



# Innovative Community Partnerships for Chronic Disease Prevention: WIC & Head Start

Healthy Living Task Force | San Juan Basin Public Health | Durango, Colorado | Presented By: Sloan Gingg, MPH

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## INTRODUCTION

La Plata and Archuleta Counties sit in the Southwest corner of Colorado, near the Four Corners area. The population of both counties is primarily white (88%) and primarily rural (55% and 66%, respectively.) The food insecurity rates of both counties are consistent with the rest of the state (roughly 13%), and just under the national rate (15%). Of the WIC participants that were surveyed, 70% reported that having enough money to buy fresh fruits and vegetables is sometimes a problem (23% said this is always a problem). The majority of participants indicated that finding farmers’ markets in their area can be a problem, and noted that getting to a farmers’ market when it’s open can be a problem. It is important to note that the percentages of household with no motor vehicle are low at 2.3% and 2.8%, respectively (percentage in the US is 9.1%). Data from the local WIC database show that 58% of women on WIC are overweight pre-pregnancy, and 16% have a maternal weight gain that exceeds the recommended amount, which indicated that we still had work to do to educate WIC clients about healthy eating, as well as promoting healthy food retail outlets.

At the start of this project, San Juan Basin Public Health (SJBPH) knew there was a strong local food movement in La Plata County (LPC). A lot of households have urban gardens, and there are multiple resources for those who are interested in starting an urban garden, shopping at a local farmer’s market, or even composting at home. There are multiple CSAs for people to participate in. The biggest issue with our community is health disparities: although there’s a strong commitment to shopping local, eating healthfully, growing your own food, etc., this is mostly limited to those who have higher incomes. Activities promoting these initiatives are often viewed as “yuppie” and, even if it’s a misperception, there is the perception that not all are welcome.

This project sought to bring the local food movement to low-income residents through increased access to convenient, affordable, local produce, as well as increased nutrition education and promotion of healthy eating.



## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The local Head Start stood out as an obvious partner; Head Start programs are income-based and all children and families are automatically income-eligible for WIC, so working with them enabled us to reach our target population of low-income children and families. Research shows that reaching children at a young age improves their chances of embracing healthy messages and behaviors for a lifetime. Early childcare education has been established as a critical strategy in the fight against childhood obesity and other chronic diseases and provides the opportunity to shape healthy behaviors through education.

