



# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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## **Hungry for Knowledge:** An Interactive Nutrition Class for the Homeless by Justin Fanslau, The HEALTH Project and Jenny Holliday, Sacramento Hunger Commission

**O**n any given night in Sacramento, 15,000 people are left without stable, long-term housing. In many cases, emergency food services that are available to these homeless individuals are not effectively used due to exhaustion, location of facility and the sometimes rude and brusque manner in which they are treated. For those who are able to reach the food closets and retrieve a bag or two of food, the next challenge becomes preparing the food, much of which requires cooking. As many homeless people do not have access to a microwave, much less a kitchen, cooking can be impossible. The individual is then prone to binge on the ready to eat foods they are given—often cakes, cookies, donuts and other sweets. These foods are always high in sugar, fat, and refined carbohydrates and certainly do not provide adequate nutrition.

In a recent attempt to reach out to the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Hotel residents of downtown Sacramento, a diabetes screening was held. The average rate for those testing positive for this chronic potentially deadly disease was significantly higher than that of the state rate. The majority of these men and women depend on local food closets once a month to get the food they need to survive. The food closet most often used is located at least four miles away from these SRO Hotels, making accessing this social service program very difficult. To combat this barrier, the SRO Downtown Collaborative sought funding to provide a van and staff to transport up to 6 residents every Tuesday to the food closet. Although this solution was helpful, it was still not meeting the full needs of all the residents.

Through collaboration between the SRO Service Center, the Sacramento Hunger Commission, the HEALTH Project, and the Central Downtown Food Basket located at St. John's Lutheran Church, an attempt has been made to further meet the SRO residents' needs. Staff from the SRO Service Center, the HEALTH Project and the Hunger Commission began to meet to discuss the ongoing crisis of hunger, poor nutrition, and lack of access, and determine how to best meet the needs of the SRO residents. This partnership was significantly strengthened when the Central Downtown Food Basket became involved. This food closet, with an all-volunteer staff, serves homeless individuals in Sacramento every week by providing nutritious bags of groceries; furthermore it is conveniently located only 10 blocks from the SRO Service Center.

The first step was to improve access to quality foods for SRO residents. The collaboration next decided to create a class that would encourage healthy eating and proper food preparation. Simply having access to healthier foods on a weekly basis would not be enough to change the nutritional habits of the residents. Since most of the SRO hotels do not offer kitchens and none allow cooking in the rooms, residents usually have limited food storage space and often use a communal microwave or crock pot to cook meals. This situation encourages residents to eat snack items and fast food. The partnership searched for an appropriate curriculum that could teach the residents proper cooking techniques and nutrition. After much research, we were unable to find information relevant to the unique needs of our clients, and so decided that our new partnership would create our own curriculum.

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# Seniors and Food Stamps

This past April the Hunger Commission completed a year-long successful Food Stamp outreach campaign which targeted low-income seniors in Sacramento. The ultimate aim of the project was to help seniors obtain more nutritious food by increasing participation in the underutilized Food Stamp program. At the start of the campaign, residents aged 60+ represented less than 1% of Sacramento County's food stamp caseload. By the project's completion, senior Food Stamp participation in Sacramento County had increased by nearly 20%.

The Hunger Commission began by identifying and educating one key food stamp contact for seniors at each DHA bureau. The Commission then distributed 1000 flyers to homebound seniors through the Home Delivered Meal Program. Later, staff developed outreach materials with answers to Frequently Asked Questions on Food Stamps and Seniors (available in 6 languages) and gave multiple presentations at Senior Congregate Meal Sites and to senior groups. Staff also provided information about Food Opportunities (Foodlink's cooperative food-buying program which has replaced SHARE). Follow up visits allowed staff to get a better picture of the barriers and myths that may prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs. Lessons learned included:

- Seniors felt more comfortable calling an individual worker rather than a general information line and non-English speaking seniors prefer to directly call a worker who speaks their language.
- Phone screenings, home visits, and mail-in applications make applying for food stamps more attractive to seniors.
- Income was the top reason most seniors thought they would not be eligible for food stamps. Seniors were largely unaware that individuals 60+ do not have to meet the same eligibility requirements as other applicants.
- Individuals on SSI in California are not eligible for food stamps. SSI was much more likely to render seniors ineligible than income.

## **The Top 5 Senior Myths About Food Stamps (all are False)**

- Seniors receiving Social Security cannot get food stamps
- Only people with children can get food stamps
- You have to go to the outlet or office to pick up or apply for Food Stamps
- Recipients cannot be working and still get Food Stamps
- Food Stamps cost money

## Nutrition On the 'Net

The Hunger Commission is embarking on a new way to teach nutrition and healthy eating. With the internet becoming a household word, we decided to collaborate with libraries, community centers, and other non-profit organizations in low-income areas that have computer labs, internet access, and introduction to the internet classes. The aim is to empower community members to use the internet as a resource for learning about nutritious eating and healthy living. Two resource sheets were developed that will be handed out at the classes and made available for individuals to pick up. The "Nutrition Information on the Internet" can be found as the insert to this issue's newsletter.

So far two classes have been conducted at the Community Learning Center, a program of Sacramento Food Bank Services. Another will be presented soon at the Hart Senior Center. Individuals at the Community Learning Center were very appreciative of the handouts and were excited to begin utilizing the internet to better the health of their families. If you know of a computer lab open to the public that might be interested in receiving resource sheets or hosting brief hands-on internet/nutrition workshops, please call 447-7063 x364.

## Staff Transitions – Moving On

**Emily Piltch** will be leaving the Hunger Commission on June 13 to enter a Masters in Public Health Program at the University of North Carolina.

**Shana McDavis-Conway** begins her year as a national Hunger Fellow on August 15, in Hartford, Conn. and Washington DC.

**Constance Lestienne** has been researching and writing **Hunger Hits Home** since April; she is scheduled to return to France in late August for her final exams at the *Institut National Agronomique*.

It's going to be very quiet around the office by the end of August!

## Hunger Hits Home

This local study of hunger in Sacramento was last revised in 1992. The 2003 revision will include an analysis of local utilization of federal food assistance programs, findings from a survey of residents using food closets and soup kitchens, and an overview of community food security issues.

## Earned Income Tax Credit in 2003

The Department of Human Assistance (DHA) and its partners assisted over 2600 people file for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) this year, for a total amount of \$3,307,754.



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