

Sunday Suppers: Creating Behavioral Change through the “Power of Family Meals”

Joseph Boxman and Martha Heuser 21 February 2012

Summary

Family instability, poor access to healthy food choices, and higher rates of nutrition-related illness. These are some of the manifestations of poverty and hunger in low-income neighborhoods that Sunday Suppers is trying to address in an innovative way. Founded in October 2010 by Linda Samost, the program’s mission is centered on the power of the family meal. The adverse effects of poverty on nutrition and access to food are a major cause for concern. In 2009, 25 percent of people in Philadelphia and 50 percent of the people in Sunday Suppers’ target community of West Kensington were living below the poverty level (TRF PolicyMap 2010).

Sunday Suppers’ (2011) charge “is to strengthen the health and wellbeing of families through the transformative power of family meals” by providing families with access to healthier food, hands-on education about how to prepare healthier meals and make better decisions at mealtime, and the tools necessary for families to make long-term lifestyle changes. The primary vehicle

that Sunday Suppers uses to reach their target population is a weekly meal served in a church in the heart of the community. During this meal, participants are provided not only with a nutritious meal in an inviting and comfortable setting to spend invaluable time with their families, but they are also given recipes and the necessary ingredients to replicate the experience in their own homes. The desired outcomes for the participants are a more cohesive and supportive family structure, a better understanding of how to access and prepare healthy foods, and improvement in key health-related outcomes.

Introduction: Identifying a Need in a Local Community

Introduction: Identifying a Need in a Local Community

In October 2010 the Philadelphia Inquirer published a series of articles that provided accounts of people struggling with hunger in Philadelphia (Lubrano 2010). These articles shed light on the realities of hunger that many Philadelphians face every day. Specifically, they discussed the West Kensington section of the city, a part of the second-hungriest congressional district in the country. After reading these articles, Linda Samost, Executive Director of Sunday Suppers, was inspired to take action. Drawing on her experiences as a chef and program developer, and after additional research, she

came up with the idea of using family dinners to help people access and prepare healthier meals. She viewed meals, and specifically dinner, as a time for families to gather and converse around the table. She reached out to her network and connected with Reverend Adan Mairena, the pastor at the West Kensington Ministry and a strong advocate for social change, who had been featured in one of the Inquirer articles. With Reverend Mairena's support, Samost settled on the Norris Square neighborhood within West Kensington to launch Sunday Suppers.

Sunday Suppers operates under the fiscal sponsorship of the SHARE (Self-Help and Resource Exchange) Food Program (SHARE), an existing nonprofit. Similar in mission to SHARE, Sunday Suppers is able to utilize that organization's 501(c)(3) status, as well as the infrastructure and network of an established organization, and the experience and expertise of its Executive Director, Steveanna Wynn. Partnering with SHARE rather than setting up its own independent 501(c)(3) status has afforded Sunday Suppers the capacity to focus on getting its program off the ground without worrying as much about the administrative and financial needs of starting a new nonprofit. After several months of program development and feedback from an advisory group, a successful pilot program began in March 2011 with 8-10 families participating for 4 weeks. Following the successful conclusion of the pilot phase, the full program launched in May 2011. Sunday Suppers' only paid staff

person is Mari Neris, a bilingual Program Liaison, who helps to establish community relationships. Linda Samost serves as an unpaid director. Sunday Suppers relies heavily on volunteer time and food donations.

Steveanna Wynn describes how SHARE's mission of "feeding with dignity and finding ways for people to bring change into their lives" aligns with Sunday Suppers' mission (2011). She believes that "the way to bring behavioral change is to create an environment for experience." Sunday Suppers is not just designed to feed hungry families. Rather, it is a model to promote lasting behavioral change through improved access to healthy foods, education about food preparation and nutrition, and ongoing family and community support.

