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[Return to Current Issue](#)

EFNEP and SNAP-Ed Initial Paraprofessional Training Materials and Methods

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Abstract: Western Region EFNEP coordinators were frustrated by the apparent lack of materials available for training newly hired paraprofessional nutrition educators. An on-line survey was distributed to all EFNEP and SNAP-Ed state coordinators seeking details about initial training and available materials and requesting copies of materials for review. Results indicated diversity in training methodologies reflecting individual states' needs. Using a comprehensive document developed by the Western Region, eight states' initial training materials have been reviewed. Three reviews are posted on the EFNEP Coordinator's website hosted by Purdue University and provide a new training resource for EFNEP and SNAP-Ed program coordinators.

Introduction

Hiring and training paraprofessionals to provide research-based nutrition education is a challenging and important responsibility of Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) program coordinators (Warrix, 1998). The subject matter of paraprofessional training programs is broad and includes a variety of topics beyond nutrition (Baker, Pearson, & Chipman, 2009). Appropriate language when training paraprofessionals should be considered as well (Baker & Pearson, 2010).

What Training Materials Are Available?

A challenge many EFNEP and SNAP-Ed program coordinators encounter is an uncertainty about what paraprofessional initial training curricula materials and methods are available. Western Region EFNEP coordinators expressed a desire to identify and review existing initial training materials and methodologies used by EFNEP and SNAP-Ed across the country. The group recognized the need for program coordinators to have access to training curricula materials and material reviews.

An online questionnaire was developed and distributed to all state and territory EFNEP and SNAP-Ed program coordinators ($N = 188$) using a national Extension list serve. Prior to national distribution, 10 Western Region EFNEP coordinators were asked to review the questionnaire to assess face validity. Individuals who regularly participate in Western Region EFNEP conference calls constituted the assessment panel. Suggestions from the panel respondents resulted in minor modifications to the survey questions prior to nationwide administration of the questionnaire. The final survey was approved by the Human Subjects Committee at Idaho State University. Some survey content included:

- Willingness to submit training materials for Western Region EFNEP coordinators to review.
- Frequency of initial paraprofessional training.
- Average number of paraprofessionals trained at one time.
- Initial training formats such as computer-based programs, face-to-face, on-line, and etc.
- Training methods including food preparation activities, field trips, guest trainers, skill practice, role playing, videos, and shadowing experienced employees.
- What program coordinators found both comfortable and challenging about initial training.

Paraprofessional Initial Training Materials and Methods Identified

The on-line survey closed in May 2009, with 55 respondents (29.3% response rate). The initial paraprofessional training curricula listed on survey responses were:

- EatSmart – Louisiana State University website
- Nutrition Education Process Manual – developed by Rutgers University (New Jersey)
- EFNEP Nutrition Educators Continuing Education – Utah State University
- Navigating for Success – developed by Cornell University (New York)

Training methodologies responses were understandably varied and reflected diverse programming responding to state populations and needs. Many programs trained new paraprofessionals twice a year (36%). Monthly training occurred as well (36%). However, some programs also administered initial training on an as-needed basis (38.2%). Interestingly, the initial training group size was small. This was evidenced through 72.2% of the survey respondents who stated one to five paraprofessionals were trained at one time. Not surprising, program coordinators primarily used a face-to-face format for initial training (98.1%). However, multiple formats such as computer-based programs and face-to-face were used by numerous respondents (56.4%). Only 20% used a single training format.

Training methods included a wide variety of activities and content.

- Food preparation activities and/or demonstrations (72.2%)
- Field trips (63.5%)
- Guest trainers (64.8%)
- Skill practice (72.5%)
- Role playing (63.5%)
- Food safety (27.3%)
- Basic cooking skills (27.3%)
- Job shadowing (94.4%)

Program coordinators indicated that the time required to train and arrange schedules was challenging. Because some programs offer training at the state level (28.0%), distance and logistics were a challenge. Many professionals were concerned about the volume of information to teach during initial training, including nutrition content, program policies and procedures, program paperwork, and recruitment. They did not want to overwhelm new employees.

Program coordinators enjoyed teaching new employees nutrition content (23.6%). Many program coordinators have an educational background in nutrition, so it was not surprising that respondents identified nutrition education as a comfort point. A small number (3.6%) indicated that teaching adult learning principles was enjoyable.

Looking to the Future for Paraprofessional Initial Training

Finding curriculum and training new paraprofessionals is a challenging process. Even so, national EFNEP participant impact data indicates the task is accomplished successfully (USDA, NIFA, n.d.).

The EFNEP Western Region has made strides reviewing initial training materials. To facilitate the

process, the region developed a comprehensive review document. Several state coordinators responded to a request for initial training material submission, and as a result, eight states' initial training materials were reviewed by the Western Region to date. Permission to post the review of their materials was received from three states to date. Those reviews are posted on the EFNEP Coordinator's website hosted by Purdue University <<http://efnep.org/>>. Interested program coordinators can contact the state program coordinators who developed the materials for further information. The posted materials are:

- Cent\$ible Nutrition Program Initial Training Manual, University of Wyoming
- Nutrition Education Process Manual, Rutgers University
- WNEP – Independent Study Course, University of Wisconsin

These new reviews of existing training materials provide a training source for program coordinators. Future steps include contacting program coordinators who did not respond to the survey to identify additional materials for review. EFNEP Western Region coordinators will review any additional materials received. Posting the reviews at <http://efnep.org> will make the materials available for professionals. Western Region coordinators will also identify gaps in training materials and work to develop the needed tools.

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