Obesity Prevention success stories

Association of State Public Health Nutritionists

Lewis Clarke, MPH
New York's Locally Grown Produce Initiative

In early 2012, *Lewis Clarke, MPH, received news that he would be receiving a one-time $2 million allocation for New York State's Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP). Mr. Clarke is the Director of the New York State Department of Health's Bureau of Nutrition Risk Reduction, which includes the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, the Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables SNAP-Ed Project and HPNAP. Lewis and the Bureau's team of public health nutritionists, including fellow ASPHN members Danielle Quigley and Lisa Borden, came together to plan how to use this one-time funding. Together they developed the Locally Grown Produce Initiative.*

Through this Initiative, the Department sought to improve the quality of food distributed through its Emergency Food Relief Organization (EFRO) network of food banks and emergency food programs. The Initiative also sought to increase the amount of fresh produce that the relief organizations purchase from growers in New York State. The Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program funds the EFRO Network.

For the past 30 years, HPNAP has provided funds to improve the quality of food distributed to an estimated 2,400 emergency food programs (EFPs), including food pantries, soup kitchens and emergency shelters, in the state. These EFPs serve more than 200 million meals each year to people in need. However, 2011-2012 data showed that only 23 percent of all HPNAP fresh produce purchases were from in-state growers.

With its additional funding, HPNAP provided eight regional food banks with funds to purchase produce grown in New York State. The food banks had a number of options for how they procured the locally-grown fruits and vegetables distributed by their member agencies to EFP clients. They could purchase produce directly from local farmers, buy their produce from food vendors, purchase Health Bucks to distribute to EFP clients to use at participating farmers' markets, order produce to be delivered directly to EFPs, and/or award mini-grants for EFPs to purchase produce directly from farmers in their areas. HPNAP stipulated that the food banks spend all of their funding by June 2013.

When EFPs receive fresh fruits and vegetables that are at the end of their shelf-life, recipients are likely to discard the produce quickly without even tasting it. The Locally Grown Produce Initiative sought to offer fresh, high

Pictured: Lewis Clarke, MPH

About Lewis

Lewis H. Clarke, III, MPH has more than 29 years of experience with public health programs in the New York State Department of Health. Lewis is currently the Director of the Bureau of Nutrition Risk Reduction and the Director of the New York State Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). He is the Vice President for the CSFP Board. Lewis also has directed the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program for more than 25 years. Mr. Clarke is a graduate of Princeton University and completed a master's level curriculum in public health through the inaugural program of the State University of New York and New York State Department of Health's School of Public Health.

quality produce so that clients would be more likely to accept and eat these fruits and vegetables. The hope was that clients would then purchase locally-grown produce on their own. The Initiative also served as a vehicle to pilot new and innovative models for increasing access to locally-grown produce, thereby bridging the gap between farmers and underserved New Yorkers.

Successes and Major Outcomes

As a result of the Initiative, the percent of HPNAP funds spent on New York State-grown fresh produce in 2012 – 2013 increased to 55.7 percent, compared to 23 percent in the two previous years. That meant that more low-income, food insecure New Yorkers had access to fresh, high quality produce. By increasing access, participants are more likely to consume locally grown produce and potentially purchase it on their own, both positive behavior changes towards greater health. Ultimately, improving the diets of this population will likely contribute to a decline in obesity and related chronic diseases. In addition, the Initiative injected more money into the state's farm economy through innovative partnerships with local farmers, farmers markets, and vendors distributing New York State-grown produce. The food banks purchased produce from 97 farmers and 75 farmers' markets.

Although the direct impact is difficult to quantify, anecdotal information from contract and program monitoring and site visits indicate that the additional fresh produce was very popular with food bank recipients. The regional food banks were so invested in the project that their locally grown produce purchases exceeded the $2 million additional allocation. The food banks re-directed $990,000 in HPNAP funding to buy more in-state produce that they would have otherwise used to purchase other types of food and produce. In total, the food banks purchased nearly 7 million pounds of New York State-grown produce.

Through this Locally Grown Produce Initiative, HPNAP expanded its reach, cultivated new relationships and laid the groundwork for food banks to continue to purchase produce from area growers to improve the health of their high-need populations across the state.

Findings and Lessons Learned

The food banks piloted a number of new approaches to increase access to local, fresh produce in the emergency food network and to support the state's farm economy. Three food banks worked with the state's Farmers' Market Federation to purchase and distribute Health Bucks to food bank clients to purchase locally grown produce at participating farmers' markets. Two food banks offered mini-grants to EFPs to purchase locally grown produce themselves. Other food banks piloted Community Supported Agriculture

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If you would like to find out more about New York's Locally Grown Produce Initiative, you can contact Lewis at **518-402-733 or Lewis.Clarke@health.ny.gov**.

programs, among other models for purchasing produce directly from farmers. Letting the food banks determine their own strategies was a great strength of the project.

A key component of the Initiative's success was building relationships with a variety of partners. These new partnerships helped to expand the reach of the Initiative and opened up additional opportunities to make a difference.

From its evaluation of the Locally Grown Produce Initiative, the New York State Health Department developed a resource guide with best practices and innovative models to increase access to local, fresh produce. The food banks use this guide to help them implement new programs across the state. Lewis and his colleagues are optimistic that health departments in other states can adapt these programs for their populations.

Challenges

Although the additional state funding was for the July 1, 2012-June 30, 2013 fiscal year, HPNAP did not receive the funds until later in the summer. As a result of this delay, the regional food banks were not able to make their locally grown produce purchases during the growing season that summer. The food banks had to be more creative to complete their purchases by the end of the 2012-13 fiscal year on June 30.

ASPHN in Action

ASPHN is a non-profit membership organization that provides state and national leadership on food and nutrition policy, programs and services aimed at improving the health of our population. Our vision is to create new environmental norms where healthy eating and active living are the easy and natural choices for all Americans.

At ASPHN, we build our members' skills as public health nutritionists by providing key resources and professional development.

To learn more about ASPHN, please visit us on the web at **www.asphn.org**.

The Important Role of the Public Health Nutritionist

The state's public health nutritionists played a critical role in contributing to the success of the initiative. Lewis Clarke, along with Danielle Quigley, Lisa Borden and other public health nutritionists on the HPNAP team, brought to the project a depth of knowledge about state contracting procedures and the emergency food network operations. These nutritionists are skilled in offering technical assistance to the food banks to improve the quality and accessibility of produce distributed in the network.

With their tool box of best practices and evidence-based strategies, the team strategized ways to build partnerships with government agencies, grassroots organizations, the food banks and local farmers. The team developed the options for how the eight regional food banks could use the funds, and they provided technical support to the food banks to successfully implement the project.

The team also fostered interaction among food banks and state contract managers to help them share new ideas. The nutritionists' resources and assistance helped the contractors to administer the locally grown produce funds in an effective, cost efficient manner.

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