The Issues: Hunger, Habit and Education

The Issues: Hunger, Habit and Education

This issue of hunger in Philadelphia is both very real and very complex. According to the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, "1 in 4 residents are at risk for hunger, more than double the rates reported at both the national and state levels" (2010). The problem, particularly concentrated in impoverished and low-income neighborhoods, has widespread implications for the current and future physical and emotional health and wellbeing of the people affected. The USDA reports that

“children in food-insecure households face elevated risk of health and developmental problems, compared with children in otherwise similar food-secure households” (Nord 2009). The American Psychological Association (2010) supports this notion with reports of a wide range of effects of hunger and poverty on children that include anxiety, depression, increased dropout rates, higher rates of obesity and other health-related problems. The underlying issues of poverty and hunger are exacerbated in low-income neighborhoods by a lack of access to healthy food options, poor mealtime habits, and a lack of knowledge about nutrition and food preparation skills.

In low-income communities, a dearth of healthier options often translates into poor dietary choices. Lacking convenient access to supermarkets, farmers markets and other retail purveyors of fresh food, residents in poorer neighborhoods are forced to rely on what is most available: processed foods. National studies have shown that low-income zip codes have 25 percent fewer chain supermarkets than more affluent zip codes, and 23.5 million Americans cannot access a supermarket within one mile of their home (Treuhaft and Karpyn 2010). This national trend rings true in the Norris Square neighborhood that Sunday Suppers serves. Residents’ food shopping is mostly limited to convenience and corner stores, and small markets with limited inventory and high prices. The absence of fresh food options leaves residents with little choice other than to turn to cheap

take-out food, packaged food and processed food, which are severely lacking in nutritional value.

Lack of food choice is not merely a symptom of insufficient shopping options, but is also a result of inadequate and inaccessible social programs. While government-sponsored programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) are intended to provide low-income families with the financial resources necessary to purchase food, applying for such programs can be cumbersome for residents. The benefits after enrollment fall short of fully supporting a family, and participants receive insufficient nutritional guidance or help.

Going beyond the first problem of a lack of access to food options, Sunday Suppers confronts the secondary factor of poor mealtime habits, which is a national trend not just limited to low-income or minority families. Whether it is the result of family members working longer hours, a lack of emphasis on family time, not knowing how or what to cook, or a wider cultural shift, Linda Samost and Sunday Suppers have found that members of their constituency are unaccustomed to eating together as a family. Few of the families they have spoken to can recall a time in the prior 6 months when they sat down and ate together. Anecdotally, when Sunday Suppers asked 200 West Kensington High School students if they ate dinner with their families, only 15 raised their hands. Even if a family is able to sit at the table together, that time is often

disrupted by technological and social interruptions, such as TV, Internet and cell phones. Embedded in this seemingly basic concept of the family meal are larger health and wellness issues, the academic performance of children, and these participants' potential contribution to society.

Several studies have shown that the impact of this negative trend can be directly correlated to much larger social issues that plague low-income neighborhoods. According to an article in Time magazine, children in families that eat together are less likely to use illegal drugs, drink alcohol or suffer from depression, and are more likely to delay having sex, do well in school, and develop a strong vocabulary (Gibbs 2006). Evidence of the positive impacts of the family meal is reinforced in an article by Frederik Joelsing (2011), concluding that kids who eat with their families are 12 percent less likely to be overweight, 20 percent less likely to eat junk food, and 24 percent more likely to eat vegetables and other healthy foods.

Some studies have shown that having access to food does not ensure that people will make healthy dietary choices when they shop or eat. One suggests that other factors, such as time, cost and cooking skills, play equally important parts in a person's food choices at a supermarket (Morrison 2011). Sunday Suppers is trying to address participants' lack of knowledge when it comes to food preparation and nutrition by providing hands-on and

culturally appropriate nutrition information and cooking demonstrations. Innovative programming is needed to support individuals who want to change the way they eat and make healthier choices. According to a study in the Archives of Internal Medicine, "increased access to food stores may require complementary or alternative strategies to promote dietary behavior change" (Boone-Heinonen et al. 2011).

