

BRINGING AWARENESS AND ACTION TO NUTRITION & FOOD INSECURITY ON THE EASTERN SHORE OF VIRGINIA



Eastern Shore Healthy Communities Coalition | Eastern Shore Health District | Accomac, VA | Presented By: Joani Donohoe, Project Coordinator/Public Relations Specialist

Introduction

The Eastern Shore of Virginia is rich in many resources including agriculture and seafood. However, we found that many members of our community are plagued by preventable chronic illnesses related to poor nutrition and diet. One of our initiatives that directly impacts the WIC community by improving the nutrition and developmental outcomes for infants and young children, is the adoption of a breastfeeding policy by the Eastern Shore Health District (ESHD). The policy was developed due to the understanding that breastfed infants are healthier and have a lower risk of diseases including obesity, ear infection, SIDS and much more. Breastfeeding is also healthy for mothers, and decreases her risk of obesity, diabetes and even cancer. The policy states that clients and employees of ESHD are provided with a designated, private space for lactation. The Eastern Shore Healthy Communities Coalition has also developed a toolkit to provide guidance and assistance to other organizations on the Eastern Shore of Virginia who would like to implement a business case for breastfeeding.

An additional initiative under the CPHMC grant was expanding the Healthy Options restaurant program which improves access to healthier foods by providing affordable menu items with high nutritional value including fresh, organic produce. One of our restaurants recently introduced a chopped salad menu which allows patrons to choose from a variety of fresh, healthy options to build their ideal salad.

While working on the objectives mentioned above, we uncovered an additional factor that contributes to the continued prevalence of chronic illnesses in our community. Through observations, attending meetings, and research, we found that a significant number of people in our community are food insecure. In fact, in 2013, there were at total of 6,940 insecure people on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, including a total of 1,960 children. Extended periods of food insecurity have been linked to diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, all of which are prevalent in our community. To address food insecurity and its related health outcomes, we hosted a Food Summit on March 30, 2016. The Food Summit provided an opportunity for stakeholders and community members to learn about the extent of food insecurity on Virginia's Eastern Shore and to engage with one another to bring about sustainable change in our community. Our keynote speaker was the First Lady of Virginia, Dorothy McAuliffe who has worked tirelessly to improve healthy local food access, build healthy communities, and eliminate childhood hunger.



Project Overview

Our project intervention focuses on increasing access to healthier foods to reduce chronic illnesses in our community. To accomplish this goal, we assembled a variety of representatives from organizations including the Food Bank, the public school system, and WIC to develop an action-based strategy to increase the uptake of existing resources, expand upon existing programs, and to adopt best practices from other communities. In addition to hosting a Food Summit, we also expanded the Healthy Options restaurant program and implemented a breastfeeding policy at our local health department.

Activities

- Research data to describe existing Eastern Shore food insecurity as well as resulting health, education, and workforce outcomes in a PowerPoint presentation and fact sheet.
- Conduct a situation analysis to determine community assets and gaps that exist to address food insecurity for PowerPoint presentation and fact sheet.
- Conduct literature review on promising and best PSE practices to address food insecurity and summarize in PowerPoint presentation and fact sheet
- Develop breastfeeding policy for Eastern Shore Health District
- Develop business case for breastfeeding to assist other organizations in implementing a breastfeeding policy
- Meet with chefs and restaurant owners to add healthier items to their menus

