

UEPI Preschool Project

I. Organization Information

The Center for Food & Justice (CFJ) is a division of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI) at Occidental College. UEPI, whose mission is to create a more just, livable, and democratic society, functions both as an academic center with strong community ties and as a community-based organization with a strong research and policy development capacity.

As the largest center at UEPI, the Center for Food & Justice has been a strong leader in establishing fresh food programs at both the preschool and public school levels for over ten years. From 1997-2000, CFJ developed a series of experimental and innovative programs for pre-school and child care facilities, as well as a healthy snacks program for after school programs in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). These programs were successful in introducing healthy fruits and vegetables into school meals and achieved significant buy-in from children, staff, and parents, and will serve as the basis for the expansion of this project. Since 2000, CFJ has developed two inter-connected models to improve school food. Through *Project CAFE* (Community Action on Food Environments), the *Healthy School Food Coalition* (HSFC), a CFJ affiliated program, was able to organize students and parents to partner with school officials and health advocates to develop and implement groundbreaking nutrition policies within LAUSD, such as bans on soda and junk food sales. Due to HSFC efforts, participation rates for meal programs have risen at HSFC school sites and the District's school food has improved.

In conjunction with multiple partners, CFJ has also developed a dynamic and rapidly expanding farm to school program, which now exists at the national, state, and regional levels. Farm to school programs have been shown to improve children's eating habits and increase their preferences for fresh fruits and vegetables. By working with local farmers, farm to school provides produce that is fresh and in season. In addition, CFJ has pioneered the development of farm to school demonstration sites which increase both knowledge and interest in the adoption of the program by hosting site visits, sponsoring workshops and trainings, and providing technical assistance to other school sites implementing the program.

A key component of CFJ's activities includes policy development, research and evaluation designed to improve school food environments. We have published extensively about fresh and healthy food access for schools and other institutions. We thus have both the organizational capacity and the policy and research expertise to now expand our existing healthy school food and farm to school-related resources to local preschools.

Childhood overweight and obesity has become an epidemic in the United States. Children are becoming overweight during their early years of life, at preschool age 2 – 5 years old. Based on the 2006 national Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance Survey, 15.4% of children age 2 – 5 in California were overweight, in comparison to the national average for the age group of 14.8%. Research has indicated that many of these children will remain obese throughout adulthood, posing an increased risk for many weight-related health conditions such as hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. Early intervention targeting nutrition habits and food preferences as they are forming is needed to change this unhealthy trend. Targeting such a young population necessarily involves both parents and caregivers, who may be unaware of toddler nutrition needs and the importance of establishing healthy habits early in life. However, education alone will not

fix the problem, where access to healthy fresh fruits and vegetables can be very limited in low-income neighborhoods.

Research conducted by UEPI and its partners has shown that access is very limited in low income communities, where fast food restaurants often outnumber grocery stores and other produce markets. At the same time, knowledge of the basics of nutrition and the benefits of healthy eating also needs to be strengthened among underserved parents and caregivers. Programs for food improvement and nutrition education in the school environment exist at the K – 12 level, including the farm to school and Harvest of the Month programs. However, few programs have targeted preschool aged children and their families, although nutrition and subsequent weight issues adversely affect them in increasingly greater numbers.

Preschools and childcare facilities are an important target for interventions such as the one we are proposing. Data from the 2006 Child Care needs Assessment for Los Angeles County show that almost 70% of all children in childcare are cared for in a home or home daycare, which include licensed home daycares or license-exempt providers. Childcare providers register with county-based resource and referral agencies, which in turn refer the facilities to parents, and also provide facilities with additional educational information and trainings on best practices, and aid them with subsidies to help them accept low income families. By partnering with referral agencies and their networks of providers and trainers, this project can expand its impact to reach more of the over one million children in childcare around L.A. County.

III. Work Plan

Demographics

This project will target Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. Within each of these counties we plan to work in low income and predominantly Hispanic and African American communities. Collaborations are currently being pursued in the El Monte, in South L.A. and in the Yucca Valley area of San Bernardino County. El Monte consists of a largely Hispanic population (72%) with a high poverty-level. Thirty two percent of families with children under 5 are below the federal poverty line and in the school district, 83% of students qualify for free or reduced price meal programs. In Yucca Valley, 11% of the population is Hispanic, with 19% below the poverty line. In the school district, about 40% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals. The area in South Los Angeles (zip code 90007) has an average income per household of \$17,644, with slightly more than 50% Hispanic residents and another 10% African-American residents.

Program Goal, Objectives, Activities, Expected Outcomes, and Evaluation

The program's ultimate goal is to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among pre-school aged children and their parents, and to improve access to fresh, healthy, locally grown fruits and vegetables. To pursue this goal, three distinct yet interrelated populations will be targeted: staff of preschools, school districts, and preschool referral agencies; parents of children attending preschool; and preschool children, aged 2-5.

We will accomplish this goal by creating opportunities for including affordable and locally grown produce in meal and snack menus by establishing collaborations between preschools and farmers and farmers' markets, providing technical assistance to preschools to make these healthy changes, offering health and nutrition education activities for both students and parents, and thereby expanding community capacity in low income areas where mechanisms for improving

health outcomes are most needed. The first set of objectives involves outreach and information dissemination to preschool staff and staff of childcare resource and referral agencies in order to identify potential preschool partners. To reach these objectives, we will choose at least two preschool sites with which to partner. Once potential pilots are identified, CFJ staff will work closely with pre-school staff to provide training on how to most effectively incorporate farm fresh produce into their menu and snack offerings. Through guidance and facilitation by CFJ staff (the Project Manager and Farm to School Manager), these preschools will build the mechanisms necessary to procure and prepare locally grown produce. In addition to purchasing local foods for the meal and snack programs, we will work with one site to implement an affordable market basket pick-up program for parents and preschool staff to increase access to healthy foods throughout the community.