The Solutions: Reaching Beyond Access to Utilization

The Solutions: Reaching Beyond Access to Utilization

Many federal, state and local organizations are dedicated to eradicating hunger by providing food for their beneficiaries. Sunday Suppers surpasses the actions of these other organizations by directly helping families access healthier food options in their community and, moreover, encouraging lasting lifestyle changes. Many Philadelphia-based and national programs are trying to make healthy food affordable. In Norris Square, a farmers' market started by The Food Trust has been held once a week for the past two years, and this year an affordable Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), called Farm to Families, was introduced. Having access does not necessarily translate into a healthier lifestyle—many Sunday Supper families are unfamiliar with the ingredients

and produce that are being offered. To create change in food thinking and eating, Sunday Suppers helps families utilize these existing resources, prepare healthier food, and develop their mealtime as a means to build a stronger, healthier and more supportive family unit. In addition, many families do not even have kitchen equipment, such as pots, dishes and utensils that they can use to cook and prepare food, which is another barrier to accessing healthier food. Therefore, Sunday Suppers helps families in their program by providing them with these donated items so that they can try to recreate the family meal at home.

The primary vehicle that Sunday Suppers uses to support these changes is a weekly meal at West Kensington Ministry, their partner in the community. This meal provides a structured environment where families can learn how to share a meal together. Families participating in Sunday Suppers are seated at their own "family table" and provided with a 3-course meal, served restaurant style. Tables are set with tablecloths, china, silverware and flowers. Each meal includes a soup or salad, a main course with lean protein and a vegetable or starch, and a dessert. Much of the food that is prepared and served at the meal and given out afterward is donated by local farms, markets and food-related organizations, and is fresh whenever possible. None of the food is fried and none of the food is processed. At each table there are conversation starters (in English and Spanish) to help the

families get used to mealtime conversation. Some rules that apply to all family members are that they must turn their cell phones off and they must try all parts of the meal. These two rules are in place to help the participants focus on family and expand their food choices. According to Linda Samost, this second rule is often met with resistance from kids and adults; however, she has found that more times than not, once they try something new, they like it and are more likely to try something unfamiliar at subsequent meals.

Despite the positive effects of the family meal, more and more families are unfamiliar with sitting down to eat a meal together, due to a myriad of social, economical and technological factors. A diminishing trend seen nationally, less than half of Americans share a daily family meal (National Survey of Children's Health 2007). That is why Sunday Suppers' approach is so powerful and innovative. While it seems like a relatively simple solution, the family meal is a transformative strategy that closes the gap between food access and utilization. Each step in the Sunday Suppers program was designed to help the participating families learn new behaviors and alter their approach to food and family life.

While the family meal is the centerpiece, there are several other elements that make Sunday Suppers an innovative program fostering long-term change in its participants. These additional elements include: cooking skills demonstrations, exercise classes such as yoga, a morning

walking club for parents, excursions to supermarkets and local fresh food providers to learn about different foods, assistance with food applications for food assistance programs, food budgeting training, provision of necessary kitchen equipment (pots, dishes, utensils) and community gardening. Further, members of participating families are required to complete a minimum of 2 hours of volunteer time and give back to their community. Each of these elements, combined with the experience of the family meal, is designed to improve the participants' ability to access and prepare healthy food, and to utilize the knowledge and experience that they gain in the process to change their behavior.

Sunday Suppers' Impact on the Community and Outcomes

Sunday Suppers' Impact on the Community and Outcomes

Because Sunday Suppers is a young organization, there has not been a great deal of data collected on the success of the program. However, after the pilot phase and several months of operation, there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that it is making a difference. Currently, 14-20 families regularly attend the meals on Sundays. One young man, Kevin, who started as a participant in the pilot and is now a volunteer, has been inspired to become more active and credits the program

with helping him lose 40 pounds. According to Reverend Mairena, the people who attend are changing their entire outlook on their place in the community. People "are coming because they are accepting responsibility and they know their worth.... [I]t helps their self-esteem" (Mairena 2011).

