

USU Extension Food \$ense Program Broadens Focus

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The Utah State University Extension Food \$ense (SNAP-Ed) program has undergone a broadening of focus and a name change. The new name, Create Better Health, more fully reflects how the program has grown from a simple nutrition education program into a comprehensive program that reaches low-income populations to help improve nutrition, health and overall



lives.

According to Heidi LeBlanc, USU Extension Create Better Health director, Food \$ense was focused solely on nutrition education and food resource management when it began. The focus changed when the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 altered the structure and purpose of SNAP-Ed. With an additional focus on obesity prevention, the program has adapted to current needs and facilitated the behaviors it promotes by helping participants establish healthy eating habits and a physically active lifestyle. Originally known as Food Stamp Nutrition Education, the program name was changed to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) in 2008 to reduce the stigma associated with the term “food stamps.”

LeBlanc said those who have been nutrition education assistants (NEAs) have also had a recent name change. Their new title is Create Better Health ambassadors, because NEA didn't seem to fully describe the services they provide.

“They are teaching nutrition education, but they are also working to improve policies, systems and environments that affect our participants,” she said. “They serve their

communities by championing a healthy lifestyle that is possible for those with limited resources.”

LeBlanc said the purpose of the program is to teach youth and adults in the locations where they eat, live, learn, work, play and shop.

“Because USU Extension is a state-wide program, we have Create Better Health programs that serve every county in Utah,” she said. “We also collaborate with community and statewide partners to help us with resources and increase our program reach. Over 26 percent of Utahns are eligible for the program, and we want to reach as many of them as we can.”

Laura Streeter, who has worked with the program in Salt Lake County for 9 years as an ambassador, has a full understanding of Create Better Health, because she has used it herself.

“I was hired with the program in July 2010 at a time when my husband was underemployed and I was a stay-at-home mom,” she said. “We were using our savings to cover rent and using SNAP benefits to help with food. We were in search of a better job for my husband, and I reached out to the Food \$ense office in Salt Lake County to volunteer, hoping it might convert into a job opportunity for me, and it did! The same month I was hired, my husband got a better job and we lost our SNAP benefits due to our increased income. Transitioning off the SNAP benefits wasn't so bad, because I already had the base knowledge of how to stay within our food budget.”

Streeter said during their time using SNAP benefits, she got used to budgeting the monthly allocation very carefully to ensure they had money on their SNAP card through the end of the month. She also grew up watching her mother plan weekly meals using grocery store ads, so she had a base knowledge of how to budget for food.

She said one of her favorite things about her job is making delicious, healthy food and teaching others to do it.

“I love getting feedback that people are keeping the recipes and using them to cook at home,” she said. “I know how important a good, healthy diet is, and I love working for a program that teaches such wonderful eating basics – lots of veggies and fruit, whole grains, lean meats, low-fat dairy, portion control and eating at home with your family whenever possible.”

Another Create Better Health ambassador, Dayle Marie Eves, has worked with the Food \$ense program for 7 years and loves the diversity of the audiences she works

with in Washington County. She said that every day is a new opportunity to teach someone a skill that will improve their health and life.

Eves has worked in the library and the Head Start program in Hilldale, Utah, a town that was once run by polygamist Warren Jeffs. The population there was taught to live in a communal way where all resources were shared and divided. Since Jeffs' imprisonment, funds for food, heat and all other expenses were gone, and the community has struggled without resources.

"By teaching there, I have been able to help direct women and families to apply for SNAP benefits, learn about community resources, broaden their perspectives on food safety and increase their knowledge of managing a food budget," Eves said. "We have also worked with local stores to help them increase their availability of fresh produce. It has all been very rewarding."

Eves has also worked with the Shivwits Indian tribe in a remote location in southern Utah where fresh produce and resources are not available. She said the rate of diabetes in the community is increasing rapidly, and in the time she has taught there, she has seen many of the elders die from it.

"We have worked diligently to teach classes that help them understand how they could reverse the effects of type 2 diabetes with their diets," she said. "We are also educating them about exercise and using incentives to make healthy changes in daily living. And, like in Hilldale, we are working with their local market to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables."

LeBlanc said there are several ways the public can get involved with Create Better Health (SNAP-Ed). Those interested in the program can contact their local USU Extension office to learn about attending a class, or they can support efforts in local communities to improve healthy food and physical activity access. To connect with the program on social media, go to CreateBetterHealthUtah.org.

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