	Hollywood Senior Multipurpose Center	Seniors

Grocery Stores

As in most areas, grocery stores in Hollywood range from the new, pricey Ralph's at Hollywood and Western to many small "mom-and-pop" stores and convenience stores. Hollywood does not have the problem recently outlined in South L.A., where healthy or low-fat foods are simply not available, or the problem of downtown where there are literally next to zero grocery stores (a new Ralph's is coming to Flower Street). The results of the grocery survey are therefore less stark and dramatic than they would be in other areas. However, there are a few points to be noted.

The surveyors entered 135 establishments that offered some kind of food; this included many gas stations and other places that had very poor selection. Those with fewer than 3 items that were on the survey list were not subsequently entered into the database. What remains are 80 main sources of food in Hollywood. Of these 80, nine are supermarkets: thirty are considered "local stores", not big enough to be supermarkets or offering all their amenities, but focusing on food. Thirty two are convenience stores---high priced, focusing on liquor or soda and snacks. (Nineteen of those had "liquor" in the name of the store). And nine (of the 80 total) are sundry stores, varying from 99 cent stores to more upscale drugstores like Rite Aid. These are increasingly entering the food market.

Given that we were focusing on accessibility to food stamps and access to fruits and vegetables, the surveyors found that of these 80 outlets surprisingly only 44 accept food stamps. Seven stores did not have signs visible stating that they accepted food stamps. Most of those that didn't take food stamps were liquor stores, convenience stores, and gasoline station shops: food stamps were accepted at most markets that concentrate on food. Only 13 accept WIC coupons (this includes two WIC-only stores.) 29 of the 80 had no produce available whatsoever, and 23 had only 1 to 5 varieties of produce. However, of the remaining stores there was an ample selection of fruits and vegetables. Not surprisingly the more upscale markets had better selections---Ralph's had 260 kinds of produce, Mayfair Market 200 and Pavilion's had 180. However, even Farm Fresh Ranch Market, a favorite of budget-conscious customers had 245 kinds of produce, although Food 4 Less, Ralph's lower-priced market, had only 45.

It is interesting to note that east of our target area, in the community known as Little Armenia, there are quite a number of stores selling fruits and vegetables only. Farm Fresh Ranch Market is located near concentrations of Armenian and Russian immigrants who are very accustomed to eating fruit and shopping for it at produce-only stores.

Although only 19 stores had visible promotion of eating 5 fruits and vegetables a day for better health, the focus groups and surveys would reveal that most people are aware of the contribution of fresh produce to good nutrition.

Some of the survey questions were aimed at finding out if stores were "homeless-friendly" or "senior-friendly". For example stores with microwaves might be places where homeless persons could at least warm their food, if not cook it properly. 23 of the 80 stores had microwaves. These tended to be, of course, the higher priced convenience and liquor stores.

A "senior friendly" store might be one that offers rides or delivery of groceries. 13 of the 80 outlets had this service.

Cleanliness of stores has been a problem plaguing other areas of Los Angeles, but Hollywood generally seems to have clean stores. 15 of the 80 stores were considered "slightly dirty" by the

surveyors, and only 2 were considered out-and-out “dirty”. The rest gave the impression of being clean.

Prices vary dramatically: but in all Hollywood is a place where a person could use food stamps at accessible locations and buy and eat a variety of produce.

In retrospect, grocery policy in Hollywood seems to have little impact on the food access situation. Income and housing costs, or lack of cooking and storage facilities, are far more important factors. Of course some of the stores are higher priced, but there are low-cost alternatives with varying reports on the quality of the food (particularly produce) at these stores.

In addition to the above research, the HCAN decided to survey an area of East Hollywood (not in the original target area) to explicitly see if the switchover to EBT had created any confusion in Armenian grocers in the area. The fear was that all the materials pertaining to the switchover had been in English only and that if grocers had not understood it, they would not have the necessary equipment for EBT. The fears were unfounded; of 33 small grocery outlets surveyed that accepted food stamps, every one had the machine and was prepared for EBT. In fact, the problem was that many had had the machines for months but no customers were using them as yet because food stamp recipients in the Hollywood area will not get their EBT cards until March 2004. The grocers were wondering when the clients would begin using their cards, and some said they would need to be retrained on how to use the EBT machines since a long time had elapsed since their original training.

