

Adapting EFNEP to Meet the Changing Needs of Food-Assistance Eligible Families: Investigating the Results of Program Responses to Welfare Reform

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Background and Research Objective: This research was designed to investigate how the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) has adapted to keep services for low-income participants relevant, accessible, and effective during the period of welfare reform. EFNEP's adaptation strategies were examined using qualitative assessment of the experiences of EFNEP personnel combined with quantitative analysis of the trends in program monitoring data on implementation and outcomes.

Highlights of Research Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with state EFNEP coordinators and selected county or regional EFNEP supervisors in 3 states. Six focus group discussions with EFNEP paraprofessional Community Nutrition Educators (CNEs) and 2 interviews with key informants were conducted in one state. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed qualitatively. A national dataset of selected program variables for the period of 1997-2003 was created from state-level data excerpted from the national EFNEP monitoring system. Regression analysis was used to examine trends over time in program implementation and outcomes at the national and state levels. The authors also compared the characteristics of a sub-sample of ten states with the strongest trends (5 positive, 5 negative) in behavior change score, a measure of the proportion of program graduates reporting an improvement in dietary practices between program entry and completion.

Preliminary Findings: EFNEP personnel reported that families transitioning to work continued to need EFNEP but had little time to attend nutrition education classes. Poor working parents who have less time for food preparation and acquisition need information on managing food resources, preparing quick healthy meals for home and work, and making good choices when eating out. To reach these participants, EFNEP collaborated with other agencies to deliver services to groups formed for other purposes, offered programs on weekends or evenings, and identified new audiences. Collaborating agencies included adult education and English language programs, residential programs addressing various needs (e.g. domestic abuse, homelessness, mental disabilities, and drug rehabilitation), welfare-to-work training programs, and occupational groups (e.g. daycare providers). CNEs now teach more groups and the audiences are more diverse and include mandated audiences who must attend an agency's program to avoid sanctions (such as loss of TANF benefits). Sustained collaborations with agencies serving similar populations and interested providing nutrition education to their clients were critical to successful adaptation. This was difficult in some rural areas where few agencies were available to collaborate with EFNEP and low population density and lack of transportation limited attendance at group educational sessions. Most personnel felt that EFNEP was adapting successfully to reach and serve potential participants. The most important disadvantages of inter-agency collaboration were constraints on the number and length of lessons, resulting in less time for education and hands-on activities like cooking. Some personnel were concerned that shorter program duration and group methods could reduce impact. To preserve program quality some sites enforced standards for minimum length and frequency of lessons and provided extra individual or home-study lessons for people needing more information and support. Training CNEs to work with new audiences, revising curricula to focus on priority topics, and sub-dividing large groups were other strategies to protect effectiveness. Such strategies required resources and were not practiced equally in all sites. Supervisors varied along a continuum from "compromisers", primarily concerned with program survival and maintenance of large caseloads, to "negotiators-innovators" employing strategies designed to ensure both high participation rates and program quality. The majority of respondents in this study were "negotiators-innovators" but the few examples of "compromisers" suggest the need to evaluate how a focus on reaching large numbers of participants affects program impact, particularly in the context of limited program resources.

Analysis of national EFNEP monitoring data confirmed many of the qualitative findings. From 1999-2003, the number of participants/year and the number of front-line staff decreased significantly. The proportion of participants reached by group (rather than individual) methods increased sharply from under 60% in 1997 to almost 72% in 2002 - 2003. Characteristics of EFNEP participants also changed. From 1997 to 2003 there was a significant reduction in the proportion of participants living in rural areas or small towns, an increase in the proportion of Hispanics, and a decrease in the proportion of African Americans. Trends in behavior change at the state level were not significantly associated with other changes over time and did not indicate that program adaptations have negatively affected outcomes. Nationally, the percent of graduates reporting an improvement in dietary behavior between program entry and completion remained relatively constant, although trends in individual states varied widely. The rate of program completion increased, probably due to inclusion of more mandated participants and changes in graduation criteria

associated with group methods. Few differences were found between the sub-groups of states with the strongest positive or negative trends in behavior change. Both groups included states using relatively more and less group methods and covering more and less rural populations. The “upward trend” states had much larger programs (federal EFNEP allocations) than the “downward trend” states, suggesting a possible contribution of economies of scale to program success.

Implications for food assistance programs and future research: EFNEP has developed innovative strategies to adapt to welfare reform and to contribute to the success of this policy by helping families practice healthy nutrition and resource management as they transition to work. Staff of EFNEP and similar programs can learn from these successful strategies and EFNEP’s capacity to adapt should be leveraged to respond to other trends influencing the health of low income families, such as the obesity epidemic. While the trends identified in this study occurred during the era of welfare reform, EFNEP was also influenced by other socioeconomic and policy conditions during this period. Continued funding constraints have implications for program access, quality, intensity, and duration as EFNEP struggles to “do more with less”. Adaptations to reach more participants are essential but programs also need adequate resources to provide the amount and quality of nutrition education that will be effective in promoting healthy dietary practices. Compromises in the name of efficiency could eventually reduce benefits to rural residents and other hard-to-reach or hard-to-teach audiences.

These analyses illustrate how EFNEP’s extensive program monitoring system can be used to assess changes in program implementation and behavior change outcomes. Despite collection of data on many useful indicators, national-level analyses are limited by constraints of resources, personnel and data format. Minimal additional investment could substantially increase the usefulness of these data for guiding programs and policy by making available a national dataset that integrates multiple years of EFNEP and includes disaggregated raw data.

The interpretation of research results would be greatly enhanced if program monitoring data were complemented by an external EFNEP evaluation of contrasting program approaches and multiple outcomes among participants and non-participants. Future research should assess the impact of the “best practices” identified by this study as likely to contribute to program efficiency and effectiveness. Our results suggest that certain state programs achieve good outcomes with large caseloads and follow-up research should examine the program characteristics and strategies related to their success.