Since the organization's inception in October of 2010, Linda Samost has successfully built additional partnerships with other organizations, such as the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, the Emerald Street Urban Garden, and the Health Promotions Council. Sunday Suppers' early success has been due in large part to the generosity and support of those within and outside of the Norris Square neighborhood. Approximately 100 volunteers have helped Sunday Suppers since it began operations. Low overhead and a shared infrastructure with SHARE, combined with donated goods and services, makes for an inexpensive program to run. Having identified what they believe to be a sustainable business model, Sunday Suppers hopes to expand and develop similar, but tailored, programs in other communities. Because the community is ever-changing, Sunday Suppers is constantly engaged in dialogue trying to support the needs of their specific population. It is Sunday Suppers' mission that makes it innovative and relevant, but it is their savvy at relationship building that will sustain them. In the words of Steveanna Wynn, "I don't know of any other organization that is doing what Sunday Suppers

is doing; this is unique. Sunday Suppers' partnerships with other organizations give them a shot because it's the best game in town" (2011). While Sunday Suppers has met with success, it also faces some challenges, including maintaining families' commitment to the program to make lasting change, trying to measure and meet the needs of their critical population, and funding.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The impact of hunger, a condition of poverty, has been especially hard felt by the residents of Pennsylvania's First Congressional District and the Norris Square neighborhood. While poverty and hunger are the basis of the problem, the issues go beyond people not having enough food. Access to healthy food options, encouraging positive habits when it comes to mealtime, and the ability and resources to prepare healthy meals are all important factors in residents having a healthy and stable family life. Sunday Suppers is an innovative and logical approach to combating each of these issues. Its simplicity makes it a model that could easily be established in any other community dealing with hunger and its health-related issues. Their program provides families with the experience, resources and structure to make long-term changes in their lives. Interestingly it has already garnered the attention of the Philadelphia Inquirer

and Alfred Lubrano (2011), the very writer who chronicled hunger in Philadelphia and whose articles helped spur the idea of Sunday Suppers. Coming full circle, Sunday Suppers was featured on the front page of the Philadelphia Inquirer just past the one-year anniversary of its formation. While young, Sunday Suppers is set to inspire large scale change in Norris Square, Philadelphia, and maybe even beyond.

The authors would like to thank the following people for their participation, and willingness to share and be a resource: Linda Samost of Sunday Suppers; Steveanna Wynn of SHARE; Reverend Adan Mairena of West Kensington Ministry; Madeline Neris of Sunday Suppers; and Sunday Suppers volunteers Kevin Reyes and Mike Torres.

References

References

American Psychological Association. (2010). Effects of Poverty, Hunger and Homelessness on Children and Youth. Available at <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/poverty.aspx>.

Boone-Heinonen, J., P. Gordon-Larsen, C.I. Kiefe, et al. (2011, July 11). Fast Food Restaurants and Food Stores; Longitudinal Associations with Diet in Young to Middle-Aged Adults: The CARDIA Study. Arch Intern Med.

171(13):1162-1170.

Gibbs, N. (2006, June 4). The Magic of the Family Meal. Time. Available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1200760,00.html>.

Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger. (2010). Hunger in America. Available at <http://www.hungercoalition.org/hidden-epidemic>.

Joelving, F. (2011, May 2). Family meals might help kids keep a healthy weight. Reuters. Available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/2011/05/02/us-family-weight-idINTRE74119S20110502>.

Lubrano, A. (2010, October). A Portrait of Hunger. Philadelphia Inquirer. Available at http://www.philly.com/philly/news/special_packages/104415168.html.

Lubrano, A. (2011, November). Encouraging a Sense of Family in North Philadelphia. Philadelphia Inquirer. Available at http://articles.philly.com/2011-11-24/news/30437940_1_meal-nonprofits-communication.

Mairena, A. (2011, September 25). Interview by M. Heuser.

Morrison, P. (2011). Study finds better food options do not mean healthier community. Southern California Public Radio. Available at <http://www.scpr.org/programs/patt->

morrison/2011/07/12/19847/grocer-tentative/.

National Survey of Children's Health. (2007). Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health: A project of the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. Available at <http://childhealthdata.org/learn/NSCH>.

Nord, M. (2009, September). Food Insecurity in Households with Children; Prevalence Severity, and Household Characteristics. Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture.

Sunday Suppers. (2011). "Sunday Suppers." Available at <http://sundaysuppersphilly.org/>.

Treuhaft, S. and A. Karpyn. (2010). The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why it Matters. PolicyLink. Available at www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565.../FINALGroceryGap.pdf.

TRF PolicyMap. (2010). Available at <http://www.policymap.com/>.

Wynn, S. (2011, October 5). Interview by M. Heuser.