

A passion for produce builds healthier lives: Evaluation of program outcomes

Passion for Produce (P4P) is a healthy eating program that offers a fruit and vegetable distribution and nutrition education in a social setting. Our evaluation found that at P4P's gold sites — those that combine food distribution, nutrition education, and Nutrition Ambassadors — participants improved their ability to make healthy eating choices for themselves and their families and foster connections with their neighbors and peers.

Background and purpose

Passion for Produce (P4P) is a community-based healthy eating program offered by Second Harvest Food Bank (SHFB) at 33 locations throughout Santa Cruz County, 14 of which are considered gold sites. Participants of the program are generally lower-income, monolingual Spanish-speakers. P4P serves urban, suburban, and rural communities, in neighborhood sites such as churches and schools.

P4P offers twice-monthly market-style distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables, alongside a nutrition class where participants learn how produce supports healthy lifestyles, receive recipes for the foods being offered, and have a chance to talk about healthy habits in a room of their peers. Food distribution and some of the nutrition classes are led by volunteers from the community who have been trained to be "Nutrition Ambassadors" (NAs).

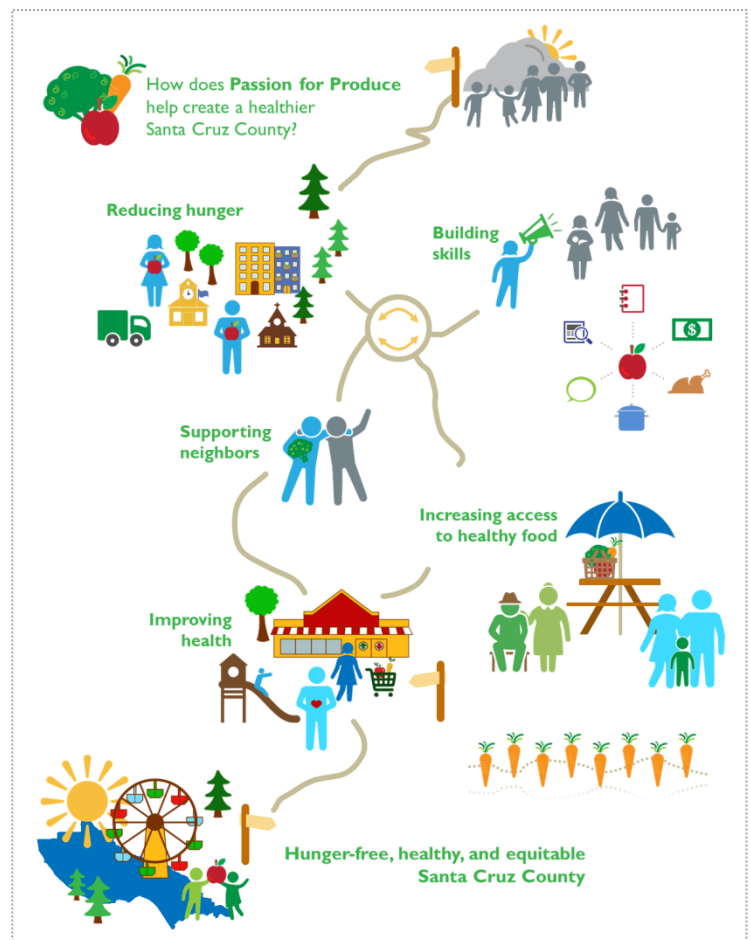
SHFB contracted with the Center for Community Health and Evaluation (CCHE) to evaluate the extent to which P4P achieves its intended outcomes. Using a logic model-case study approach, CCHE conducted in-depth interviews with participants at three gold sites to understand ways the program supports them. This evaluation project was the first time SHFB has had the opportunity to systematically capture the difference P4P makes in the lives of participants.*

Methods: Three gold sites were selected to participate in an analysis of P4P program outcomes. In January and February of 2017, CCHE conducted 30 interviews (including in Spanish) with participants and NAs to understand P4P's impact on their lives. CCHE rigorously analyzed the interview data using standard qualitative methods to compile individual case studies (Appendix A). From these, the team identified themes that were consistent across sites. See Appendix B for a full methods description.

Key findings

Those who participated at a gold site for at least 6 months reported that P4P:

- Builds knowledge and skill for incorporating fresh produce into daily life
- Prompts them to adopt healthy eating behaviors
- Supports social connectedness and learning with one another
- Provides healthy food to individuals and families who cannot afford to purchase fresh produce on a regular basis



*Participants referenced in this report include the NAs and the community members who attended the classes and food distribution.

CCHE developed a theory of change, or logic model, to describe P4P's intended outcomes.