Restaurants and Fast Food

The scope of work did not allow for an intense analysis of this data, but 175 prepared food outlets were documented in the target area (and this is certainly incomplete) including 24 in the entertainment mall at Hollywood and Highland. Of these, about half are low priced non-sit-down restaurants offering donuts, hamburgers, tacos, pizza, fried chicken or fast-Chinese and fast-Thai food. Astroburger's with its extensive vegetarian menu is an anomaly. Hollywood is certainly a place to go for fast food.

Charitable Food Providers

The assessment team documented a total of seven hot meal or sandwich programs in the target area (or just outside of it), however one of those serves only one time a month. Other programs have started and ended since the beginning of the project in October 2002. Three other programs offer meals only to youth (defined as age 12 to 24): Hollywood is known as a meeting place for homeless youth and has several shelter programs dedicated to them. In addition, the target area has five other programs that offer bags of donated groceries to people. These programs plus a few additional ones that are not in the target area, but are near it, or serve it, were inventoried and placed on a flyer, along with listings of Meals on Wheels programs: senior congregate meal programs (there are three in the area): the Farmer's Market: and basic information on food stamps and WIC.

At the beginning of the assessment, a meeting was held with emergency food providers in the Hollywood area. Those attending included the West Hollywood Food Coalition, the only daily provider of prepared meals for the homeless: the Lord's Lighthouse program of the First Presbyterian Church (serving prepared meals): the Deacon's Cupboard program of the same church (giving bagged groceries to a largely senior population): Project Angel Food, which home-delivers meals to persons with AIDS: and Food on Foot, a largely volunteer organization that does a street meal in Hollywood, the Sunday “Chicken Line” serving El Pollo Loco chicken and other items, including fruit, near the Gay and Lesbian Center. Also attending were representatives of Sustainable Economic Enterprises of Los Angeles (SEE-LA), which operates two farmer's markets in Hollywood and does extensive outreach on food stamps at the markets in collaboration with the LA Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness.

The meeting was designed to introduce the providers to the idea of the Food Needs Assessment and its goals, and invite their help. It was also to attempt to gain insight into some of the basic

questions that led to the assessment, including the sensitive one about the quality and type of donated food in the light of the fact that many poor people have diet related diseases such as diabetes. Much food donated to food pantries is starchy, or salty, or “junk” food.

The Deacon’s Cupboard representative knew that up to 40% of her mostly elderly clients were in fact diabetic, but “special foods are not available at the food bank”. Nonetheless, she was actively pursuing obtaining healthier foods. However, this would involve a budgetary problem unless the foods could be donated. At the time the program was pursuing a contract with California growers to get produce, and getting a commercial refrigerator to store more fresh vegetables.

The West Hollywood and Chicken Line food programs actually already did provide fresh fruit to homeless individuals, and cooked vegetables or salad were provided by the Lord’s Lighthouse and 7th Day Adventist programs. However, they pointed out that they feed people “what they want” because “you cannot afford to waste money by serving something you HOPE they will eat, but in fact do not like.”

The providers didn’t realize that the Farmer’s Market accepted food stamps. Many were also not aware of the WIC and Senior Farmer’s Market Coupon Programs, which provide a large portion of the business at the smaller of the two Hollywood Farmer’s Markets. The Sunday market donates a lot of produce to food pantries, although not to the ones in the area: there are logistical problems, it requires someone committed to take the time to pick it up on Sunday.

The charities had many concerns with how they are perceived by the public, often as “inept” or simply helping people who are “on drugs and alcohol”. They felt it was necessary to get the word out that “not everyone who’s in the food line is homeless”: many are working people only one paycheck away from homelessness. Some charities had been blamed for problems by neighbors who do not like the homeless. Several of them stated that they did tend to see the same clients all the time, and all were concerned with much broader issues than food. Food on Foot has established its own “work for food” program exchanging volunteering for certificates good at stores and restaurants.

Many of the charities found a connection between the lack of peoples’ access to food and “cultural illiteracy”, especially in the case of immigrants: a story was related of a woman whose gas was cut off at her house because she couldn’t understand the gas bill and had let a huge debt accumulate.

