

Community Outreach Project: Implementation and Evaluation

By Christina Germann

Background: The Healthy Retail Network (HRN) was created and is supported by the Multnomah County Health Department. Its main purpose is to increase community access to healthy, affordable food by helping storeowners market healthy products, and make store improvements to increase the neighborhood desirability and value of their businesses. The network is being supported by a grant funded by Kaiser Permanente.

Implementation

As indicated at the project proposal, my contribution to the program was creating educational materials for the HRN staff members to use when educating the corner storeowners. The first piece of this educational material was a tool to be able to read and understand food labels, the “Workshop Steps”. This is a key piece of the project for store owners to be able to choose healthy foods to be a part of the HRN. The second piece of the educational material was a tool created, based on the HRN guidelines for saturated fat and sugar, called the “Nutrient Label Reference Charts”. This tool is a reference chart that calculates the saturated fat and sugar amounts (up to tolerable limits set by the HRN) that the store owners can use to choose healthy foods. These materials were created and completed in early October of 2011.

These materials were presented to and distributed to the people who I had been working with on the project, Suzanne Briggs and Jennifer Young, RD. The materials were then to be distributed to members of the HRN staff by the end of October 2011, with the goal being that they would implement their use in teaching the store owners how to choose healthy foods in February and March of 2012.

Staying in contact with the HRN staff, since November 2011, has been somewhat challenging. Recently I was updated on the status of the project via Suzanne Briggs, who has been my contact person. I was informed that my contribution to the project was a success in

helping the project, however, in a different manner than originally presumed. The tools I created were used as a stepping stone to improving the existing project, which is going to be renewed with a new grant this spring. The nutrition label tool helped the HRN staff to take a closer look at the requirements for membership into the HRN. It helped the staff to understand how difficult it could be to read a label and apply that to the standards that were set for the HRN, such as looking at calories, fat and sugar content of foods.

The nutrient label reference chart helped the HRN staff to see the math involved with calculating the sugar and saturated fat content of snack foods. This led the HRN staff to rethink the requirements for the storeowners when choosing healthy snacks. I was informed that what was gained from this would be used in the future program of the HRN which get new grant funding in April 2012.

I was also informed that the label reading workshops that were planned never actually took place. The HRN staff is exploring other educational options for storeowners that will allow them to succeed as healthy retail owners.

In summary, my part of the project was successfully implemented as learning tool most directly for the staff members of the HRN. Indirectly, my educational materials will benefit possible HRN storeowners in the future by way of changing the current HRN guideline to a more user-friendly version.

Evaluation

The next steps to take for this project is to take what has been created and learned and to improve the project for the future grant project. Although my educational tools were not used to directly educate storeowners, they can and were used to educate the HRN staff, as well as being used to change the way the requirements for the program are written. The next step for those who are creating the guidelines is to create something that the storeowners can understand and something they can adhere to.

At the beginning of the fall I enjoyed working on this project, and really liked the idea of a community outreach project. As the project progressed however, my interest slowly declined. While I enjoyed the topic that I chose, and the population that I was working with, I started to get predictable caught up in the politics that can accompany such projects. There were many barriers that had to be overcome to complete the project with a degree of satisfaction.

One of the greatest barriers was communication and collaboration. While I was readily accepted to help with the project, it quickly became apparent that not everyone knew what was going on. The person who was presented to me as being in charge, and the person who was my contact for the project soon appeared to be unsure herself of what the project required. At one point she told me that she didn't ask for this, referring to a student helping with the project, and told me to use another contact person as my primary contact. Another segment of this communication barrier was that the people I was working with for the HRN project, didn't know exactly what it was that I, as a student, needed to complete/participate in/etc... to fulfill my requirements for class. I was told late into fall, after completion of the educational materials, that I was to have no contact with the store owners, and at this point needed to re-write part of my proposal.

The communication barrier continued through the end of fall and into winter when it was necessary to continue work on the project, in the form of implementation and evaluation. While this barrier was eventually solved, it seemed to take extraordinary powers to have all the pieces fall into place.

I recognize the burden of a student, relatively unfamiliar with a certain project, joining a project already in progress. I also recognize the challenges of working with people on a project when they themselves are working in different offices and on different aspects of a large project. In regards to lessons learned, I would suggest having students work on projects that they are welcome to work on. Meaning, that it is difficult to establish projects too far in advance due to

ever changing rules, regulations, laws, projects in motion, etc. It would be nice to have options for students, especially in public health, to have projects where the student's role is better defined in advance. Another lesson learned is that one can never get away from office politics and lack of communication. To be able to be successful it is imperative to keep open lines of communication, and to not be afraid of having differing opinions. It is very important to ask questions, as well as take the time to appreciate those who are acting as mentors, whether they asked for it or not.

I did enjoy the learning opportunity with this project, and greatly appreciate all the help and direction that I received while I was interning at the State Office learning about public health.