Participant profile

The participants we interviewed engaged with P4P for 6 months to as long as 8 years. Many attended classes and food distributions with their friends, neighbors, or family members. Some lived nearby, while others commuted up to an hour. Participants worked in a variety of settings including agriculture, service industries, small businesses, clinics, and home-based child care; a few of them were unemployed or retired.



Collecting leafy greens at the DeLaveaga P4P site

Program profile

The P4P founders emphasize that the heart of what makes the program work is that “it’s about how much NAs care, not how much they know.” Along with nutrition education and free fresh food, the program emphasizes a culture of warmth and hospitality, and encourages NAs to welcome, greet, listen, laugh, and encourage learning together.

Nutrition lessons are planned by SHFB staff and are led by either staff or NAs. Topics vary from month to month and focus on a theme such as how healthy eating can prevent or manage diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, or obesity. Lessons teach skills related to reading and understanding nutrition labels, appreciating the nutritional benefits of foods, learning healthy cooking habits, and making healthy snacks.

Very often a recipe is demonstrated with a taste test, frequently using fruits and vegetables available that day for distribution. At one site, DeLaveaga, Nutrition Ambassadors offer family friendly activities to parents and children in the audience, by adapting the lessons for the children who come with their families.

Program spotlight: DeLaveaga

The P4P program at DeLaveaga Elementary School serves many families whose children attend the school. Parents learn about the program when information is sent home with children or when they pick their children up from school. The energetic and dedicated DeLaveaga NAs describe their role as to support families to be healthier, but also to support and build volunteers. The lead NA tailors the SHFB nutrition lessons for her group of participants; notably she tries to emphasize easy ways they can understand nutrition information and choose healthy foods over unhealthy options.

I ask people if they feel depressed and what do they like to eat? A lot of people say “cake, coffee, chocolate” – and I explain “well I have new information for you, if you eat 1 apple, banana, orange, instead of cake, if you eat a granola bar or snack that’s 100% grains this is better for you than sweet bread. I explain the options you can substitute.

— Nutrition Ambassador

The lead NA encourages children and parents to learn together and even tries to get older children to volunteer at the site.

One activity has been that I invite all the kids to come to the table, give each kid paper with some questions on it, for example, how to be active, how to eat healthy. I was really surprised when the kids were 100% correct, and knew more than their parents. I feel happy that the kids are teaching the parents a little bit how to change.

— Nutrition Ambassador

Program outcomes

Participants gained knowledge and skills for a healthy lifestyle

All participants described new ways they learned to prepare foods and cook vegetables they had never tried before such as kale, Brussels sprouts, eggplant, and butternut squash. Many learned about low-fat alternatives to frying foods; new ways to use produce in salads, soups, and smoothies; healthy ways to season foods; and other ways to reduce the amount of sodium, sugars, and fats in meals.

Over half of participants explained how learning to use new recipes had supported their healthy eating. Recipes broadened their range of ideas for healthy cooking for themselves and their families, and served as a key motivator to cook new vegetables, especially when recipes were aligned with the produce offered at that day's distribution.

Most participants shared a strong awareness that they were trying to eat well to manage or prevent such conditions as diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart conditions, cancer, anemia, and kidney disease. Some participants described that learning about nutrition had prompted them to encourage family members and friends to eat well to stay well.

I have tried a few things they have talked about in the class. I have learned that instead of drinking soda, I can make flavored water with cucumber, oranges, mint leaves.

– DeLaveaga participant who cleans homes, and has come to the program for over a year

Participants adopted behaviors and habits to lead a healthier life

Each participant interviewed shared examples of how participating in P4P helped them introduce more fruits and vegetables into their diets.

The availability of produce alongside guidance on how to prepare it helped almost all participants make the decision to avoid foods with high fat and cholesterol. Examples of substitutions participants made included choosing lean proteins like fish or grilled chicken over hamburger and other red meats. They described cooking with fewer fats, eating less fried foods and pizza, and avoiding processed foods.

Several participants shared examples of how they had changed their behaviors while at the grocery store, such as walking the outside of the store to shop for fresh produce rather than processed foods in middle aisles. Many talked about how they had learned to read labels to understand nutrition values and choose foods with less added sugar, salt, or fat. They avoided purchasing items like soda, sweet baked goods, and high-sodium canned vegetables.

I try to put more vegetables in meals than I usually did, like putting carrots in soup, zucchini, potatoes. Before I never put that stuff in my food.

