

OSU partners to encourage healthy eating habits for homeless youth and their families

In the 2016-17 school year nearly 9 percent of the students in Coos Bay School District (CBSD) reported being homeless, including about 130 high school students. For these students, cooking healthy meals isn't always a top priority.

The SNAP-Ed obesity prevention and nutrition education program, offered through Oregon State University's Coos County Extension Service, partnered with the CBSD's school-based program, ARK Project, to aim to change that by offering nutrition and cooking classes to these students and their families to encourage healthy eating habits. Coos County Extension provided an evidence-based curriculum on how to cook and shop on a limited budget. They launched the pilot program in May.

The curriculum is called Plan, Shop, Save, Cook. It blends in Food Hero, an OSU Extension social marketing campaign that focuses on planning creative, low-cost, healthy meals that include fruits and vegetables. All recipes featured non-perishable foods and the meals were prepared in 12-inch electric skillets. The goal is for the students and their families to be able to cook meals using ingredients that come off a food pantry shelf.

Allison Harris, Nutrition Program Coordinator for Coos/Curry Extension Service, taught one series for homeless/unaccompanied high school students and one series with families. Melinda Torres, CBSD Homeless Liaison/ARK Program Manager, recruited youth and families experiencing homelessness to participate in the pilot program.

"We also gave the participants a nutrition education reinforcement at the end of each class, such as a reusable grocery bag with healthy eating and food safety messages on it," Harris said. "The reinforcements are given to help participants maintain the healthy eating behaviors that they have learned in class. Behavior-change research indicates that when others see a message to eat fruits and vegetables, it may influence their choices as well."

At the end of the series all participants received a new electric skillet provided by the Coos Bay Lions Club.

One of the students said of the classes, "I enjoyed learning about how easy it was to shop for food and cook. I've always viewed cooking as difficult and complicated but this class gave me the confidence to go out of my comfort zone and cook and try new things."

Another said, "The most important thing I learned from this class is that anyone can cook and eat healthy. It's all about the choices we make. Cooking is not that hard and shopping for the right food isn't hard either. But learning how to take care of yourself and feed yourself the right food is important."

Five students and three families completed the program. Organizers plan to continue and expand the classes in the 2017-18 school year thanks to the Bay Area Hospital Community Foundation.

"This class was great for youth and families that are experiencing similar situations and this program showed that they are not alone," Torres said. "Plus, all the participants got to work with each other and build relationships. Increasing their knowledge and confidence really does make a difference and without this opportunity they might not have increased their skills."

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Two students use healthy ingredients to make a meal.