Colorado State University Cooperative Extension programs are helping Coloradans

- improve their food-resource-management skills by stretching food dollars and making healthful food choices;
- increase food security and improve overall health of the state’s limited-resource populations.

Helping Colorado Families Stretch Food Resources and Improve Nutrition

One of the most disturbing aspects of life in a wealthy country like America is the persistence of hunger — the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to sufficient food due to poverty or constrained resources, which can lead to malnutrition over time. While starvation seldom occurs in this country, children and adults do go hungry and chronic under-nutrition does occur when financial resources are limited. Many established food programs help provide a safety net for many low-income families, but the mental and physical changes that accompany inadequate food intake can have harmful effects on learning, development, productivity, physical and psychological health, and family life. A 2002 U.S. Census Bureau survey revealed that 11.1% of U.S. households were “food insecure,” or lacking resources to access enough food to fully meet basic needs. Adults in food-insecure households often run out of food, or reduce the quality of food their family eats, or feed their children unbalanced diets, or skip meals so their children can eat, in order to adjust to the economic problems that threaten the adequacy of their family’s diet. The survey showed that those at greatest risk of being hungry or on the edge of hunger live in households that are headed by a single woman, are Hispanic or Black and have incomes below the poverty line. Also, households with children experience food insecurity at more than double the rate for households without children. “Food security” — a term used to describe assured access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life — is the most basic of human needs.

The Costs...

- Food insecurity occurs whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods is limited or uncertain. In 2002, 12 million U.S. households (more than 35 million individuals) reported limited access to sufficient food because of inadequate resources. In Colorado, 436,000 people including 182,000 children were food insecure; of these, 42,000 experienced hunger.
- Hunger has a big effect on children’s health — a Food Research & Action Center survey showed that hungry children from low-income families suffer from two to four times as many individual health problems, including fatigue, irritability, and inability to concentrate as low-income children whose families do not experience food shortages.
- The Census Bureau reports that a family of two adults and one child in Colorado must make $20,448 per year to be self-sufficient. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that a minimum-wage worker must work 133 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom apartment in an urban area like Denver. At this income level, after other payments, a family has only a few dollars left for food each month.

Colorado State University Cooperative Extension, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, provides Nutrition Education Programs that target at-risk audiences most likely to be undernourished, in poor health or with poor nutrition habits, and in need of assistance.
The Payoff...

- Administered by Cooperative Extension and funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture through the Colorado Department of Human Services Food Stamp Program, the Colorado Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP) primarily addresses the problem of food insecurity among limited-resource Coloradans who receive food stamps. The Colorado FSNEP Program is committed to providing at-risk audiences such as children, the elderly, immigrants, emergency food assistance participants and welfare recipients with nutrition, food safety and food-resource-management education aimed at promoting food security and overall health. Each year, the program reaches more than 6,000 adults & seniors through classes, demonstrations & other methods, and 17,000 children through child care & school programs.

- The Adult FSNEP program has improved the nutritional well-being of low-income Coloradans and increased their ability to manage food resources – 88% of adult FSNEP graduates reported a positive change in their eating habits and improvement in nutrition practices; 77% showed improvement in one or more food-resource-management practices (planning meals, not running out of food, using a shopping list, etc.); also 64% showed improvement in food safety practices.

- 10% of all Americans or 26.9 million people receive food stamps; 60% are children or elderly. The average length of food stamp usage is two years, and half of new recipients use them six months or less. In 2002 in Colorado (last available data), federal funding for food stamps contributed $165,442,169 to the state’s economy.

- Hunger relief advocates say the best assistance is helping people help themselves. Cooperative Extension’s Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), funded for 34 years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is designed to teach limited-resource families with young children how to make healthy food choices, stretch their food resources, and use safe food-handling practices. National EFNEP data reveal impressive improvements in participants’ food-related behaviors – more than 100,000 “graduates” across the country show that 83% improved one or more food-resource-management practices; 87% improved one or more nutrition practices; and 67% improved one or more food safety practices. EFNEP has also proven effective in increasing the dietary intake levels of six key nutrients that are often limited in the diets of low-income individuals (protein, iron, calcium & vitamins A, C, B-6), increasing the servings of grains, and decreasing consumption of fats and sodium.

- One of the many consequences of poverty is the lack of money for food. Learning “food resource management” is key to stretching food dollars and making healthful food choices. As a result of what they learned in the programs, FSNEP participants reported an average savings of $75.64 on monthly food bills; EFNEP graduates reported an average savings of $52.80 per month on food bills.