The Homeless and At-Risk: Food Access

For the purposes of the survey it was not prudent to limit research to those who were literally living on the street at the time. Most of Hollywood’s homeless are occasionally housed (meaning a roof over the head) in shelters or in low cost “residential” hotels (the Rae-Tan, the Mark Twain, the Gilbert, the Las Palmas) that have no cooking facilities. They may stay in a hotel for two weeks until their money for the month runs out, and then be on the street again. Others are living in apartments in constant danger of eviction. Therefore we use the term “homeless” to mean “homeless or at-risk”, and it covers both people who have been on the streets for years with not even a night or two of shelter, and a large number of people who are occasionally on the street when evicted or broke.

The true “street homeless” of Hollywood number perhaps 500 to 1,000 including people who do not always stay in the area. They can be found at hot meal programs on Saturday mornings at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, slightly west of the target area: on Sunday afternoons at the Lord’s Lighthouse (First Presbyterian) and the so-called Chicken Line: on Wednesday evenings at the 7th Day Adventist Church “Feed Hollywood” program: and on every day near a vacant lot by Sycamore and Romaine, where the West Hollywood Food Coalition offers a prepared meal.

Dependence on food lines is time consuming for the homeless. In the focus group, of six participants, three said they spent two hours a day getting to the meals, waiting in line and eating. The others said one and a half to three hours a day. Making the time to get to a certain meal eats

into time for medical appointments and job interviews. A missed bus or an appointment that runs long can mean going hungry, with nowhere to store food.

Homeless: Produce Consumption

Among the 67 homeless individuals surveyed, insufficient consumption of fruits and vegetables stems from a variety of unmet needs. Although a full 75% of participants understand that eating fruits and vegetables can help prevent illnesses like diabetes, cancer, and high blood pressure, only 10% regularly eat the recommended 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day. An alarming 58% of those surveyed report eating one or fewer servings of fruits and vegetables per day. Despite their understanding that the regular consumption of produce reduces one's risk of disease, homeless individuals often face overwhelming obstacles in both obtaining and preparing fruits and vegetables.

The greatest barriers to adequate produce consumption among the homeless people surveyed include the lack of cooking facilities and information about emergency food sources, receiving emergency food that is low-quality or devoid of nutrition, and excessive prices for fruits and vegetables. Forty percent of participants said that they would eat more produce if more food lines distributed them. One woman surveyed commented on the lack of availability and variety of produce for those receiving emergency food: "You cannot get the fruits and vegetables you want...The homeless places don't give vegetables...they do give carrots. They do give cooked vegetables, but not raw." Another 36% said that they would eat more fruits and vegetables if they had a way to refrigerate or store them, and an additional 25% said their lack of a way to cook produce (vegetables) prevented them from eating more of it.

Homeless: Food Stamp Usage

Although most homeless people are eligible for food stamps and other governmental food assistance programs, many do not take advantage of these benefits. Of the 67 homeless people surveyed, only 37% receive food stamps. 16% had received them before but had been dropped due to sanctions or other reasons and had never re-applied. 15% receive SSI making them ineligible, and 18% had tried to apply but were denied. Although many did not say why they were denied, some listed lack of identification or the ban on post-1996 drug felons. Of the remainder, only 2% said they actually didn't think they would qualify. More felt they didn't need or want to ("too much trouble", "just never crossed my mind").

Homeless: Diet-Related Diseases

Many of the homeless who suffer diabetes or other diet-related diseases expressed frustration at their inability to obtain both the foods necessary to prevent disease as well as foods necessary to manage existing medical problems. Participants frequently described the emergency food they received as high in fat, sugar, and salt. One participant said, "They give you peanut butter and hot dog buns. I mean, come on, give me something nourishing!...They give you candy, cupcakes, doughnuts...Well, that's my breakfast, lunch, and dinner." Only 3% surveyed indicated they had diabetes: the surveys were conducted at food lines and it's possible that persons with diabetes avoid the lines.

A substantial portion of the homeless people surveyed reported consuming fast food several times per week. Twenty-one percent said they eat at fast food restaurants such as McDonald's, Burger King, Popeye's, and Taco Bell almost every day, and an additional 42% said they ate fast food several times per week. When asked why they eat fast food, 49% said replied that fast food is inexpensive, and 55% said that it is easy and convenient. "I like McD's 'cause they got the one dollar value," said one participant. Another said that he liked fast food because it's "hot food you don't have to worry about cooking," a concern of many homeless people who lack cooking facilities.

One woman described McDonald's as "the neighborhood food bank" for those trying to make their last few dollars stretch.

Homeless: What's Missing from the Diet?

