



Community Food Mentors Strengthen Self Sufficiency Skills of Food Pantry Users

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Introduction

Maine ranks first in New England for food insecurity. Maine's Master Gardener Volunteers grow and glean over 200,000 pounds of produce for food pantries and soup kitchens each year. Making free produce available does not, however, guarantee that it will be used. A 2013 survey of Maine food pantry managers indicated that many clients did not take fresh produce because they lacked knowledge and confidence regarding how to use it.

Purpose

The objective of the Community Food Mentors program is to improve food self-sufficiency skills of food pantry users through on-site peer-to-peer education.

MONTH	FEATURED PRODUCE	SKILLS TAUGHT	SAMPLE RECIPES
July	Kale	Washing and Storing Produce	Kale cranberry stir fry Kale white bean soup Kale chips
August	Summer squash	Storing Leftovers Safely	Garden ratatouille Zucchini lasagna Garden skillet sizzle
September	Onions, Tomatoes	Freezing Produce	Chili Roasted tomato and spinach pasta
October	Carrots, Winter Squash	Roasting Root Vegetables, Preparing Winter Squash	Carrot spinach quiche Tropical carrot salad Glazed butternut squash

Discussion and Implications

With training and support from Cooperative Extension, volunteer peer educators can effectively engage emergency food recipients at food pantries to improve their diets and food self sufficiency skills by using more fresh produce when preparing meals.

Methods

1. Community Food Mentors (CFMs) undergo specialized training in basic nutrition, food safety, cooking & preserving fresh produce, poverty awareness and cultural sensitivity.



2. Master Gardener Volunteers grow crops specifically earmarked for CFM distribution at food pantries throughout the growing season.



3. Community Food Mentors demonstrate food preparation techniques, provided recipes and taste tests, and distribute free produce at food pantries during regular emergency food distribution times.



4. To determine long term program impact, emergency food recipients were surveyed six months after participating in CFM demonstrations and receiving donated produce.

Results

After six years, data show that clients made positive shifts in food selection behaviors and food resource management skills. Food pantry managers have asked us to continue our programming since its inception in 2014, as their facilities have been transformed from simple food distribution sites to learning locations. Community Food Mentors have formed powerful bonds with food pantry clients.

Data from participants surveyed 6 months after intervention, 2016 – 2018, n = 80

