In Texas, 17% of households have incomes that are at or below 100% of the federal poverty level (FPL). An estimated one out of seven Texans receives benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. This program helps eligible low-income families buy nutritious food to feed their families. Proper nutrition is important because diet quality has been linked to four of the ten leading causes of death. Research also suggests that the diets of low-income households, including those receiving SNAP benefits and those with children, often lack variety and are typically inadequate in fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, dairy products, and lean meat. Additionally, 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 is currently recommended.

Stretching resources so families have food on the table also presents a challenge for many limited-resource audiences. Data from the 2013 Current Population Survey indicate that 18% of Texas households faced challenges in keeping food on the table at least once within a 12-month period (classified as food insecurity). The percentage of Texas households that experience food insecurity continues to be higher than the national average of nearly 15%.

The Better Living for Texans (BLT) program is a cooperative endeavor among the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (AgriLife Extension), Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), and Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) of USDA. BLT was begun by AgriLife Extension in 1995 and today includes every county in Texas that is served by an AgriLife Extension agent in family and consumer sciences.

A component of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, BLT provides educational programs to SNAP 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. Incorporating AgriLife Extension’s Walk Across Texas! program into BLT provides an opportunity to help the target audience 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, AgriLife Extension is poised to reach all areas of Texas, both rural and urban, and increase the likelihood of meeting the nutrition education needs of under-served Texans.
Results
During fiscal year 2014, county AgriLife Extension agents reported a total of 1.3 million educational contacts from adults and youth participating in BLT.

A survey of 944 BLT adult graduates from the Back to Basics series across the state found that BLT participants made meaningful changes in the frequency that they practiced targeted food safety and food resource management behaviors. For example:

- More than 80% of the participants were shopping with a list “always” after the program ended, compared to 34% when the program began.

- Nearly 42% of the graduates reported that they “always” compared prices when shopping for food when the program began. However, 30 days after graduating, 85% were doing so.

- More than 78% of participants reported thawing meat and other frozen foods at room temperature “always” or “sometimes” at the beginning of the program. Thirty days after the program ended, only 27% were doing so.

The percentage of respondents who ran out of food before the end of the month “always” or “sometimes” fell from 69% to 45% nearly a month after the program ended.

BLT has a history of high customer satisfaction. Results from the survey found that most participants (80%) rated BLT as “excellent.” In addition, more than half (58%) of respondents identified BLT as their first exposure to Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, suggesting that this program is enabling AgriLife Extension to reach audiences that might otherwise not have the opportunity to benefit from its education programs.

To learn more about the BLT program, please visit our website (http://blt.tamu.edu) or contact program coordinator Jon Perrott (japerrott@ag.tamu.edu).