Outcomes

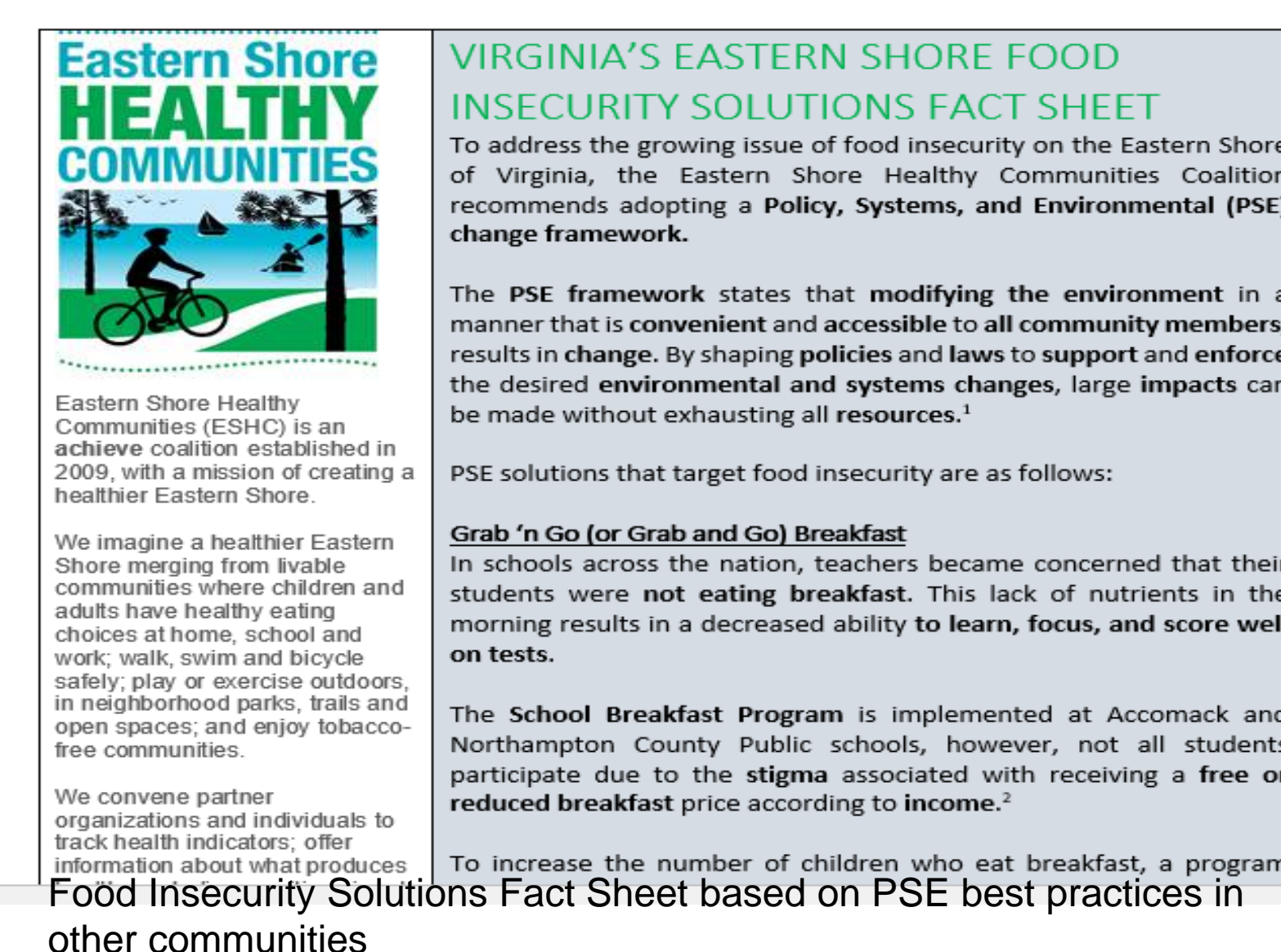
Our intervention has resulted in the creation of two fact sheets: "Virginia's Eastern Shore Food Insecurity Fact Sheet" and "Virginia's Eastern Shore Food Insecurity Solutions Fact Sheet," and a presentation titled: "Food Insecurity of Virginia's Eastern Shore: Addressing Hunger and Food Insecurity Across all Generations." These items were educational tools used at the Food Summit.

We also developed a resolution to hold community leaders accountable for sustaining the efforts of the Food Summit by bringing an end to food insecurity.

The intervention also resulted in a breastfeeding policy and lactation room(s) for the Eastern Shore Health district, over 50 new menu items for Healthy Options restaurants, and two Healthy Options billboards in Accomack and Northampton Counties.



Healthy Options Restaurant Billboard located in both Accomack and Northampton Counties on the Eastern Shore of Virginia



Next Steps

- Evaluate the outcomes of the Food Summit
- initiate a workgroup within the ESHC coalition to continue to find and sustain solutions to food insecurity on the Eastern Shore
- increase the number of businesses that adopt breastfeeding policies through the Wellness Work Group within the ESHC coalition
- Continue to support and expand our Healthy Options restaurants as they increase their healthy option menu items.

Lessons Learned

Rural health departments and WIC agencies may lack visibility in the community due to location (i.e. not on a main road) and limited transportation. We learned that it is important to improve outreach and communication strategies to ensure that members of the community know where we are located, and the scope of the services we can provide.

Although Healthy Options restaurants have several locations in both counties on Virginia's Eastern Shore, we discovered that not all members of the community have the opportunity to participate in the program. Due to financial and economic stresses, as well as limited transportation options, we found that it is necessary to address the larger issue of food insecurity, and not to assume that all residents have the means to participate in the Health Options restaurant program. This was an unexpected outcome, and led to the creation of the Food Summit to mitigate food insecurity in our community.



Accomack County Health Department located at 23191 Front Street, Accomac VA

Best Practices

One of our best practices was in reaching out to other organizations in order to increase our knowledge of other initiatives by attending meetings and networking. This allowed us to determine which organizations have similar goals and missions as our coalition, and to thereby develop plans to collaborate to make a larger impact on the community. We also found that allowing members of the community to tell us what they need, through outreach and in surveys, instead of us imposing our ideas upon them, allows for a more streamlined, customized package of services.