

Low-Income Families Learning to Cook

By Olivia M. Hall

In a town that prides itself on its Farmer's Market and manifold dining options, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County (CCE) in Ithaca offers a special cooking class. Targeted at low-income families, the six-session courses aim to improve participants' knowledge and skills in nutrition, meal planning, shopping on a budget, food safety and weight control.

The CCE's four nutrition educators regularly go out into the community to recruit new participants at the Department of Social Services, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, food pantries and even Laundromats around the county. The classes are free for individuals and families who qualify for Medicaid, food-assistance programs such as SNAP and WIC, and similar benefits.

The pool of eligible families for the state- and federally-funded classes has grown in size in recent years. "There has been an increase in the use of SNAP benefits in Tompkins County," says Tina Snyder, nutrition program manager at CCE. According to data from the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, in September of this year 9,104 individuals across 5,035 households in Tompkins County received SNAP benefits worth a total of \$1,246,443. This represents an increase of 3.3 percent (individuals) and 4.5 percent (households) since the same month last year.

Carolynn Jabieski joined the SNAP roster about a year ago. She and her friend Lorna F. Burns were two of the newest participants to show up recently in CCE's Cargill Teaching Kitchen, where most cooking classes are held. Renovated last year with the help of \$250,000 in grants from Cargill, the facility offers a commercial demonstration station, four cooking stations, a sanitation room, a food pantry, laundry facilities and a childcare corner. "This kitchen tops the old kitchen a hundred times over," says Stacy Nembhard, nutrition program educator.

In the kitchen's meeting area, Nembhard sat down with Jabieski and Burns to enroll them in the CCE's Lunch & Learn series. In this course,

students learn about strategies for planning, shopping for and preparing healthy, low-cost meals—and maybe even involving children in the process.

At the beginning of the series, Nembhard usually asks participants what they would like to learn. "Sometimes we work with teen moms who just don't know how to boil water," she says. "Other people come back after a couple of years to refresh what they've learned before. And a lot of people are interested in fruits and vegetables and how to get your kids to eat more of them. So we talk about different ways to tackle those challenges."

During a past Lunch & Learn series, the cooking students worked together to create a healthy smoothie, Nembhard says. "There was a mom that was having difficulties getting her son to eat vegetables. So we came up with a smoothie with spinach, strawberries and plain yogurt that looked and tasted really good. And her child actually loved it and is drinking a smoothie every morning now."

Younger people and homeless families often struggle with access to cooking facilities and therefore frequently rely on convenience food, says Nembhard. "So we show them how you can make stuff in the microwave, how you can get a hot plate. You don't have to spend your food stamps at the gas station or a convenience store."

In the Blubber Burger Activity, participants learn how much fat is in different food items at fast-food restaurants. "We also have them dish out how much sugar is in a milkshake versus what you would make at home," adds Nembhard. "And so they say: 'I can do this; I can make this at home and be healthier, cheaper.'"

At the inaugural meeting of the most recent Lunch & Learn series, the focus was on preparing students for the upcoming hands-on sessions. While participants munched on beef burritos, dietetic intern Rachel Green gave a demonstration on meat safety; she provided instructions on how to buy, cook and store meat in a way that avoids cross-contamination and



Photo by Olivia M. Hall

Jeannie Freese-Popowitch, nutrition program educator, and Rachel Green, dietetic intern, prepare the meal for a Lunch & Learn class.

food-borne illnesses. As an incentive, she handed out pocket meat thermometers.

This coaching results in real behavioral changes, according to surveys that the instructors conduct at the end of each program. In 2011, 432 individuals attended at least six lessons. Among those, 297 were polled in SNAP-funded courses, and most reported that their practices regarding nutrition and food safety had improved or had previously already been acceptable. "We also touch base with them later, give them a call, send them invites to other events," Nembhard says.

The most recent Lunch & Learn series started on Nov. 29, but eligible community members are welcome to join anytime, as long as they commit to attending six classes.

For more information contact CCE's Food and Nutrition Programs at 272-2292.

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