

Kahuku Hospital Healthy Communities Farmers Market: a culturally appropriate health intervention

AURIELLA HUGHES, RN*

Introduction

The Ko'olau Loa area of the north-windward shore on the island of O'ahu has a population of 19,000 of which nearly 23% are Native Hawai'ian and 47% are Pacific (Native Hawai'ians included). High risk factors, which contribute to the prevalence of chronic diseases within this population, are well documented and continue to be a public health challenge. Statewide, Native Hawai'ians comprise 44% of all diabetes cases reported. The rate of diabetes among Native Hawai'ians was the highest for those 35 years and older. An important goal of any community health education program is to reach those who would not typically seek out health information. Native Hawai'ians and other Pacific Islanders are underutilizers of health promotion programs when compared to other ethnic groups in Hawai'i. Programs have been unsuccessful in reaching these populations. Additionally, health education efforts, particularly those generated by a hospital, are often misunderstood. Many people tend to steer clear of health educators out of fear they will receive only preaching on the "don'ts" and "shouldn'ts" or how they are falling short of the ideal.

Complicating matters in the Ko'olau Loa community, is a general mindset of associating hospitals with sickness and death rather than with health and healing. Many in the community have voiced the feeling that they do not want to go to a hospital unless they are dying. It is difficult to inspire interest in hospital-based programs even when the activities are free and healthy snacks are included as incentives. This presents a problem for a community health education department wanting to realize its objectives.

*Community Health Education Coordinator, Farmers Market Project Director, c/o Kahuku Hospital Community Health Education Office, 56-117 Pualalea Street, Kahuku, Hawai'i 96731.

New and creative approaches are needed to stimulate public interest in health and wellness and participation in health assessments and screenings.

The birth of an idea

In an effort to identify activities that were culturally appropriate and acceptable to the members of this community, a group of health professionals from O'ahu met to share ideas. One of the ideas discussed was combining health education and screening with a Farmers Market. Farmers Markets are a popular event in the island communities. They are usually held once a week, in convenient locations and provide a variety of fresh produce at below-market prices.

Turning the idea into a reality

The concept of providing health screening and education activities with a Farmers Market was presented to representatives of other health agencies at a community care network meeting. The concept was positively received and work began to develop the Kahuku Hospital Healthy Communities Farmers Market (Farmers Market). A grant proposal was generated and submitted to The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Local Initiatives Funding Partners Program (RWJF LIFPP) to support the intervention. The Queen Emma Foundation provided the matching funds required by the granting agency. The months of hard work and collaboration of community members with hospital staff resulted in the Farmers Market proposal being one of 18 grants funded by the RWJF out of over 200 applicants nationwide. The demonstration of strong community collaboration was one of the reasons RWJF funded this innovative project.

About the Healthy Communities Farmers Market Project (HCFM)

The Kahuku Hospital Healthy Communities Farmers Market takes place two Saturday mornings a month on the front lawn of the hospital. This program integrates health promotion and screening activities with an open market where community members can purchase fresh produce below the regular retail cost. The Farmers Market area is decorated with multicolored flags and numerous blue tents indicating that an event is happening. The layout allows ample room for strolling from tent to tent to promote walking. This is the only exercise some of our participants get. Screening services, on-site health education and information, children's activities, cook-

ing demonstrations, and visiting health professionals are located in the center of the Market under one large tent. The free health services are intentionally located at the center of the Farmers Market in order to draw the participants in toward what we consider to be the “core” or main purpose of the Market — raising health awareness.

On-site education

In this unique setting, the HCFM staff is able to provide individualized education in a “mini learning session”. Client information is collected and chronic disease risk factors are discussed. Participants have the opportunity to ask questions about health, health care alternatives, and accessing local services. This component of the program has been found to be successful, as community members have been able to open up and share their personal and family health concerns. Participants demonstrate their level of trust and comfort with the community nurse and community health representative by sharing personal information regarding any traditional or complementary methods of healing they are using.

Participants identified with abnormal blood glucose levels, blood pressure, or cholesterol are provided with timely health education and recommendations for follow-up. Follow-up may consist of recommendations for additional free lab work, appointments with a primary care physician, referrals to health agencies, phone calls, health literature and invitations to utilize the Market staff for further information.

In the first year of the program, 1,182 persons were screened and a total of 2,191 screening tests were performed. Twenty-nine percent, or 631 of those screenings reported abnormal values in blood pressure (>140/90), total cholesterol (>200 mg/dl), and/or blood glucose (<70 or >140 mg/dl).

During the first year, the program experienced an increase in vendor participation and attendance. There is a core of over two dozen farming families and vendors who sell their produce at the Market and at least 500 people visit and shop at the Farmers Market on a regular basis. A total of 29 different health agencies and complementary care practitioners participate to provide information and education to the community. Other activities, such as T'ai Chi exercise and cooking demonstrations are included.

Healing through food

Combining health education with a Farmers Market is a simple, yet practical “marriage” of activities. A marketplace full of healthy produce provides the ideal environment to connect health education and wellness. The popularity of the

Farmers Market enables the health component to reach shoppers of different ethnicities, lifestyles, ages and socio-economic groups.

The lower prices for fresh produce makes the Farmers Market appealing to the public and in turn, supports healthy diet choices. Another draw is the wide array of fresh produce, including local favorites such as taro, seaweed, and hard to find fruits and vegetables. Although the Farmers Market is not historically linked to the Hawaiian culture, it promotes an environment where local people appreciate feeling at ease, being outdoors, and buying food for their *‘ohana* (family) from a real person rather than from a chilled rack at the supermarket.

The Farmers Market is successful for more reasons than just the availability of fresh and inexpensive produce. People come to a farmers market not just to take care of their basic need for food, but also to take care of another basic need – to connect with other people. The Healthy Communities Farmers Market provides a safe and relaxed environment to shop, chat with neighbors and old friends, as well as providing an opportunity to meet new ones.

Combining health education with a Farmers Market is a simple, yet practical “marriage” of activities.

Collaboration is key

Collaboration is a critical component to this program’s success. Early discussions stressed the importance of synergy — working together with combined action. The projects motto, “*E Kiko’oaku, E Hana Like*” (“Reaching Out, Working Together”) promotes and prioritizes cooperation rather than competition.

The partners who make this project successful include the farmers and produce vendors; health agencies; professional and clinical resource persons; student clubs; interested individuals who serve in various capacities and most important, the community participants. We have learned that it is very important to include *all* those involved to ensure that collective ownership and responsibility are felt for successes as well as for challenges.

Health is holistic

Taking responsibility and good care on all levels – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – is a lifelong effort, and one that requires ongoing support and encouragement. The staff of the Community Health Education Department at Kahuku Hospital are now able to meet the challenge of reaching at least a portion of our “at risk” population with health education and screening services, in a comfortable setting where community members feel happy to visit. □