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EFNEP Reaches Refugee Youth Using a Mobile Van

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Abstract: New groups of refugees settled in apartments far from city services. Their children lacked access to organized after-school activities and the opportunity to practice English. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) wanted to reach and teach the young refugees but lacked the staff and budget to do so. This article discusses how the EFNEP formed a partnership with a city parks and recreation department to reach refugee youth while providing organized activities and nutrition education. Educators should learn: what new groups live in their county, where they live, what schools their children attend, and other agencies assisting them.

Introduction

Refugees from Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia settled in apartments far from city services. Their children lacked access to organized after-school activities and the opportunity to practice English. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) wanted to teach the young refugees but lacked the federal funds to do so.

In the 1970's Extension "paraprofessional staff in vans (gave) block-by-block help" in areas following disasters (Paulson, 1973); 35 years later Nevada Extension professionals updated that model and taught parenting and preschool programs to at-risk families using old school buses retrofitted into mobile classrooms (Kock, 2009). This article discusses a similar model to reach refugee youth; the University of Idaho Extension EFNEP formed a partnership with the Boise parks and recreation department and used a mobile van to provide organized physical activities and nutrition education to refugee youth.

The Van

Boise Mayor Dave Bieter received reports about his city's rising childhood obesity rates and noted a growing population of refugee youth who lived in outlying apartments. After meeting with his parks and

recreation staff, he decided that the best way to reach these groups was with a mobile recreation van to provide after-school programs. The Mayor's office provided money to purchase and outfit a van with sports equipment, and the parks and recreation department found money for a half-time employee. At the same time the Southern District EFNEP supervisor knew of the recent growth of young refugees in her region (Fortuny, Capps, Simms, & Chaudry, 2009) but did not have the staff or budget to reach them. In years past EFNEP paraprofessionals taught nutrition lessons to 4-H aged youth (English and Spanish speakers) in a neighboring rural county, but traditional 4-H programs now reached them. After reading an article in a local newspaper about the city's proposed mobile recreation program (Kreller, 2007), she contacted the superintendent for parks and recreation and scheduled a meeting.

During that first meeting the EFNEP supervisor described the mission of the EFNEP youth program, the limited funds EFNEP budgeted for a half-time employee, and the variety of nutrition education materials EFNEP used with school-aged children. She also shared her desire to reach these new low-income refugee youth. At the conclusion of the meeting both identified shared goals and resources, and the potential to hire a full-time employee. The next step was to share their idea with University of Idaho and City of Boise administrators and take steps to forge a partnership.

Shaping the Partnership

Formalizing the partnership took place during the winter of 2007; the final agreement was crafted by the legal departments of the university and the city. The City of Boise took the lead in hiring, supervising, and evaluating the new full-time employee as well as paying the employee's benefits. Also, as part of the agreement, the city would license, register, insure, outfit, and maintain the mobile van. With input from the EFNEP supervisor, the city's human resource department developed a job description that satisfied the city parks and recreation department's needs as well as EFNEP's. Interviews were held in February, and a full-time employee was hired. The enhanced after-school program, referred to thereafter as the Mobile Van Program, began in March 2008.

Collaborating Partners

Today EFNEP supports the partnership by providing funding for one half of the salary of the manager of the Mobile Van Program, money for nutrition education materials, and evaluation of the nutrition education using the EFNEP reporting system. During the summer months when more youth participate, additional part-time city employees assist the Mobile Van Program manager.

Another partner of the Mobile Van Program is the Idaho Foodbank (IF), a regional nonprofit. The IF provides free nutritious snacks to all of the youth who participate. During snack time when the children are seated, the nutrition lessons take place. Lesson topics come from one of the eight chapters of the Jump into Foods & Fitness (JIFF) curriculum developed by Michigan State University Extension; JIFF supplies the research-based nutrition education lessons that complement the various physical activities offered by the Mobile Van Program.

First-Year Results

During FY2008 the Mobile Van spent 2 hours each week at eight parks and four apartments. Participation averaged 50-60 kids per site per week rather than the 15-20 kids anticipated. The superintendent of parks and recreation reflected, "The [Mobile Van] program witness(ed) more participation in the first 10 weeks than it expected for the entire spring and summer (Dryden, 2009)." Other Mobile Van demographics:

- Youth reached—2,129
- Males—53%; females—47%
- Latino—6%
- Asian—2%
- Black—19%
- White—77%
- Grade range—pre-kindergarten to grade 10

One EFNEP impact indicator from the FY2008 EFNEP annual report showed that 724 youth (34%) "now eat a variety of food." Short and simple nutrition messages taught during snack time encouraged the youth to try a new food each week.

Implications for Extension

Audiences and methods for teaching Extension classes continue to change. In order to be relevant and reach new audiences, Extension educators can benefit by forming partnerships to extend their programs to new groups; seldom does one organization have the needed money or staff to do it all by itself. In order to attract new groups to Extension programs, educators need to devote time learning:

- What new groups now reside in their county,
- Where they are living,
- What schools their children attend,
- What other agencies are assisting them, and
- What Extension programs would enhance their lives.

By forming a partnership with Boise's parks and recreation department, EFNEP today is able to reach and teach a new audience, refugee youth.

By playing games, discussing American foods, eating healthy snacks, and talking about making healthy food choices, these young people are trying new and different foods, making friends where they live, practicing their English, and making the transition to becoming American (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Four Youth Grin as They Head Off to Play Soccer. EFNEP Funds the Nan Visits.



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