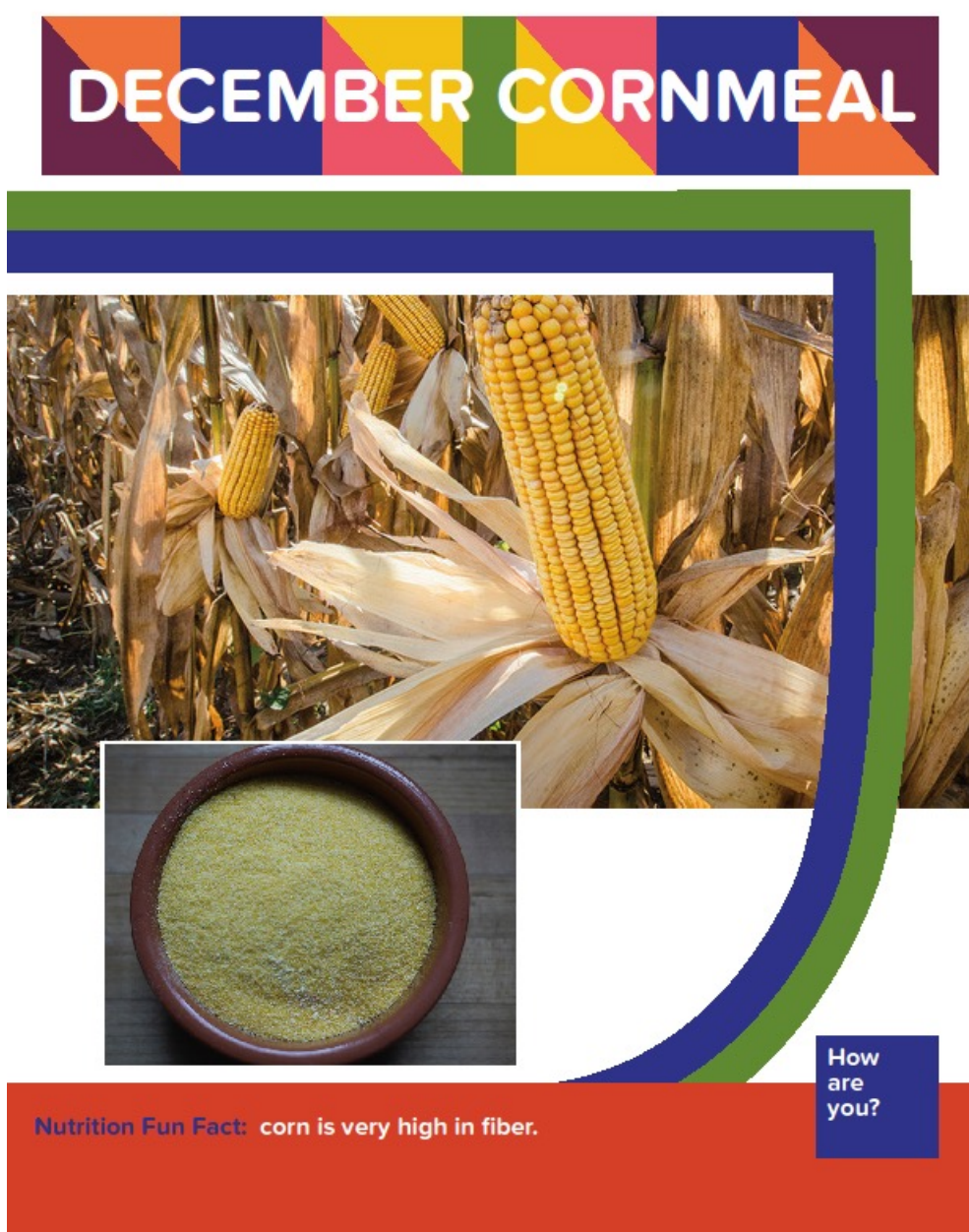
## ACTIVITIES

The partnership SJBPH established with the local Head Starts is multifaceted and has led to implementation of four main efforts to increase access to, and education about, healthy foods among Head Start students and families:

### 1. Free Farm Stand at Roberta Shirley Head Start – Manna Market



### 2. Food of the Month Taste-Test Activities



### 3. Teacher Training and Implementation of the CATCH Curriculum



### 4. Preschool Gardens

## OUTCOMES

SJBPH’s WIC program was able to solidify a strong relationship with the local Head Starts; we will continue to collaborate and reach out to families and provide WIC services and increased access to healthy food. The evidence-based CATCH curriculum, Taste Test Booklets, and preschool gardens are all system-level changes that Head Start kiddos and families will continue to benefit from.



Head Start kiddos using the CATCH curriculum

## LESSONS LEARNED

Because Head Start is a federally-funded program, they have to follow strict guidelines on how the program is implemented. This can create some bureaucratic barriers, but most can be overcome through careful communication, and development of formal process outlines and/or MOUs. An effective partnership with Head Start requires time and patience, but the collaborative effects are worth it.

Head Start teachers participating in the all-day training for implementation of the CATCH curriculum



## BEST PRACTICES

SJBPH implemented the best practice of conversing with community partners and the Healthy Living Task Force before finalizing the Community Action Plan (CAP) for this grant. The partnership with Head Start was a natural one due to the overlap in priority audience, but it evolved organically and without pressure from SJBPH. All four specific components of the partnership with Head Start were discussed with Head Start leadership prior to implementation, and staff were consulted to ensure buy-in, implementation fidelity, and program impact. SJBPH WIC staff also participate in the local Head Start Advisory Council, so as to remain aware of other Head Start initiatives, challenges, and potential ways to expand the partnership.

For the CATCH curriculum specifically, at least one teacher from each classroom at each center (a total of 26 teachers) was formally trained to implement the CATCH curriculum, which ensures consistent implementation across Head Start centers and classrooms.

## NEXT STEPS

Thankfully, through strong partnerships with Head Start and other food-focused organizations participating in the Healthy Living Task Force, most of these efforts will be sustained moving forward. There are plans in place to host Manna Market again this summer. The Head Start centers have committed to continuing to implement the CATCH curriculum, as well as the monthly Taste Test lessons. Additionally, the Healthy Living Task Force will continue to meet regularly, even after this project period ends.

San Juan Basin Public Health (SJBPH) has also applied for additional funding through a private foundation; if funding is awarded, it would be used to implement innovative WIC program delivery improvements. One proposed improvement is initiation of a mobile WIC office, which will enable staff to enroll families in WIC and host appointments off-site, at locations they frequent. This could expand the partnership with Head Start through regular mobile WIC clinics at local Head Start centers.