Program Assistant Helps People Improve Their Life

**Situation**
The Idaho Family Nutrition Program began in Power County in May, 1996 working with limited resource families to increase knowledge in food purchasing and preparation, nutrition, and resource management. Empowered families and individuals of all ages can improve the social, economic, and environmental qualities of their lives. Program assistants teach people how to nutritionally feed their families with limited resources at the end of the month, as well as the beginning.

The county's population is, on the average, younger than that of the state. Power County has both higher per capita incomes and a slightly higher level of poverty than the state. About 14% of all persons and 11% of all families are living “in poverty”. Seven hundred seventy-five people in 275 households received food stamps totaling $50,423 in August, 1995. Loss of even a small number of local jobs is a serious economic matter. Power county has experienced a substantial increase in Hispanic population who are attracted to rural, agricultural communities to work and live. The Hispanic population has a lower educational level and higher poverty rate. Low income is usually associated with poor diets. Youth in poor families are particularly at risk for poor nutrition.

**Our Response**
Program assistants are trained to teach nutrition in the homes of the participants or in small groups in their neighborhood. A minimum of thirteen core lessons are required for program graduation. Lessons cover topics on planning and shopping for food, basic nutrition, food preparation, and food safety, household budgeting, record keeping and money management. Thirteen optional lessons can be selected according to family needs. Hands-on experiences are encouraged.

In cooperation with Idaho Health and Welfare, a grant for $17,525 allowed three program assistants to be hired and trained in Power County during the summer. An advisory committee of local agency representatives and families review the program and provide direction and support. Program assistants are now contacting and working directly with Power County families. Extensive data is being collected as a benchmark to evaluate behavior changes.

**Achievements**
By July, 1996 three program assistants were working with household members who were learning about food and nutrition. The average family size of our participants is 5-6 people within the household and their earnings are poverty level. Housing, food and transportation account for approximately 78% of the total expenditures of poor households.
In September, 1996 one program assistant remained on staff, one resigned and one took maternity leave. Twenty seven participants have signed up for training. One hundred sixty family members are being affected by the Idaho Family Nutrition Program in Power County. One hundred ninety seven total contacts have been made. Many lessons have been given on infant and child nutrition. One common request of the families is how to prepare foods that are readily available in local groceries. Small rural grocery outlets often do not carry a wide variety of food products.

Program assistants relate some successes:

- Five teenage mothers are participating. One mother was giving her child only Gatorade to drink. After learning of the importance of calcium for children’s growth and health, she switched the child from sugared drinks to drinking more milk.
- I have a few mothers who have never used the oven before because they didn’t know how to use it. The oven was used to store items, like a cupboard. We cleaned out the space, I showed them how to make and bake lasagna and scalloped potatoes. Her family loves oven baked foods.
- One mother has a three year old toddler who is terrified of the dentist. Extensive dental work had to be done on the child following a long period of continuous bottle feeding. The dental work cost about $1,500. This mother did not realize that improper child nutrition practices had contributed to poor tooth development and the child’s fear of the dentist. Since she watched the bottle feeding video with me, she is much more careful in feeding her infant.
- Ninety percent of the current families in the program are Hispanic. The Program Assistant says: “All my families want to learn to speak English. Many of them know only Spanish so I am teaching language skills along with my nutrition lessons. I have made labels written in English for my families, they attach the English term to kitchen items, equipment, and foods. They are learning a new English word every time I visit and give a nutrition lesson.”
- The program assistant said: “This program has brought a smile to the faces of the people I work with because it gives them hope and helps them now and is going to help them in their future. They have hope that it will make a difference for themselves and their families.”
- A Guide to Human Services & Community Resources for Power County was produced and distributed to 366 individuals and agencies. This guide and the food guide pyramid are the most requested home economics publication.

Co-Sponsors
Power County Family Nutrition Advisory Committee, Idaho Health & Welfare, Idaho Expanded Food & Nutrition Education Program, Mental Health Steering Committee, Heartland Counseling, Inc.

The Future
One more program assistant will be hired and trained for the 1997 program. The Idaho Family Nutrition grant has been extended to thirteen counties in Idaho. Power County has been given $24,204 to teach families to better use their food dollars.

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