Over one half of the homeless/at-risk people surveyed said they wanted more vegetables, and one third indicated more fruit (people could give more than one response). Slightly less than one third wanted more meat to be available, and about 20% desired fish or seafood.

What Would the Homeless Say to the Mayor?

The final question on the survey asked participants what they would tell the Mayor of Los Angeles about food access. Less than half actually answered the question. About 25% said there should be more food lines and better food. Increases in jobs, housing and benefit programs were cited by 10%.

Low-Income Families : Food Access

The low income families in Hollywood targeted by the assessment tend to be working, often undocumented, immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Together with the homeless many families can be found at the Lord's Lighthouse food program on Sundays. Many in this group either should be getting food stamps but are not, or are not eligible due to immigration status. They live in concentrations of apartments just a couple of blocks behind the tourist attractions of Hollywood. There are many building code and landlord issues. There are groups that have already organized families in this area: the Hollywood CAN collaborated with the Santa Monica-Western Residents' Group to conduct the community meeting for families.

Low Income Families: Produce Consumption

Among the families surveyed, the greatest obstacle to adequate produce consumption is lack of information as to where to obtain inexpensive fruits and vegetables of good quality. Only 15% of participants reported eating five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, and the most common reason given for this deficiency was that families simply do not know where to get them. Twenty-seven percent of those surveyed provided this reason, and 15% said more specifically that they don't know of any food lines that give out fruits and vegetables.

The surveys and community meeting indicate that many low-income families lack information about two sources of fresh, affordable produce: farmers' markets and community gardens. Just 38% of survey participants reported buying produce at farmers' markets, and only one person of the seventy-six people surveyed reported obtaining produce from a community garden.

42% of the families said that they ate fast food less than once a month. 20% of the families reported eating at fast food outlets a few times a week. The families surveyed didn't eat fast food as much as the homeless/at-risk group, but more than the seniors.

Low Income Families: Food Stamps

Only 12% of participants in the family survey reported that they currently use the food stamp program. However, at the family community food meeting that focused primarily on educating families about food stamps, 39% of participants expressed interest in applying for food stamps. These statistics coupled with many of the comments made by participants suggest a lack of information about governmental food programs among one of the populations that needs and deserves them the most.

When asked why they had never applied for food stamps, many of those surveyed responded with common misconceptions about the food stamp program and what constitutes eligibility for it. For example, several people said that they had never applied for food stamps simply because they work; they seemed unaware that working people can still be eligible for the program if

their income is still below the required limit. Others said that they didn't think that they would qualify because they are undocumented immigrants; many of these people have children who, as American citizens, are entitled to the benefits of governmental food programs. Without information about eligibility for the food stamp program, many of those who are eligible never receive the benefits they deserve.

Another barrier to food stamp access reflected in survey results is the lack of basic information about how and where to apply. Ten percent of those who attended the family community food meeting said that they have never applied for food stamps because they don't know where to go to begin the process.

Finally, confusion and frustration during the process of applying for food stamps seems to be a common complaint among those surveyed. Some of those who reported having applied for food stamps said that they were denied because the social worker that managed their case "didn't want to support them." Others who were denied from the food stamp program said that they were given no reason as to why they did not qualify. Whether or not these participants do indeed qualify for food stamps, the confusion and frustration that they reported suggests that difficulties in the application process may, in fact, deter qualified people from applying.

Families: What's Missing from the Diet?

29% of families wanted more vegetables but felt they weren't affordable or easily obtainable. 20% listed fruit, and 14% listed fish or seafood as the item they wanted but didn't have enough access to. Families at the focus group said they wanted soy milk, but it was too expensive, or the store they knew that carried it was too far away for it to be convenient to obtain.

What Would Families Tell the Mayor?

16 of the 75 participants had something to tell the Mayor about food access. Only 3 had comments about stores---"we need more projects like Farmer's Markets": "we need stores with better foods without pesticides"---and eight had comments relating to housing programs, rent or shelter programs.

Seniors: Food Access

It is little known that Hollywood has the largest population of seniors of any Los Angeles neighborhood. Many are living in convalescent homes but others are Armenian and Russian immigrants living in housing complexes. There were some interesting discrepancies between the focus groups, done with Armenian and Russian immigrants, and the surveys, most of which were done at congregate meal sites.

