

Nutrition Education for Improved Health

A Partnership between Cooking Matters and DotWell

Healthcare professionals are increasingly using practical nutrition education to educate patients on the importance of healthy eating and the impact of food choices on their health. By teaching patients the skills they need to make healthy choices in purchasing and preparing food and helping patients understand how what they eat is directly related to their health and well-being, health care providers have another tool to use in combatting chronic disease, food insecurity, and malnutrition.

No child should grow up hungry in America, but one in five children struggles with hunger. Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign is ending childhood hunger in this nation by ensuring all children get the healthy food they need, every day.

One of the No Kid Hungry campaign's core programs is Cooking Matters®, which empowers low-income families with the skills to shop for and cook healthy meals on a budget. Low-income families in America report that cost is their biggest barrier to making a healthy dinner at home. Cooking Matters empowers families to stretch their food budgets so their children get healthy meals. Participants learn to shop smarter, make healthier food choices, and cook delicious, affordable meals. Nutrition education through programs like Cooking Matters® can help combat the impact of chronic diseases and help patients achieve better health outcomes.

Cooking Matters is offered as a six week course, covering nutrition and healthy eating, food preparation, budgeting and shopping. Share Our Strength also offers Shopping Matters, interactive grocery store tours with a focus on buying healthy foods on a budget. Courses and tours are led by volunteer chefs and nutrition educators and offered to more than 30,000 families a year across the U.S.

BACKGROUND: DOTWELL

[DotWell](#), a community-based organization, is a partnership between the Codman Square Health Center and the Dorchester House Multi-Service Center in Dorchester, Massachusetts. In 2006, DotWell conducted a needs assessment of Dorchester community residents. With approximately 18 percent of residents living below the federal poverty line and more than 30 percent of residents suffering from obesity, health center staff sought to understand how they could best serve the needs of their community. The assessment revealed that financial concerns were a primary stressor for health center patients. Additionally, patients understood that an unhealthy diet negatively impacts their health conditions, but did not have the knowledge to change their eating habits.

Codman Square and Dorchester House health center staff started offering patients nutrition education, with an initial focus on patients suffering from diabetes. Staff worked with patients to teach them how to eat healthy, how their diet impacts health conditions and how to make changes to their diet and the diet of their family. DotWell also began offering a number of programs focused on children, nutrition and obesity.

RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR NUTRITION EDUCATION

DotWell conducts a Fiscal Health Vital Sign assessment on each participant so that we can address any social and financial issues that the participant may experience. In order to broaden their reach, DotWell staff wanted to offer patients classes on financial literacy and the intersection between household economics and nutrition, such as maximizing food budgets to eat healthy meals on a limited budget. According to Michelle Rue, Director of Health Education and Outreach for DotWell, a significant portion of the Dorchester population is comprised of immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean, and physicians were seeing a growing population with diets comprised of rice and other starches. Physicians wanted to help patients understand how to change their diet and cook more nutritious meals.

As Rue explained, “We wanted to give our patients alternatives to their traditional foods and we thought, if we can teach the adults, they can teach their kids and we’ll have a greater impact.” The team at DotWell decided that cooking classes would be an appealing way to engage patients in nutrition education. With funding from BlueCross and the Smith Foundation, DotWell launched Eat Green, Save Green. DotWell partnered with Cooking Matters to offer a six-week course for patients and community members in which participants receive nutrition education, participate in cooking classes, receive financial education and learn how to shop for healthy food on a limited budget. Since 2006, the program has run 22 courses in the Dorchester community.

Eat Green, Save Green, a collaboration between Cooking Matters and DotWell, is designed to teach patients and community members to cook healthy meals and shop for nutritious foods on a budget. The program emphasizes financial literacy and teaches participants how to set a budget and build good credit.

In the first half of each class, Cooking Matters staff discuss general nutrition and healthy eating habits. Then, class participants prepare a healthy meal together. At the end of each session, students take home a bag of groceries to prepare the meal that was just cooked in class. In the second half of each class, students learn about financial management and how to access additional resources, such as heating assistance programs, local food pantries and federal nutrition programs.

DotWell staff discussed the Eat Green, Save Green program with clinicians on an individual basis, paving the way for clinicians to refer patients to the classes. According to Rue, physicians and providers were immediately on board because the classes take place on health center grounds, making it easier to refer patients and monitor health impacts. Nutritionists at the community health center praise the program and refer patients to the classes. According to McCabe, the class participants are savvy about nutrition information. “They knew that nutrition information panels were important, but they didn’t know how to put that into practice. They knew eating high-fiber foods was important, but they didn’t know how to put that together in a way that didn’t taste like cardboard.”

Cooking Matters serves a high-need population in the Dorchester community. The majority of Eat Green, Save Green participants are female, between the ages of 40-59 years old. Three-fourths of participants (76%) already access federal nutrition programs, such as SNAP, WIC, and school meal programs. Additionally, 33 percent access emergency food pantries. By conducting direct outreach in the Dorchester community and distributing flyers at food pantries, neighborhood churches and throughout both health centers, DotWell has been able to recruit a high-need population from the community.

EVALUATING LONG-TERM IMPACTS

DotWell administers pre and post program surveys to measure changes as a result of program participation. An evaluation of Eat Green, Save Green participants demonstrates that not only do participants change their eating behaviors, but they are also seeing positive changes in their finances. The evaluation revealed that as a result of the class:

- Participants are 46% more likely to use a food budget; 83% felt confident in creating a budget
- 33% more likely to plan meals ahead of time
- Participants saw a 124% increase in using “Nutrition Facts” to make food choices
- 93% made recipes from class at home

The evaluation revealed the potential for long-lasting health impacts:

- 97% of participants made changes in their eating habits
- Participants realized a 65% increase in eating at least two cups of fruit a day
- 40% increase in eating at least two and a half cups of vegetables a day
- They are using 30% less salt in preparing meals
- 63% increase in using low-fat or fat-free dairy products

DotWell is committed to continuing the Eat Green, Save Green program. Staff see the classes as a vital piece of education for patients and the community as a whole. Rue explained, “Our only complaint is that we wish we could take more people. Participants see immediate value to the classes, but most importantly, they are still utilizing what they learned three months later.”