

Healthy recipes and effective social marketing campaign improve eating habits

3 November 2016



Cowboy salad is a recipe developed by the Food Hero healthy eating program. Credit: Oregon State University

The Food Hero social marketing campaign is an effective way to help low-income families eat more nutritious meals through fast, tasty, affordable and healthy recipes, two new research studies from Oregon State University have found.

Food Hero was launched by the OSU Extension Service in 2009 in an effort to encourage healthy eating among low-income Oregonians. The initiative includes several components, such as a website, www.foodhero.org, with information in both English and Spanish; Food Hero recipe taste-tasting events in schools and communities across Oregon; and a library of healthy recipes that have all been taste-tested and many approved by children.

"The success of the program is by far exceeding the scope of what we envisioned when we started," said Melinda Manore, a professor of nutrition in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at OSU and co-author of the studies. "Getting people to change their diet and eating behavior, especially when they do not have much money, is very

difficult, and this program is helping to do that."

The social marketing program is led by Lauren Tobey of Extension Family and Community Health at OSU, and Tobey is lead author of the studies. Food Hero is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - Education, or SNAP-Ed. SNAP-Ed focuses on obesity prevention within low-income households.

One of the new studies, published in the journal *Nutrients*, explores how Food Hero was developed and tested. The goal of the program is to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among those eligible for SNAP benefits in Oregon, with a particular focus on low-income mothers.

The campaign's strategy includes providing clearly focused messages, writing in plain language, being positive and realistic with the messaging, and offering simple tools for action that include an explanation of what to do and how to do it. The campaign has been effective in part because educators stayed focused on their target audience, the researchers said.

The other study, published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, examines Food Hero's recipe project in more depth. The recipes used in the Food Hero campaign are formulated to be healthy, tasty and kid-friendly. To date, the Food Hero recipes have been accessed millions of times via the website and social media sites such as Pinterest.



Magical fruit salad is a recipe developed for the Food Hero healthy nutrition program. Credit: Oregon State University

"All of the recipes are simple to make and cost-effective for families on tight budgets," Tobey said. "Many families can't afford to have a recipe fail or try an untested recipe the family may not end up liking."

The recipes also are being tested with children who complete surveys or participate in a vote. If at least 70 percent of participating children say they "like the taste" of a recipe, it is considered "kid-approved." The program has collected more than 20,000 assessments from kids who have tried Food Hero recipes at school or at community events. About 36 percent of the tested recipes have received the "kid-approved" rating to date.

"When our nutrition educators say to the children, 'Would you like to try this for us and tell us what you think?' it empowers them," Manore said. "It also is a way to expose kids to foods they may not have tried before."

Parents and caregivers are also surveyed after their children participate in tasting exercises. Of those who completed surveys, 79 percent said their child talked about what they had learned in school about healthy eating; 69 percent reported that their child asked for specific recipes; and 72 percent reported making at least one Food Hero recipe, the

research showed.

As Food Hero's tips, tools and recipes get shared in person, online, through the media and via social media, the program's reach also expands beyond the initial audience, the researchers said. Recipes from the program are now being used around the world, and in 2015, the recipes on the Food Hero website received more than 290,000 page views.

In addition to their collaborations with Oregon partners such as the Department of Human Services, Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority, Food Hero program leaders are sharing materials and ideas with public health and SNAP-Ed programs in other states.

"Since 95 percent of the Food Hero recipes contain fruits and/or vegetables, people who try the recipes are helping us meet the primary goal of the campaign, which is to encourage more fruit and vegetable consumption, especially among [low-income families](#)," Tobey said.

Anyone interested can also subscribe to Food Hero Monthly, an electronic magazine that includes recipes and tips. To sign up, visit <https://foodhero.org/monthly-magazine>.

More information: Lauren Tobey et al, Reaching Low-Income Mothers to Improve Family Fruit and Vegetable Intake: Food Hero Social Marketing Campaign—Research Steps, Development and Testing, *Nutrients* (2016). [DOI: 10.3390/nu8090562](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu8090562)

Provided by Oregon State University

APA citation: Healthy recipes and effective social marketing campaign improve eating habits (2016, November 3) retrieved 19 June 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-11-healthy-recipes-effective-social-campaign.html>

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