The alimentary problems and needs of the seventy-five seniors surveyed differed from those of the homeless people and the families who participated in several ways. First of all, unlike many members of the other two groups, most senior participants reported taking much care and spending much time trying to eat well. For example, a full 55% said that they eat fast food less than once a month, and 73% said that they eat fast food only once a week or even less frequently. The vast majority of those who participated in the senior community food meeting considered their diets to be healthy since they do not usually eat fast food, nor do they buy unhealthy food when they go shopping. Sixty percent of those surveyed said that they only eat snacks or meals that they think are not good for their health once a week or less.

The most apparent barriers to obtaining nutritious food that senior participants face include excessive prices and lack of information about sources of inexpensive food of good quality. Since many of the seniors surveyed have a limited income, they spend much time looking for food bargains and sales. Some reported that shopping takes them almost an entire day since they must shop in several stores in order to find the best prices and sales. Many said that they go to a store even for just one specific food item on sale.

Participants in the senior focus group were Armenian and Russian immigrants. They had little knowledge of options such as senior congregate meal programs and free food programs---where the other seniors were interviewed for the surveys. One focus group participant said he knew of the food pantry but felt degraded and that he was being given old food. Although 51% of survey participants had heard of food stamps, only 9% currently use them. 27% were SSI recipients who would be ineligible. Seniors at the community meeting were surprised to find that they might qualify for food stamps. It was necessary to clarify the difference between SSI, SSDI (Social Security Disability Income) and “regular” Social Security.

Seniors: What Foods Were Missed?

One third of seniors felt that fruit was a food they thought was healthy but couldn't afford or get easily. About 20% listed fish or seafood.

What Would Seniors Ask the Mayor?

Seniors responded in force to this question (47 of 75 responded). Just under half said that food was just too expensive for them. Although the surveys were mostly done at the congregate meal sites, this jibed also with the answers given at the focus groups and community meetings. The cost of housing was often stated as the high ticket item.

Conclusions about the Survey Process

Although valuable information was found out in the surveys, the Coalition and HCAN feel in retrospect that many of the questions asked didn't yield valuable information (for example, at which store people did their most shopping) or were too confusing and may have given inaccurate results. It is important to do very good training with the surveyors so that they are able to probe for clear answers to questions. The focus groups and community meetings gave more clear data about people's true issues with food access. Overall, the survey process was valuable in building trust among different communities, confidence in the community workers, and a sense of the goals of the project.

Recommendations

The LA Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness and the Hollywood CAN believe that addressing housing issues is the most powerful step toward increasing the amount of money that seniors and families have in their food budgets, and enabling homeless people to store and cook food, purchase it in economical quantities and free up their time from the endless “food chase” from line to line. Housing issues take a long time and considerable political support to work on. Increased income is the other obvious and equally difficult solution. Hunger and nutrition questions are always tied in directly with income, and the Assessment confirmed what many already knew.

However, there is still plenty that can be done on the nutrition side to promote and facilitate healthy eating and to enable people to access the food stamp program:

Food Stamps:

Enlist the LA County Department of Public Social Services as a partner, together with the HCAN and other Hollywood organizations such as SEE-LA, in setting up food stamp enrollment workshops at Hollywood senior centers and places where families frequent, to facilitate the process of applying for food stamps and removing bureaucratic hassles.

Increase the number of stores in the Hollywood area that accept food stamps through rigorous promotion, thereby giving low income consumers more options to choose from.

Clear up misinformation about the food stamp program by improving and updating the publication “The People's Guide to Welfare, Health and Other Services in Los Angeles County”, and arranging for wide distribution of this booklet.

Fruit and Vegetable Consumption:

Enable homeless people who use food lines to have more access to fresh fruits and vegetables by arranging donations of produce to area churches and food programs.

Create a Market Basket program that would make fresh fruit available at a low price and build up a habit of eating fresh fruit among its customer. The program could be run in conjunction with large community gardens in Hollywood or adjacent areas one of which has already expressed interest in growing food targeted for Hollywood.

Increase knowledge about healthy eating:

Meet with stores and with free food programs to explore the possibility of carrying more produce and other healthy foods identified in the needs assessment as being unavailable.

Conduct workshops for churches and other agencies currently not operating food programs on

Use the experience of homeless persons who have found solutions to the dilemmas of getting enough healthy food by having them conduct workshops on economical food buying for their peers.

CREDITS

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