

Better Living for Texans

<http://blt.tamu.edu/>

Relevance

An estimated one out of every six households (16.2 percent) in Texas lives in poverty. Research has shown that individuals who live in poverty have dietary intakes that are not in agreement with current recommendations (i.e., Dietary Guidelines). For example, the diets of low-income households, including those with children, often lack variety and are typically inadequate in fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, dairy products, and lean meat. Consequently, the diets of low-income households tend to be low in fiber, vitamins A and E, folic acid, zinc, calcium, and iron and higher in total fat, saturated fat, and sodium than currently recommended by USDA. This is a concern since dietary quality has been linked to four of the ten leading causes of death including heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes.

Individuals and families who live in poverty are also at risk for being food insecure, meaning that the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods is limited or uncertain. Nationally, an estimated 10 percent of households are food insecure. In Texas, the estimated percentage is higher at nearly 16 percent. A 2002 survey of 1,000 food stamp households in Texas found that more than 50 percent had experienced difficulty in obtaining safe and nutritious food for their families at least once during a 12-month period. Although the Food Stamp program is available



to help low-income audiences improve their food security status as well as the nutritional quality of their diets, only about 60 percent of the state's eligible individuals actually participate.

Response

The Better Living for Texans (BLT) program began in 1995 as a cooperative endeavor among the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), and Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) of USDA. BLT is administered by Extension and funded by FNS through HHSC as a reimbursable contract. The program began with 29 pilot counties and has expanded to include every county in Texas that is served by a county Extension agent – Family and Consumer Sciences.

A component of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), BLT provides educational programs to food stamp recipients, applicants, and other approved audiences to help improve their ability to plan and prepare nutritious meals, stretch food dollars, and prepare and store food safely. Additionally, BLT provides educational programs that help the target audience improve their overall diet quality and increase their level of physical activity.

BLT is delivered through a variety of teaching methods that reflect audience needs. Teaching methods include: lesson series, single education events, one-to-one consultations, demonstrations, and tours. With the presence of BLT in almost every county in the state, Texas AgriLife Extension Service is poised to reach all areas of Texas, both rural and urban, and increase the likelihood of meeting the nutrition education needs of underserved Texans.

Results

In FY 2008, Extension educators reported 614,328 direct educational contacts with BLT clients.

A survey of 1,045 BLT adult graduates from across the state measured behavioral changes that occurred as a result of participating in BLT.

Results found that these participants made meaningful changes in the frequency that they practiced selected food resource management behaviors. For example, the percentage of graduates who planned their meals “always” rose from 26 percent before BLT to nearly 66 percent 30 days after the program ended. Nearly 77 percent were shopping with a list after the program ended compared to 34 percent when the program began. Almost 58 percent of the graduates reported that they “always” or “sometimes” used unit pricing to identify economical food buys when the program began. However, 30 days after graduating, more than 90 percent were doing so.

Participants were also asked to estimate how much of their own money they were spending on groceries before and after the BLT program. On

average, participants lowered their monthly out-of-pocket food expenses each month by \$26.84, which if maintained and were not due to some other economic hardship, could lead to an annual savings of \$322 per household.

BLT has a history of high customer satisfaction. Results from the survey found that nearly all participants (99 percent) rated BLT as either “excellent” or “good.” In addition, respondents indicated that participating in BLT was helping them to feed their families more nutritious meals.

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of respondents identified BLT as their first exposure to Texas AgriLife Extension Service, suggesting that this program is enabling Extension to reach audiences that might otherwise not have the opportunity to benefit from Extension education programs.

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