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HUNGER DOESN'T TAKE A SPRING BREAK:

Addressing Childhood Hunger Through Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

The rate of food insecurity among Hoosier children is slightly above the national average. For many of these children, school lunches are their primary source of nutrition. During school breaks, these children are at risk of going hungry. The Purdue Nutrition Society partnered with Glen Acres Elementary School in Lafayette, Indiana, a school where, in 2016, 72.6% of students qualified for free or reduced lunches. Through the school, 20 students from low-income families were identified and chosen to receive food care packages over their spring break. These packages were delivered to the students' homes, and they consisted of a minimum of three nutritious meals for each of the five days school was not in session. In addition to supplying a combination of nonperishable and fresh food items, the care packages included kid-friendly recipes and other nutrition-related educational handouts. Through this initiative, the Purdue Nutrition Society was able to help feed young children that know all too well that hunger doesn't take a spring break.

KEYWORDS

childhood hunger, food insecurity, nutrition society, nutrition

INTRODUCTION

"One of the greatest feelings in the world is knowing that we as individuals can make a difference. Ending hunger in America is a goal that is literally within our grasp."

—Jeff Bridges

According to a 2015 report, 335,410 children in Indiana are food insecure (Feeding America, 2015, p. 31). School lunches are the primary source of nutrition for many children of low-income families; during school breaks, these children are at risk of going hungry. With this serious social problem in mind, I proposed an initiative called Hunger Doesn't Take a Spring Break (HDTASB). Funded by a grant through the Office of Engagement, HDTASB allowed Nutrition Society to provide 20 area schoolchildren with three meals a day for the week of their spring break.

METHODOLOGY

After reviewing the Indiana Department of Education's data related to reduced and free lunch enrollment in the Lafayette School Corporation, I identified a school with one of the highest rates of qualifying students. With 72.6% of its students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program in 2016, Glen Acres Elementary was chosen as the community partner for the HDTASB project. Glen Acres serves kindergarten through fourth grade students, predominantly minority school, with 63.4% of the students belonging to nonwhite ethnicities in 2016 (Indiana Department of Education, 2016). With research expertise in food insecurity, Dr. Heather Eicher-Miller, an assistant professor in Purdue's Department of Nutrition Science, served as a consultant for this project (Figure 2).

Figure 1 (banner image, above). Project display at the Engagement and Service-Learning Summit, March 10, 2016.

Figure 2. Infographic detailing statistical information and the objective prepared for the Engagement and Service-Learning Summit.

A core group of Nutrition Society members worked to develop a menu that was both nutritious and appealing to elementary-aged children and that included largely items not typically available through a food pantry. I visited Costco and WalMart to record the quantity and prices of items we wished to include in the food care packages. With this information, I was able to develop a budget and refine the menu to ensure we had enough funds and food to cover at least three meals a day for five days. After the budget and menu were finalized, we were able to determine the number of students we could serve.

We were fortunate enough to have the ability to provide 20 children with food care packages. Our contact at Glen

Acres helped us to identify the students that would be the recipients. I requested that the school select students they felt were of the greatest need; four of the families had multiple children identified as recipients. The parents of these children were provided with a letter introducing the project and asked them to note any allergies as well as their preferred delivery method for the packages. After all information was collected, a volunteer from Nutrition Society and I went shopping for the items on our menu (Figure 3).

The menu focused on food items that the child could prepare with little to no adult assistance. We were mindful of the potential for limited appliances and resources

HUNGER DOESN'T TAKE A SPRING BREAK MENU	
BREAKFAST	FRUITS
Assorted Oatmeal	Banana
Bagel & Peanut Butter	Raisins
Assorted Cereal	GoGo Squeeze
Nutrigrain Bar	Apples
	Mixed Fruit Cup
	Peach Cup
	Fruit Strips
	Freeze Dried Fruit Chips
LUNCH	VEGETABLES
Chicken Noodle Soup	Mini Cucumbers
Peanut Butter & Jelly Sandwich	Canned Corn
Turkey/Ham Sandwich	Baby Carrots
Tuna & Crackers	Black Beans
Walking Tacos	Canned Green Beans
DINNER	SNACKS
Spaghetti	GoGurt
White Chicken Chili	Mini Pretzels
English Muffin Pizza	Granola Bar
Chicken & Rice Soup	Veggie Straws
Peanut Butter & Jelly Sandwich	String Cheese
BEVERAGES	
2% Shelf-Stable (UHT) Milk	
2% UHT Chocolate Milk	
Organic Juice Box	
*Multiple servings of some items are provided to utilize as additional meals/snacks	

