

The Los Angeles Fresh Food Access Project: An Assessment of a Pilot Spanish Language Community Food Assessment and Workshop Highland Park (Los Angeles, CA) September 2002

Obesity, overweight and diet-related health problems have climbed to epidemic levels. Many of the environmental factors of modern society lead to sedentary lifestyles and increased consumption of fast food, high fat, high sugar, and/or salty snacks, and other unhealthful foods. Risk factors for obesity are amplified for those living in low-income communities where access to fresh fruits and vegetables at reasonable prices is limited and where fast food restaurants and snack-filled liquor and convenience stores are the primary food retail outlets. In a survey of a two square mile area of South Central Los Angeles, residents found more than 50 fast food restaurants, no farmers' markets or community gardens, and only one sit-down restaurant. Farmers' markets, community gardens, and farm-to-school and after-school programs can provide Los Angeles communities with access to fresh and healthy fruits and vegetables. Improving access to these types of programs will also promote local self-reliance and neighborhood community building. In an effort to involve residents of these communities in identifying and addressing food quality and access issues, the Center for Food and Justice has completed a pilot community food assessment and fresh food access workshop in Highland Village, a low-income predominately Latino neighborhood of Los Angeles.

Community Food Assessment

After initial discussions with a community organization with which the Center has previously worked, Highland Park was identified for the first Spanish-language community food assessment and fresh food access workshop. The Highland Park community is predominantly Latino (84%) and low-income (median household income of \$35,000 annually). The Center's Spanish-speaking project coordinator initiated a collaboration with Hathaway Family Resource Center and Planned Parenthood to identify promotoras (Spanish-speaking community health educators) interested in participating in the project. Three Spanish-speaking promotoras were recruited to assist with the design and implementation of a community food assessment in Highland

Village, a 91-unit low-income family housing complex in Highland Park. Forty-seven assessments were successfully conducted (54% of the 87 occupied units) during in-person visits to each residential unit in the complex.

Issues relevant to the community residents were identified through questions covering the following topics: access and need for more healthy food outlets in the community and in schools, where food is currently purchased and why, frequency and types of fruits and vegetables currently prepared/eaten, ways in which the community feels healthy/fresh food access could be improved, and awareness of and interest in impending changes in the Food Stamp Program. In addition to consulting with Highland Village residents regarding food access issues, the local area food outlets of all types were mapped and labeled for distribution to the residents at the workshop.

Fresh Food Access Workshop

The information gleaned from the assessment was used to tailor the follow-up nutrition education and fresh food access workshop, held at Highland Village on Saturday, September 7, 2002. Forty-eight residents and other community members attended the 5-hour Spanish-language workshop in the Community Center. The workshop sessions included overviews and group discussions of the Food Stamp Program and Electronic Benefits Transfer system, school meal programs (School Breakfast, Lunch, and After-school Snack Programs), general and child nutrition, community gardens and farmers' markets. During the workshop, 67 resident children and youth participated in the children's activities: yarn and glue crafts, mosaic stepping stones, coloring, reading, and planting seeds. Information tables provided participants with an array of Spanish-language resources including recipes, seeds, and nutrition education materials and program information from the University of California Cooperative Extension, the Center for Food and Justice, Hathaway Family Resources, the California Hospital, LA Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, and the California Food Policy Advocates.

The Los Angeles Fresh Food Access Guide

The workshop was also the first venue for distribution of the Center's newly completed Spanish-language version of the LA Fresh Food Access Guide. The guide is designed to be a means to inform residents, especially in low-income communities, of fresh food resources including local

community gardens and farmers' markets in the city of Los Angeles. It is also intended to provide the needed resources to develop neighborhood gardens, farmers' markets, and fresh school and after-school food programs. This includes providing information about the efforts currently taking place in LA to expand access to nutritious food in low-income communities. In order to reach more of LA's large Spanish-speaking population, the Center has translated the guide into Spanish. The guide provides nutrition and fresh food access education information and highlights local fresh food resources.

Next Steps Towards Increasing Fresh Food Access

The assessment and workshop were designed to raise community awareness about local food and nutrition issues and to increase community advocacy for access to fresh food in Los Angeles communities and schools. This and similar workshops in other Los Angeles communities could play a major role in extending healthy food advocacy to low-income communities. The Spanish-language workshop, organizing by the Healthy School Food Coalition among Latino parents in support of a soda ban in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and preliminary interest in the Spanish-language Fresh Food Access Guide indicate a strong potential in the development of a powerful Latino voice for fresh food access. The healthy food movement has long been criticized as a middle class movement helping promote a type of niche market. The experience of the Center for Food and Justice and its fresh food access programs suggest otherwise.

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