Eating Healthy in Nelson House, Manitoba: Country food program is improving food security

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The Nelson House Country Food Program provides community people with access to healthy foods, while creating jobs and building community based on First Nation values. It is the only country foods program in Northern Manitoba. With financial support from the Nelson House Trust office (through the Northern Flood Implementation Agreement), seven local people were hired including a program coordinator, a technician, and five workers who hunt and fish year-round. The food brought in by the workers is distributed for free amongst community members reaching 1500 people in a community of 2500. The food program prioritizes sharing the food with elders, the sick, and low-income, single-parent families. The program has been a great success. Food insecurity rates were found to be significantly lower than in other Northern Manitoba communities, which do not have country food programs.

Traditional Aboriginal diet, combined with the active lifestyle needed to hunt and forage, is protective for chronic disease (Damman, Eide and Kuhnlein, 2008). As well as being nutritious, wild food also alleviates hunger with high quality foods, such as local fish, wild meat, medicines and berries. However, public health restrictions currently do not allow wild game to be sold in local restaurants or stores or provided free to pubic facilities (hospital, health centre, schools) for institutional use. These public health restrictions are due to prions and other risks.

We explored the food security status of households of children and adult and asked if in the last 12 months financial constraints affected the quality and quantity of food available to and consumed by children under 18 years and other family members. To measure the food security status of households in communities, a simple and scientifically grounded measurement tool was applied using the version that was adapted for Canada (Health Canada, 2007, pp. 45-49) from the US Food Security Survey Module, Bickell, Nord, Price et al. 2000). The 18 validated questions about food security as experienced and reported by household members has eight questions that consider children's food security and ten questions that measure adult food security. Also questions about traditional food use were asked.

Methods

The following steps to determine food security status were taken:

A survey of 52 households, in Nelson House Manitoba was undertaken in the summer of 2009.
The survey was analyzed using Excel and SPSS for children and adults in households for each of the

eight child-referenced items. Each question in the survey asked the household about a food insecurity issue that occurred or did not occur within the past 12 months due to financial resources. "Depending on the question, a response was considered affirmative if the respondent indicated (i) "yes"; (ii) "ofter "sometimes"; or (iii) "almost every month" or "some months but not every month" (Health Canada, 2007, p. 11). The response is calculated according to the equation:

Percent of households with food insecurity issue = number of affirmative responses/total number of households responding.

"Households for which the item was "not applicable" were excluded from the denominator (Health Canada, 2007, p. 79)" as well as items for which the participant's response was "no answer" or "I don't Blank responses were treated as "no answer

The more times affirmative responses were made indicated a greater degree of food insecurity. Overall, nouseholds were moderately food insecure if either adults or children or both adults and children were moderately food insecure and neither were severely food insecure. If either adults or children were severely food insecure, the household was severely food insecure (Health Canada, 2007 p. 10). In households that were moderately food insecure the quality and/or quantity of food consumed was compromised. Households that were severely food insecure had reduced food intake and disrupted food

3. The level of food insecurity for northern Manitoba was determined with confidence intervals. The more times affirmative responses were made indicated a greater degree of food insecurity. Overall households were moderately food insecure if either adults or children or both adults and children were moderately food insecure and neither were severely food insecure. If either adults or children were severely food insecure, the household was severely food insecure (Health Canada, 2007 p. 10). In households that were moderately food insecure the quality and/or quantity of food consumed was compromised. Households that were severely food insecure had reduced food intake and disrupted food

- \$31% of community households said they often worried they would run out of money to buy food
- ♦22% of community households could not afford to buy food when food ran out.
- 43% could not afford to eat balanced meal.
- Household families sometimes relied on a few low-cost food items for children (27% often+1% sometimes=28%), couldn't afford feed children healthy food (43%) and children weren't able to eat enough (14% often and 29% sometimes = 43%).
- ♦50% of community households garden to improve their access to healthy food.
- ◆50% of community households wanted training in gardening.
- ♦30% of community households wanted training for youth to get food from land and promoting local food











Figure 1: Perce

of households with

children that were

moderately (red)

severely (purple)

food insecure

compared by

communities

Numbers in

hrackets

represent sample

size, the number of

were interviewed

in each

community.

igure 2: 31

of the

community

members

often or

sometimes

worried they

would run out

of money for

food

igure 3: 28%

of the community

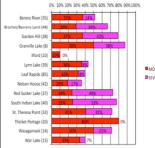
people relied

on a few low

cost food

items for

children.



Bella Lenard's Chicken Coop.

MODERATELY FOOD INSECUR

SEVERELY FOOD INSECURE



Households Couldn't Afford Food for Children



Adults relied on few children (n=25) Adults couldn't afford to

meals (n=35) Children were not eating enough because adults couldn't afford to

buy food (n=35)

Charlie Hart, the Program Co-ordinator for the Nelson House Country foods program describes what a great success the country foods program is: "We are providing food to 1500 people out of 2500 and all of them are happy getting fresh meat and

In the photo Country food staff Douglas Hart is showing us their



are enthusiastic to work for the Country Food program



Figure 4: Seasonal Calendar made by community embers from Northern Manitoba

What did people say? Community members believe that the country food program makes their community stronger "We do have country food that helps us for better access of traditional wild fish and meat, but not fresh vegetables. Then again those of us relying on welfare cannot afford go to shop at Thompson on a regular basis. We have to rely on the local Northern Store, where there are not many choices of vegetables which is making the low cost junk food very popular." For the past two years Bella Lenard, the Mayor of the Northern Affairs community, has been involved in gardening and raising chickens. She has received hands on training from Bayline Regional Roundtable (BRRT) so that she could get more community people involved in gardening and chicken production. She said last year (2008) she had success with eight families growing vegetables and flowers. She also said besides gardening and chicken production, country food program can help people maintain a healthy, traditional diet.



food making it popular It increases the risk of type two diabetes.

Nelson House has better food security than most northern Manitoba communities, as it is the only community with a country foods program. Through the country food program, Nelson House had a significantly lower food security rate for children (p>0.05) which people attribute to their country food program. Food insecurity in the Northern Manitoba is an alarming issue and researchers are ncreasingly making the link between high food insecurity and different chronic diseases like diabetes for both adult and children (Thompson, Mailman and Gulrukh, 2009), An immediate solution to this food crisis is the promotion of traditional country foods, including wild meat and fish, as well as gardens, berries and medicinal plants. Despite the food safety risks that exist with traditional food there are clear benefits for their use. Traditional food practices are a proven practice that should be accepted by public health to allow for local food to benefit school food programs, health programs and for sale to public. To address the safety of traditional foods, traditional food preparation has been processed in an approved facility for a head start program in BC (BCFNHS Growing Together newsletter, 2003) and by Kivalig arctic Foods Ltd, which distributes traditional food, using retail, whole sale and online stores. Support to maintain traditional food practice is an immediate requirement in Northern Manitoba Aboriginal Communities. Growing Hope at http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~thompson4/Movie.html. shows the importance of country food in Northern Manitoba to prevent chronic disease like diabetes and maintain traditional healthy diet

We thank the Nelson House Band office, especially Lenard Linklater and Violet Turner. Bella Lenard, Mayor of Nelson House, helped us with the survey. Thank you Nelson House community members for participating in the survey Funded by Canadian Institutes of Health Research Regional Partnerships Program (CIHR-RPP). Photo credit: Asfia Gulrukh Kamal.

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pson, S., Mailman, M. and Gulrukh, A. (2009) Is Healthy Food on the Table in Northern Manitoba? Evaluating Northern Healthy Foods Initiative for Sustainability of access. University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.