News
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Cal Poly Helps Food Bank Find Hunger Spots in San Luis Obispo County

(L to R) STRIDE Director and Kinesiology Professor Ann McDermott, Nutrition grad student Ally Lund, STRIDE Community Liaison Stephanie Teaford, Food Science and Nutrition Professor Aydin Nazmi, Kinesiology graduate and hunger survey volunteer trainer and coordinator Christian Cardenas.

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Cal Poly students and volunteers are canvassing San Luis Obispo County this month, talking to more than 600 low-income residents to get more-accurate data on how many people go hungry.

"We think the rosy picture on hunger in San Luis Obispo County comes from the fact that those most in need have been undercounted in previous studies," said Cal Poly Kinesiology Professor Ann McDermott, director of the university's STRIDE (Science through Translational Research in Diet and Exercise) center.

STRIDE is partnering with The Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County on the study. It's being funded by a $100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The study is one of only 14 Hunger Free Communities grants awarded across the nation this year by the USDA.

Cal Poly received $30,000 from the grant to design and carry out two data-gathering and analysis efforts: a countywide food availability survey, conducted in spring 2011, and the ongoing hunger survey.

Cal Poly undergraduate and graduate students and recent grads representing 11 degree programs are working collaboratively on the Hunger Free Communities research through classes or volunteer work with STRIDE. They are all receiving hands-on experience in scientific survey principals, survey analysis, and consumer and community public health research, McDermott said.

"This is a perfect example of what STRIDE is all about: bringing Cal Poly's expertise and Learn by Doing mission into partnerships with the local community to promote health," she stressed.

Currently, 72 Cal Poly students and 10 representatives from local social service and nutrition agencies are conducting surveys across

the county in English or Spanish, as needed.

They are interviewing people from low-income groups most likely to have difficulty getting food: single-parent families, non-English speakers, migrant workers, veterans, senior citizens and people who are disabled, homeless, unemployed and underemployed.

“We are seeing a lot of seniors who are unable to buy food,” said Christian Cardenas, STRIDE’s volunteer coordinator and a 2011 Kinesiology graduate. “We are talking to people at senior nutrition centers who literally have to choose between paying for their medicines and buying food.”

Throughout November and December, STRIDE students will spend an estimated 600 hours entering the results of both the hunger and food availability surveys into a computer database and then double-checking the data.

The database was created by two Cal Poly engineering students: third-year Biomedical Engineering student Eugene Wong and Dhyan Gandhi, a third-year Computer Science student and STRIDE center’s database manager.

For the food availability survey, Cal Poly Food Science and Nutrition Professor Aydin Nazmi and 17 students from his senior-level Community Nutrition class surveyed 45 grocery stores throughout the county.

The nutrition students took an identical list of food staples to each store during April and May. They documented the cost and quality of 97 food items and whether they were in stock. The students used a customized USDA list that deleted foods not common to the Central Coast (like pickled herring) and substituted items more typically sought by California and Latino families (like avocados, tortillas and cilantro).

“We grouped the towns by regions and coded all the stores we visited to preserve the stores’ anonymity,” said Cal Poly nutrition graduate student Ally Lund, who coordinated the food availability survey.

“We were able to visit all the stores in the county that accept CalFresh (food stamps),” she said, “from Oceano to Cayucos to Shandon, from small corner stores to big-name chain stores.”

Nazmi and his students are analyzing the results. They will use the data and geographic mapping software to create a “hunger map” of food availability in the county’s different regions, including price differences and “food desert” zones. “If you’re going to feed your family, and you need to buy milk, bread, eggs, butter, meat and produce. When you go to the store, what will it cost? And is the food even there?” McDermott said.

The STRIDE professors and students are scheduled to have the map and an initial report completed and sent to The Food Bank Coalition by mid-December.

The Cal Poly research findings will be used to create a countywide plan to combat hunger. The Food Bank Coalition and 18 local government agencies, food producers and social service groups will tackle the planning in 2012. Once the plan is completed, the coalition can apply for additional grants to fund food purchases and other resources needed to reduce hunger in the county.

Cal Poly professors and students will continue to analyze the hunger data and publish expanded findings in 2012.

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About STRIDE (Science through Translational Research in Diet and Exercise)

Cal Poly's STRIDE center launched in 2007. Since its creation, STRIDE professors, staff and student interns have developed research studies and programs to improve the health status and knowledge of the greater community. STRIDE brings together professors and students from departments across the university to conduct research and outreach programs that promote healthy weight. Most of the center's work is supported by state and federal grants and private donations. For more details visit http://stride.calpoly.edu.

About the USDA's Hunger Free Communities grant program

The USDA appropriated $5 million in grant funding in 2010 through the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. The grants are intended to help communities improve access to nutritious food through research, planning, and implementation of hunger relief activities. Find out more on the USDA website at www.fns.usda.gov/outreach/grants/hfc_awards.htm.

About the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County

Founded in 1989, the non-profit Food Bank Coalition now distributes more than 5.5 million pounds of food annually throughout San Luis Obispo County. The Food Bank works with more than 200 non-profit agencies. Find out more at http://slofoodbank.org/.

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