– Nazarene participant who is the primary earner in her household and takes care of her children and grandchildren



Nutrition Ambassador Isaias promoting cabbage at Nazarene

Nearly all participants described their strategies to eat more healthy foods. Examples included:

- Putting more vegetables on family members' plates
- Offering smaller portion sizes
- Allowing children to serve themselves what they felt they could eat
- Planning ahead to have healthy snacks on hand so that they did not resort to fast foods
- Making substitutions in recipes to reduce sugar or fat
- Cooking at home more often
- Adjusting the timing of meals so that dinners did not happen too late

A key motivation among all participants for adopting healthy eating habits was to nurture the health and well-being of their families, especially their children. Several participants were the primary food preparer in the home, and their participation enabled them to directly improve the nutrition of their families. Parents described how the program had given them the information needed to feed and encourage their children to eat more vegetables and less sugary foods and help their families “get healthier together.”

Before, I didn't know how to nutritionally feed my family. I used to just give them food, have them eat it and that was it. But they show you how to better or correctly feed yourself.

— Participant who has regularly attended the program for one year and cleans homes for a living

Participants developed connections with one another and benefited from learning with peers

Participants provided heartfelt examples of how they had developed care, concern, friendship, and connection with others by participating in the classes. Several talked about how participating expanded their social circle, helped them meet more people in their neighborhood, and in a few cases reduced isolation. These connections and the social atmosphere supported learning and motivated many to try to eat healthier.



Participants, nutrition ambassadors and staff enjoying a distribution at Soquel Bilingual

Program spotlight: Soquel

The P4P program at Soquel Bilingual Seventh Day Adventist Church began in 2012, and serves around 30 families in the small town of Soquel, just outside of Santa Cruz. The site is run by a committed mother-daughter team, and many of the NAs and participants are members of the church. This site serves participants with varied backgrounds; some are retired or are on disability, others work in the service industry.

The people here remember your name, ask how you're feeling. I remember I didn't come for a month, and came back and they said, "We missed you, how are you feeling?" You feel like they're an extension of your family.

— Participant

Participants at this site talked a great deal about how they had developed care for and friendship with one another, and are particularly drawn to the social aspect of participating. One interviewee stated that they felt “part of the family” when they were there. Several NAs described how through volunteering they had developed communication skills and learned to be more open and sociable.

The program has helped us connect with the people in the community. Whenever we are out and they see us, and they ask if we have the food bank going on, and so we have formed friendships around town.

— Nutrition Ambassador

Passion for Produce helped participants to eat healthy foods they otherwise could not afford

P4P distributes free fresh fruits and vegetables throughout Santa Cruz County. The participants we interviewed experienced financial hardship or food insecurity. Many described how the program allowed them to acquire the fresh produce they needed to eat a healthy diet, which they otherwise could not afford.

At two sites participants described how they had benefitted from learning how to buy foods in bulk, purchase more food for less money at the grocery store, and make food last longer to feed their families. Several participants talked about how receiving free fresh produce had enabled them to spend money on other important items such as medications or other healthy foods for their families.

Program spotlight: Nazarene

The first P4P program opened its doors in 2009 at the Church of the Nazarene, as a response to inadequate fresh food access in rural parts of the county and increasing prevalence of diabetes and obesity, especially among low-income and Hispanic populations. Nazarene is a small church on a busy road on the outskirts of Watsonville.

Participants describe how they began attending the program because they had seen the distribution truck from the road. Participation at this site is largely seasonal and fluctuates based on the work cycle of the many agricultural workers who attend the program; the program absorbs higher numbers of participants during non-picking seasons (September–March).

This program is the main support to better health for my family; they provide us fruits and vegetables that we eat in every single meal. If there are fruits and vegetables in our meals, it comes from the distribution.

— Participant

I got days when I don't want to leave the house, but I look forward to seeing people here, even though I limp all the way over here. It gives me the strength to get here because I get to hang out with people and the simple thing about getting excited about the food, it connects you, and you take that home with you and that piece of fruit and vegetables, is that much sweeter and tastier because you got it here.

— Soquel participant who lives near the P4P site and has been coming to the program for 3 years



Nutrition Ambassador, Remijio, promoting vegetables at DeLaveaga Elementary

Conclusion

Our analysis of interview data from a sample of participants and volunteers, all of whom participated in a high performing P4P site for at least 6 months, credits the program with improving participants' skills and knowledge to make healthy eating choices for themselves and their families. Community members who attend the program benefit from expanded access to fresh produce, free nutrition education and opportunities to socialize and learn together.

Efforts are underway to bring these benefits to greater scale. Program staff are implementing assessments to identify opportunities for program improvement. The program is committed to expanding its capacity for assessing program outcomes and impact on participants. To this end, P4P is developing and operationalizing confidential methods of attendance tracking to better understand participation.

P4P leadership is working with CCHE to design an ongoing and self-sustaining evaluation plan that will match baseline demographic information from new participants with health and behavioral data collected through brief, but identifiable, touches as participants grow within the program. Within this work are efforts to foster evaluation capacity through creative techniques to collect participant input and feedback.

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