

LC 5: Cooking for the Family

The mission of Cooking for the Family (C4F) is to help families gain basic cooking skills and access to healthy, affordable ingredients. This is accomplished via a 5 week program that teaches students 8 core cooking skills, all for a participation fee of only \$10. The social determinant of health that C4F addresses is health literacy. One of their main goals is to educate participants about how a healthy diet can improve your physical and mental health. Health literacy plays a significant role in both individual and community-level health outcomes. Understanding the importance of a balanced, nutritious diet empowers individuals to make wiser choices about their health. C4F works to educate community members not only about nutrition, but how to prepare foods in an affordable and enjoyable way. Lack of understanding regarding cooking techniques and cost-efficient shopping is a significant factor in many individuals' poor diet choices.

Community interviews elucidated several concerns regarding the impact of COVID on community relationships. First, the pandemic limited C4F's ability to host classes in-person at community centers. This limited some lower-income communities' ability to participate, especially in communities where transportation is an issue. Participants and teachers also expressed a dislike for the virtual format; internet accessibility, home stability, and kitchen resources were noted as barriers to an efficient session. Virtual sessions also lacked key components of community building such as engaging and connecting with other participants.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed problems in C4F's ability to foster a community environment in classes. Before the pandemic, the class would gather together at the end to eat their meals together as a group and to discuss what they learned throughout the class. However, the pandemic masking requirements made this impossible. At certain points in the pandemic, they even had to switch to online classes for the safety of all participants. Our project was focused on updating the recipes to include health content and providing alternatives for those with specific diets, so we were able to complete our project without significant difficulty. COVID mainly impacted us in that we changed many of our meetings to online, rather than meeting in person.

The Cincinnati community has many areas of food insecurity, including Over The Rhine (OTR). There is not a grocery store within OTR and many community members shop at Findlay Market, which is primarily a tourist destination that can be more crowded and expensive than a traditional grocery store. According to the City of Cincinnati City Planning Office, 50% of families in OTR do not own a vehicle (1). Because of this, many residents rely on public transportation to access food and grocery stores. The pandemic has made public transportation more daunting to many residents who have no other means to access food in their community. When residents do have access to a grocery store, they will find that food prices have increased by 12.4 percent in the Midwest over the last year (2). Thus, residents in OTR may have difficulty accessing healthy foods, not to mention the time to prepare them.

C4F is a program that works to improve health literacy in the context of diet and cooking. As future health care professionals, we learn everyday the impact that diet can have on health and longevity. C4F works to provide affordable meal ideas and basic kitchen supplies for OTR community members, hopefully improving both their health literacy and diet. As grocery prices continue to increase, the need for budget friendly healthy recipes is more imperative than ever. The education provided at C4F helps inform its participants of new,

healthier recipes and gives them substitutions with relevant prices so the families can consider what foods will fit their budgets with substitutions that suit their palates. Cooking in class lets the students try and succeed with the new recipes, helping them to build confidence and understand how viable each recipe is for their own household. Each student also receives a binder containing the recipes, ingredients, and nutritional information for each recipe to help build health literacy among the students.

Working with C4F last year highlighted the many barriers that OTR community members face when trying to apply what they have learned in the program to their daily lives. As future healthcare providers, we have to go further than simply making suggestions and expecting patients or community members to easily adapt and implement these changes. We have an obligation to advocate for changes that facilitate these goals, by identifying disparities and calling for changes in policy, when warranted. While working with C4F throughout the last year, students and staff frequently cited a need for easier access to healthy foods. Since the Kroger has moved from central OTR on Vine St to Downtown, people now must travel much further to get groceries or shop at Findlay Market (which has higher prices than a traditional grocery store).

Expanding access to financial support (i.e. vouchers, food stamps) for healthy foods will allow residents of OTR to access the foods that they need to support a healthy diet more easily. Students and physicians can work to better coordinate cooperation with organizations like Freestore Foodbank so that access to healthy foods can reach those who need it most in our community. Thus, we can help bridge this gap between food resources and access to them. C4F aims to teach healthy, cost-effective cooking skills while course participants are in their program, but in order to achieve long-lasting health benefits, it is crucial that individuals have the means to implement these changes in their daily lives.

It would be helpful to extend voucher benefits at Findlay Market. Currently, those with SNAP Plus/EBT benefits can exchange their EBT dollars for tokens to use at shops in the market, and SNAP Plus doubles their spending power. However, only temporary assistance of \$5 vouchers is available to families who have financial need but do not have access to SNAP/EBT. Additionally, although Findlay Market is the sole marketplace in OTR providing fresh produce, it opens at 9 AM and closes at 6 PM on weekdays, which presents an issue for community members with full-time jobs. On weekends, Findlay Market is a busy meeting place for Cincinnatians and those visiting the city, and C4F notes that residents of OTR find it difficult to navigate. Overall, we aim to further the mission of C4F by highlighting barriers in accessing affordable food and transportation that impact OTR community members. C4F provides much needed education on healthy and affordable cooking, but these practices remain difficult in daily life when healthy foods and means to get them are not accessible.

1. City of Cincinnati City Planning - city planning - cincinnati-oh.gov. Over the Rhine Statistical Neighborhood Approximation. Published April 2012. Accessed October 13, 2022. <https://cincinnati-oh.gov/planning/linkservid/>.
2. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Consumer Price Index, Midwest Region August 2022. Published September 2022. Accessed October 13, 2022. https://www.bls.gov/regions/mountain-plains/news-release/consumerpriceindex_midwest.htm.