Obesity Prevention success stories

Christina Thi, MPH, RD, LD
Texas’ Farm to Work Program

Now in its eighth year, Texas’ Farm to Work Program connects farmers to consumers right at their workplace. Employees can order locally-grown produce each week from the Farm to Work website. Each week, farmers deliver a basket full of fresh seasonal produce. The weekly basket, with a variety of fruits and vegetables, costs $20 – $25. Employees meet the farmers and learn tips for preparing their produce.

The Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) launched the Farm to Work Program in 2007 as a wellness benefit for employees at the Department’s main campus in Austin. DSHS brought in two key partners right from the beginning, the Texas Sustainable Food Center and WebChronic Consulting. Farm to Work is now active in 48 worksites in Austin as well as San Antonio, with several sites in Houston. Christina Thi, MPH, RD, LD, is DSHS’s lead staff person for the program. Christina is the Obesity Prevention Coordinator with DSHS’s Community and Worksite Wellness Program.

SHS initiated Farm to Work with the goals of:

- Increasing access to and consumption of fruits and vegetables for employees and their families.
- Improving participants’ and their families’ health and reducing chronic disease.
- Supporting a healthy work environment.
- Expanding opportunities for local farmers to sell their produce directly to consumers.

DSHS provided initial funding for the program. The Department also helped design the program so that it would work well for its employees. DSHS staff worked to address regulatory hurdles, and they developed program procedures. DSHS currently conducts periodic evaluations and helps publicize the program, among other activities.

The Sustainable Food Center (SFC) recruited farmers and provided training and support, both for the farmers and for the worksite wellness coordinators. SFC staff continues to play that role. SFC also provides overall coordination of the program. WebChronic developed and manages the program's specialized online platform.

About Christina

Christina has been with DSHS since January 2012. She started her career as an outpatient dietitian working with patients who have diabetes and heart disease risk factors. She was thrilled to join DSHS’s Community and Worksite Wellness Program. Policy, systems and environmental approaches to preventing chronic diseases are her main interest and passion as a public health nutritionist.

When she’s not hard at work promoting wellness initiatives, Christina enjoys traveling, cooking, eating out, reading, and getting out in nature.
SFC is a nonprofit organization based in Austin. Its mission is to strengthen the local food system and improve access to nutritious, affordable food. SFC connects growers with consumers through farmers’ markets and farm-to-school programs as well as farm-to-work. SFC also provides training and resources to help schools and neighborhoods start community gardens. SFC also runs the Happy Kitchen, a nationally-recognized cooking and nutrition education program. Evan Driscoll is SFC’s Farm Direct Projects Manager. He works closely with Christina Thi at DSHS.

When a worksite is interested in joining the program, the site’s wellness coordinator submits an application to Evan at SFC. Evan then surveys the site’s employees to determine if there is enough demand at the site. If there is, Evan trains the worksite coordinator to navigate the program’s website, and they outline on-site logistics. One of the advantages of the program is that all ordering and payment is online. Employees receive an automatic email each week inviting them to order. The website also offers recipes, information on the farmers, and a page for participants to give their feedback.

Evan also works directly with the farmers, including inspecting their operations. Building solid relationships with the growers is a vital component of the program. Evan helps the farmers understand how the program works, and he counsels them on how to plan for weekly fluctuations in the ordering amounts.

Successes and Major Outcomes

The Farm to Work Program has expanded and grown each year except for one, both in sales and in participants. In the 2013 – 2014 market year, the program brought in $228,000, a 27 percent increase over the previous year. That same year, more than 3,800 employees purchased upwards of 10,000 produce baskets from seven participating farmers. The program has always had a waiting list for new worksites that want to come on board.

Over the years, the Farm to Work program has gained recognition from major national organizations. In 2012, CDC-DNPAO featured the program in its 2012 Stories from the Field. DNPAO also included the program in its listings of Farm to Where You Are programs and Communities Putting Prevention to Work resources. In 2013, Center TRT recognized the program as an emerging intervention. The National Association of Chronic Disease Directors included the program in its Success Stories from States and Territories and in its Celebrating Change Community Success Stories.

In 2009, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) honored Farm to Work with its Vision Award. With this award, ASTHO...
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recognizes outstanding state health department initiatives that use creative approaches to address public health needs.

“We are making local foods convenient for people,” Christina said. “We have created a connection between worksites and farmers that did not exist before. And we are supporting our local economies,” she added. “Plus, employees value having their employers’ support for healthy eating.”

Here’s what some program participants have said:

“The quality of produce is better than what I can find at the store at a similar cost.”

“I feel great about supporting small, local farms, preferably organic!”

“I like to learn to cook what’s seasonally available.”

Challenges

One of the challenges that Evan and Christina face in helping the program to run smoothly and to work well for both farmers and buyers is the fluctuations from week to week in the order volumes. To meet this challenge, Evan works with farmers to develop strategies to meet the changing demand. At the same time, Evan strives to bring on worksites that will have consistent orders and sales.

Keeping up with workplace demand has also been a challenge. The program has had a waiting list since its inception. Evan promotes the program to growers at farmers’ markets and other venues. He is committed, though, to only working with farmers who are very interested in and excited about participating.

Setting up the Farm to Work website and the online ordering and payment system was a big challenge at the program's start. Nothing existed like what DSHS and SFC envisioned for the website. WebChronic developed the program’s website and has refined it over time.

Also at the start, DSHS had to address legal concerns about introducing a Farm to Work program at a state agency. Food service vendors operating at state agencies must be licensed by the state's Business Enterprises of Texas Program, which operates under the authority of the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act. To overcome this hurdle, farmers must sign a liability waiver. In the waiver, farmers agree to limit the items they deliver to raw, unprepared produce.
Findings and Lessons Learned

“We are meeting our goal of increasing Texans’ health and wellness.” Christina said. From DSHS’s surveys and evaluations, the Department has concluded that program participants are eating more fruits and vegetables than non-participants and that the prevalence of pre-diabetes, diabetes and obesity is lower in program participants than non-participants.

Christina said that the keys to the program’s success are the online ordering system and partnering with a nonprofit like SFC. SFC already had strong relationships with farmers and a great reputation. She said that, as an added benefit, the consumer-driven recipe database has created a sense of community and identity among program participants.

SFC works with businesses and organizations to replicate the Farm to Work program at their own work sites. SFC offers Program Replication Training as well as on-site consultations.

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The Important Role of the Public Health Nutritionist

Christina said that having a registered dietitian as the face of the program lends it great credibility. Plus, as a public health nutritionist, Christina brings an understanding of the importance of supplying nutritious local produce directly to where people are as a critical strategy to improving health outcomes. In addition, as a public health nutritionist, Christina brings a systems perspective as well as an equity perspective to the state’s Community and Worksite Wellness Program.

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.