As a public health nutritionist with the New York State Department of Health, Danielle Quigley has played a key role in the Department’s successful Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables Program (JSY).

About Just Say Yes

Launched in 1997, Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables is a SNAP-Ed nutrition education initiative with the goal of preventing overweight and obesity and reducing chronic disease through the promotion of increased fruit and vegetable consumption. Through nutrition education workshops and food demonstrations, JSY works to ensure low-income families in New York eat nutritious foods, make the most of their food budgets and prepare foods in a safe manner. A team of Registered Dietitians and public health nutritionists provide nutrition classes using USDA-approved lesson plans. They provide recipe demonstrations and give out recipes to show workshop participants how to prepare fruits and vegetables.

JSY is a partnership between the USDA, Office of Temporary Disability and Assistance (OTDA), New York State Department of Health’s Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, in addition to partnerships with WIC and the Summer Food Program.

JSY includes two initiatives to improve the health and nutritional status of low-income families in New York State:

- **Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables** is a collaboration between the New York State Department of Health and eight food banks in New York State. Thirteen public health nutritionists deliver comprehensive nutrition education activities across the state at food pantries, shelters, soup kitchens and community-based organizations serving low-income populations, agencies, WIC and Summer Food Program sites. Each nutritionist offers monthly workshops at twelve to fifteen sites each year.

- **The Stellar Farmers’ Market Program**, launched in 2008, is a collaboration between the New York State and the New York City Departments of Health. The goal of this program is to attract more

About Danielle

Danielle joined the Just Say Yes Program in 2002 as a nutrition educator. She taught nutrition workshops in 23 upstate counties from Rockland County to the Franklin and Clinton counties neighboring the Canadian border. Danielle thoroughly enjoyed being in the field and working directly with program participants.

In 2006, Danielle was promoted to contract manager, working directly with the food banks around the state. In 2011, she became the JSY Program Director. In that role, Danielle writes and implements the grant for the Program. She oversees the program’s contractors and conducts strategic planning for the program with other Unit staff.

Danielle has two children, ages three and four, and she loves Zumba!
residents to farmers’ markets in low-income neighborhoods by offering a variety of healthy activities, and re-envisioning markets as not just a place to buy produce but also a venue to learn about fruits and vegetables and how to prepare them, and a place where residents can sign up for food assistance programs.

At these markets, public health nutritionists present workshops on the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables — as well as how to cook with fruits and vegetables — at farmers’ markets in targeted low income communities. Thirty-six part-time nutritionists (20 FTEs) conduct workshops at farmers’ markets in New York City. The Stellar Farmers’ Market program is expanding in 2013 from fifteen to eighteen markets. In 2013, the New York State Department of Health will further expand the initiative and pilot workshops and demonstrations at urban farmers’ markets located in Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse.

In both initiatives, nutrition educators focus on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, improving healthy eating behaviors and food budgeting skills, and keeping food safe. Classes typically run for 30-60 minutes and include interactive discussions as well as recipe demonstrations and food sampling. In addition, the nutrition educators give participants incentives such as Health Bucks (coupons to buy fruits and vegetables) or kitchen gadgets to help them prepare healthy fruit or vegetable recipes.

The nutrition educators are trained in how to meet participants’ needs and how to interact effectively with them. These nutritionists are passionate about what they do, and they bring their passion to helping their clients eat more healthily.

Just in 2011, these two initiatives reached about 27,000 people. The Department and its project partners are working now to expand Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables so they can achieve even greater environmental changes to support obesity prevention activities and increased access to healthier foods.
How was it developed?

Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables came out of the New York State’s Eat Well Play Hard Program. This program addresses childhood obesity and reduces long-term risks for chronic disease through the promotion of targeted dietary practices and increased physical activity.

To develop Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables, the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program conducted focus groups and market research with food pantry clients to determine what type of program would make it easier for them to purchase and prepare healthier foods. The focus groups and research showed that fruit and vegetable consumption rates were extremely low in this population and that food demonstrations would be most helpful and meaningful to them. Focus group participants said that they wanted recipes for food that are low-cost and easy to prepare.

Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables emerged from that research. USDA initially funded the Program with four nutritionists who provided nutrition education in four counties in upstate New York. Since then, the program has expanded to thirteen full-time nutritionists who provide services in the emergency food network and an additional 20 full-time nutritionists in the farmers’ market project.

Danielle says that with strong partnerships with food relief organizations, other states could easily implement a project like Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables. The program’s materials and messages are relevant everywhere, as all states use the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate principles to encourage healthy eating.

Lessons Learned

Danielle believes that one of the keys to JSY’s success was that people who developed the program sought input from low-income New Yorkers. The Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables team concluded that the most effective way to reach their target population was to conduct nutrition education workshops at sites within the community where participants access services. They also observed that strong program evaluation is critical to capture project successes and, just as important, to identify areas that can be improved. In addition, they learned that it would have been beneficial to incorporate a curriculum for children in the workshops as well.

Danielle believes that the nutrition educators are key to the program’s success. They focus on assessing the needs of the state’s low-income communities and working with that population to meet those very real needs.

Public Health Nutritionists Are Essential

Public health nutritionists are professionals with academic training and experience in both public health and nutrition, who are often registered dietitians with advanced degrees. Public health nutritionists possess diverse skills and expertise ranging from nutrition science...to food systems and food environments...to finance and grant management.

More information on the role and value of public health nutritionists is available in ASPHN’s briefs on The Role of Public Health Nutrition in Obesity Prevention and Improving the Nutritional Well-Being of Women, Children and Families.