



HEALTHY FOOD, SAFE FOOD PROJECT

Health Equity Review

June 26, 2016

BACKGROUND

The Healthy Food, Safe Food (HFSF) Project is a partnership between University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development and Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH's) Office of Statewide Health Improvement Initiatives (OSHI). HFSF's goal was to conduct a formative evaluation to aid in developing a plan of action to address regulatory barriers to improve access to healthy foods, while simultaneously maintaining and enhancing food safety. Between July 2015 and July 2016, the HFSF project team conducted a listening session, key informant interviews, and focus groups, followed by analysis and planning meetings.

REVIEWER

Erika Vázquez Salazar is an adult educator with 20 plus years of experience and a recipient of the 2008 Adult Education Leader of the Year award from the State of Minnesota. She has direct experience with health inequities as a person of color, a non-native English speaker, and an immigrant to the United States from Mexico. Her heritage is from a population that experiences historical trauma and racism.

REVIEW

The following is my perspective on how the HFSF Project can help make healthy, safe foods available to all Minnesotans by breaking down the greatest barriers to access.

Frontline local public health staff employed by MDH and SNAP-Ed staff employed by Extension are right that the food system needs to be reviewed for specific barriers to access, such as restrictions on cooking in churches and other non-institutional locations. But the project also needs to focus on overarching barriers, including the fact that none of us can be comfortable under the umbrella of the current system. The work now is to change the system. We need to work harder and take risks, and we cannot take "no" for an answer if we have the knowledge and rationale that something has to be changed in order for equity to happen.

Minnesota is considered one of the healthiest states in the nation but what does that mean, when the disparities are so great? Who do we need to think about?

We need to think about everybody, including both healthy people and people with cancer, autism, mental health issues, depression, diabetes, ADHD, and other diseases. Just think about the people in our lives — our friends, family, and other people we know who need better access to healthy food.



For example, think about people with cancer living in small towns in greater Minnesota with no grocery stores. Their cancer treatment is killing their healthy cells, along with the cancer cells in their body, and it is only with fresh, healthy foods that their bodies will recuperate between their treatment sessions.

Add to these conditions the fact that many of these people need to drive to clinics a long way from their hometowns — cities such as Duluth, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Rochester, and Moorhead. They also need to buy gas and eat a healthy meal along the way. These things cost money, and they might not be able to find restaurants that serve healthy food on their routes to the clinics.

We might say to ourselves, “I have access to healthy food; it’s not an issue for me. People make their own choices, and they could do what I did — what I do.” But it’s not that simple. We need to ask ourselves why we have access to healthy foods, while others don’t. Other questions to ask include:

- Do I have a college education? Does everyone have access to higher education like I did? Or access to financial aid to attend college or career schools after high school?
- Do I have a good job? How is the system designed? Am I white, or a person of color? Am I a man or a woman? Am I younger or older? Which of those conditions might have made it easier for me to get hired?
- Do I know how to garden, how to shop, how to read labels, or know which foods are healthy? Do I know how to cook a nutrient-rich meal that tastes good, too?
- How did I learn about these things? Are there people in my town or my neighborhood who didn’t learn these things? Why not?
- What is my zip code? Do I live in a healthy environment (safe with access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity, parks nearby, etc.)? Were my parents able to raise me in a healthy environment? Did they have access to good jobs with a living wage?
- Do I or did my parents or grandparents face structural racism?

Now, try to imagine yourself in someone else’s shoes and ask the same questions about that person. This could be the Latino immigrant who picked the fruits and vegetables you bought at the grocery store, or a neighbor with disabilities or chronic illness, or anyone you think faces many barriers to accessing healthy foods.

Lastly, won’t it be great to say one day that Minnesota is both one of the healthiest states in the nation and one of the best states in the country for health equity? If that happens, that might make Minnesota the healthiest state, period!

I’d also like to suggest conducting a listening session with people who have experienced inequity directly to review elements of the HFSF Project as I did. This would provide perspectives on how the project can most benefit people facing the biggest barriers to accessing healthy, safe foods.

For more information about the Healthy Food, Safe Food Project, visit z.umn.edu/hfsf.

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