Our work with farm to school programs has shown that cafeteria interventions are most effective when combined with educational activities targeting both children and parents to reach program objectives of increasing nutrition knowledge, fresh food concepts, and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables in both populations. Additionally, our objective is to ultimately increase children's preference for fresh fruits and vegetables. Therefore, project staff from CFJ will partner with the pilot sites to implement innovative and engaging nutrition and agricultural education activities including presentations from farmers, taste tests, and a Harvest of the Month program. Parents will be given a community-tailored Fresh Food Access Guide written by UEPI staff, and they will also be targeted through a series of education workshops about health, nutrition, and accessing local foods. Parents will also have the opportunity to attend "Doc Talks" which will allow them to ask health related questions of medical professionals. These activities are designed to give children and parents the information they need to implement healthy practices at home. Educational sessions for both parents and children will also follow an evidenced-based curriculum which CFJ staff will identify based on a thorough literature review. We also plan to conduct a feasibility study on using Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the Classroom for preschools. This program has been successfully used in K-12 schools and could enhance our program activities if feasible among the pre-Kindergarten population.

In Year 2 of the project, one preschool will be designated a demonstration site to host trainings and a workshop for additional preschools and childcare facilities who are interested in learning more about the program. CFJ will work with the staff at the demonstration sites to enable them to provide effective technical assistance to other sites. CFJ will also conduct broad outreach and technical assistance about these farm to preschool programs. A final objective will be to draft a preschool wellness policy for implementation. Key CFJ staff will include the project manager, the farm to school program manager, and the research and policy director of UEPI.

Based on the objectives and activities, expected outcomes in relation to targeted staff include: identifying at least two preschools to participate in the program; enabling these schools to purchase some of their fresh fruits and vegetables from local sources; designating a school as a demonstration site; drafting a wellness policy for implementation; and sharing information about the farm to preschool model with preschool and childcare sites through the workshop and through a preschool section of the farm to school website. Outcomes for participating children include an increase in: awareness of farms and farm-fresh produce; knowledge of nutrition basics; and in consumption of, and preference for, fresh fruits and vegetables. Expected outcomes for parents correspondingly include: an increase in knowledge of healthy foods and local access to them, as well as increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables in the home.

To evaluate if program outcomes have been met and to measure success, the following strategies will be employed: retaining copies of Memos of Agreements between CFJ and preschools; copies of contracts and receipts of payment for snack/meal and market basket purchases; copies of meeting minutes for all interactions between CFJ and the participating preschools; copies of the developed wellness policy and its timeline for implementation; copies of all communication pieces, as well as the number of website views. Tracking schools' local produce purchases will also assess the impact of the program on farmers, and determine the financial impact of the program. Attendance and pre- and post- evaluation surveys will also be conducted with attendees of the workshop and the parent education sessions. A parental pre- and post- program survey of home food consumption will also be given, as well as a pre- and post- survey for all market basket purchasers. To evaluate child-based outcomes, preschool teachers will be given surveys to address the following: child attendance at all program activities, level of interest displayed during activities, and observed changes in consumption of meals and snacks.

Sustainability and Funding Strategies

After two years of the program intervention, participating preschools will have ongoing collaborations with local farmers and farmers' markets and will be able to maintain these connections and purchases once intervention funding ends. Purchasing farm fresh produce is economically viable for schools, as demonstrated by the farm to school program. CFJ will continue to provide technical assistance and program promotion and outreach free of charge, as it currently does with the farm to school program. With program-developed resource documents posted online, new preschools will have the means to start the Healthy Meal Preschool program at minimal cost. This project also benefits from CFJ's current funding to develop models of local food distribution in Southern California. This work is funded for the next two years and will result in multiple options for procuring locally grown foods.

Communication mechanisms

To ensure the sustainability of the program, multi-level communication strategies will be employed. A farm to preschool information hub will be developed as part of the existing national farm to school website. Resources included on this site will include: the Fresh Food Access Guide (available in both English and Spanish); a resource toolkit as a "how-to" on establishing collaborations with local farms and farmers' markets nation-wide; information on tailoring farm to school activities (such as Farmer in the Classroom and Harvest of the Month) to the preschool population; a posted schedule of workshop training sessions at the demonstration site; nutrition education materials for both children and parents, as utilized by the program; a sample preschool wellness policy for implementation; evaluation technical reports of the two-year pilot program; and a broader research report of the program. To expand dissemination, this latter report will be distributed to our partners, specifically with preschool referral agencies and Los Angeles area childcare provider networks. Additionally, the documents will be available on UEPI's website and will be presented at no fewer than two conferences in the year following project implementation. In addition, newspaper articles and Op-Eds will be published in L.A. and San Bernardino local papers, a journal article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal will be written based on evaluation data, and policy briefs will be published on the UEPI website. Additionally, project staff will conduct media outreach at the time of the opening of the preschool demonstration site to develop local support and interest in the program.