Figure 3. Menu of the food items contained in each child's food care package.

in the family's home and as such opted for largely shelf-stable foods. In addition to food, we purchased each child a lunch tote and a MyPlate bracelet and created a folder with nutrition-related handouts, recipes, and games. I generated a packing list and labels for each of the bins to assist with assembly efforts (see Figure 4).

Assembly and delivery of the food care packages served as the labor-intensive portion of the HDTASB project. Five other Nutrition Society members worked with me to sort, assemble, and deliver each of the packages. Based on the parents' preferences, we made deliveries on both the Thursday and Friday prior to Glen Acres's spring break to either the school or the students' homes.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

"If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one."

—Mother Teresa

With the successful delivery of our 20 food care packages, we received very positive feedback from the families, including surprise and delight over the amount of food their children received. Though our reach was small in the number of children we were able to help, we hope the children we were able to affect felt comfort and security in not having to worry about where their next meal would come from for that week.

STUDENT IMPACT

“Childhood hunger in America is a real and often overlooked problem, but one that together, we can fix.”

—Scarlett Johansson

Researching the prevalence of childhood food insecurity in the area surrounding Purdue University, the state of Indiana, and the United States as whole was a sobering task. As an aspiring nutrition professional, this firsthand opportunity to realize socioeconomic factors in addressing community nutrition needs was invaluable. To best serve our clients, we must understand our clients, their lives, their struggles, and the obstacles they face. While direct interaction with the children's families was limited for the sake of efficiency and timeliness, even a small glimpse into their lives was profound and better prepared me for my future career. An added benefit to completing this project was the opportunity to serve those facing similar challenges I encountered as a mother living below the poverty line. This shared experience made HDTASB truly rewarding for me on a personal level as well.

In the future, this project could be improved by expanding the timeline to allow for collection of nutrient intake information to assess the contribution of the care packages to meeting the students' nutritional needs, as well as identifying those students with the most significant nutrition-related risks, such as nutrient deficiencies or inadequate intake. This addition would allow students to apply dietetics expertise to a greater extent. Additionally, collecting outcome data, including child and family satisfaction and acceptance of the food care packages,

would provide a better opportunity to objectively measure the success of the initiative.

We initially sought to expand our reach by seeking donations from food banks, local grocery stores, and a food drive. Unfortunately, time and resources limited our ability to accomplish these objectives. In the future, further funding and successful implementation of these partnerships would allow us to feed more children and execute an even more successful project.

Improvements and challenges aside, HDTASB was successful and well received. For our efforts, the Nutrition Society was nominated for and awarded the Community Engagement and Involvement Award through the Office of the Dean of Students, Student Activities and Organizations.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the profound social issue of childhood hunger in the United States was both eye opening and impactful toward my future career. As an aspiring registered dietitian, to facilitate proper nutrition education and counseling, I must first understand the lifestyles and obstacles of my patients and clients. This project required that I thoughtfully consider the limitation of resources available to low-income children and their families that could hinder their ability to not only follow a healthful diet, but maybe to eat at all. I will be able to apply this valuable insight in my career when working with low-income families.

Overall, the Hunger Doesn't Take a Spring Break project was more successful than I had imagined it would be when the idea was first conceptualized. Though there are opportunities for improvement, should the project be repeated by Nutrition Society, the overall goal of providing meals to children who might otherwise go without them over spring break was brought to fruition.

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Figure 4. Example of the food care packages provided to each child.

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AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Jessica Isaacs, a graduating senior in dietetics and president of the Purdue Nutrition Society, completed a service-learning project to help children at risk of going

hungry. As a mother who faced poverty, she experienced the anguish of not being able to adequately provide for her child. When the opportunity to engage in this project presented itself, she knew she wanted to participate.

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