

## Toward a goal of healthy food for all

When the USDA released the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans late last month, public health advocates applauded the emphasis on addressing the obesity epidemic by balancing calories with physical activity and increasing consumption of wholesome, healthy foods.

Some of the recommendations are common-sense tips, but their inclusion in the federal policy guidelines will have an important effect on a broad spectrum of programs from school food for children to Meals on Wheels for seniors and nutrition advice for all.

The Food Bank of Yolo County has been working to improve access to healthy food for many years, and these guidelines reaffirm our hope and efforts to ensure that everyone in Yolo County has the food and resources needed to make healthy choices.

Increased access to fresh, local produce will help in this regard, which is why we were pleased to welcome the great news that the Davis Farmers Market is now accepting Food Stamps. This opens the door for a win-win as low income families are able to purchase fresh, nutritious produce while directly supporting local farmers.

However in order to maximize the impact of this and other resources, we need to ensure that all people eligible to receive Food Stamp benefits are enrolled. Unfortunately California has the second-lowest participation rate in the country at 37%, and Yolo County is no exception. In fact, Yolo County ranks #50 (out of 58) in the state with only 31% of likely eligible residents receiving benefits based on data from 2008. And while Food Stamp enrollment has been on the rise in recent years, many see this as a reflection of the increase in need due to the economic crisis rather than significant gains in enrolling all who are eligible.

Some people choose not to apply for Food Stamps because of a perceived stigma. They remember with pride the resilient times they have endured in the past and view asking for help as welfare. In an effort to combat this perception, the federal government renamed the program to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) in 2008 to highlight the focus on health and nutrition.

More recently, California announced that the new name to be used here will be CalFresh, to emphasize that the program is not just a resource for food, but a way to better support a healthy diet and lifestyle.

In addition to the health benefits of increasing Food Stamp participation, studies have shown that every \$1 in benefits spent results in \$1.79 of economic activity. This beneficial multiplier effect provides an important opportunity to revive our local economy and increase prosperity for all.

In spite of the clear benefits of the program, there are many reasons those who are eligible choose not to apply for Food Stamps. Myths abound regarding the eligibility requirements, application process and whether it's "worth it."

However, we have seen through our new Food Stamp Outreach initiative that if we dispel the myths and assist people through the process, we can make great strides in helping our neighbors in need. Families who until recently weren't sure where their next meal was coming from are now able to secure the food they need to grow and thrive. And as they are empowered to make healthy choices, we as a community move together toward our goal of healthy food for all.

— *Frances di Cristina is the director of programs at the Food Bank of Yolo County*

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