Consensus on a Healthy Food Donation List for Community Outreach

Local food drives bring out good intentions – and for some people, old, dusty non-perishables from the back of the kitchen cupboard. Others head to the grocery store to buy items specifically to donate. Both scenarios can lead to an unhealthy overload of donated foods that are high in sodium, sugar and fat. A New Haven Connecticut Healthy Food Donation coalition is trying to change that situation. The group is composed of representatives from the University of St. Joseph’s SNAP-Ed program, American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program project, Connecticut Department of Public Health, Connecticut Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, City of New Haven, and local food banks. They have adopted guidelines for healthy food and beverage donations that provide dietary guidance for the types of healthy food items that food pantries and food banks can stock on their shelves. The guidelines outline a variety of healthier food and beverage options that food assistance programs can provide their clientele, many of whom have chronic illnesses that are worsened by poor diets.

The Challenge

According to 2016 figures from the Community Alliance for Research and Engagement, food insecurity is higher in New Haven’s low-income neighborhoods than other parts of the state. Thirty-five percent of the people in these neighborhoods reported not having enough food to eat or enough money to buy groceries. Low-income residents make up a majority of the recipients who rely on food banks and food pantries. They also are a demographic that tends to be at higher risk for developing obesity, diabetes, hypertension and other chronic health problems often related to poor nutrition. But many times, the types of contributions that come in to food assistance programs include soups, canned vegetables or boxed meals that are high in sodium and sugar and low in fiber and other essential nutrients. These foods can have a negative impact on chronic illnesses.

“It’s important that the food offered provides significant nutritional value or benefits. We urge donors to consider the sodium, fat, sugar, and fiber content of donated foods.”

— Kimberly Hart, co-chair of New Haven Food Access Workgroup and New Haven Food Policy council member

Work made possible with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
The Solution
New Haven health advocates want people to donate healthier items to their local food pantries. To help make this happen, they have created guidelines for healthy food and beverage donations that were adopted for distribution to key donors such as employers, work sites, and companies in the area that often sponsor food collection drives. The healthy food and beverage donation guidelines also will be shared with school systems, faith-based institutions and other groups who frequently help with food collections. Spearheading the effort is a collaboration of registered dieticians, nutrition consultants, local food banks, universities, food advocacy groups and government agencies. This partnership hopes to promote an increase in the donation of protein food, whole grains, low-sodium canned goods and other items that will allow food bank recipients to eat healthier. The New Haven advocates will be monitoring and tracking the systems change over the coming months.

Sustaining Success
New Haven’s food assistance programs have adopted a healthy food and beverage donation list based on the nutrient levels recommended in U.S. government dietary guidelines and the certification requirements of the American Heart Association’s healthy food and beverage guidelines. The donation list is being distributed within New Haven and will be shared with other municipalities as well as larger policy-making bodies. The list may eventually be brought forward to the Connecticut Food Policy Council and state government departments that oversee public health improvement plans.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Regional health advocates and representatives from non-profit organizations and government agencies worked together to merge existing healthy food and beverage resources into one common list of guidelines. The new list has been embraced and promoted by food banks, pantries and other assistance programs throughout the New Haven area.

Results
The creation of the healthy food and beverage donation guidelines brought together representatives from numerous workgroups, organizations, universities and government agencies for the common purpose of boosting the supply of healthy nutritious food for city residents. Food insecurity is a growing problem in New Haven and a priority issue for city officials and community representatives. Because of the area’s high cost of living, many low-income residents find themselves forced to choose between buying food and paying for other basic needs such as housing or utilities. Low income residents rely on food pantries and similar assistance programs now more than ever. With the guidance of a healthy food and beverage donation list, outreach agencies can provide recommendations and deliver specific requests for more nutritious offerings to avoid passing along donated foods that are excessively salty, high in sugar and unhealthy in other ways.

Get Involved
Food insecurity is a problem faced in every community. Reach out to your local food bank or pantry and learn more about long-term solutions that can help reduce hunger in your neighborhood. In addition to food donations, assistance programs also welcome cash contributions, which maximize their ability to make large purchases of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods.