Combat Food Insecurity Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Emergency Food Project for Low-Income Seniors in the City of Thunder Bay

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Abstract

Food insecurity has long been a public health issue in Northwestern Ontario, which adds a substantial burden on social costs and health care. Food insecurity is further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the closure or limited hours of emergency food and transportation services. Low-income seniors (age > 65 years old) face additional risks of food insecurity due to their vulnerability to the coronavirus. To help reduce food insecurity in this specific population, an emergency food program named “Senior Food Bags” was established by Roots to Harvest at the City of Thunder Bay, which provides insights on incorporating skill-building into food distribution activities. As a dietetic intern, I participated in the planning and implementation of the project. Considering that a lack of fresh produce, limited cooking skills, and comorbidities are major barriers for local low-income seniors, we aim to impart seniors with basic cooking skills and create recipes to consider health concerns. Hence, a weekly recipe was developed to encourage seniors to use healthy ingredients (e.g. fresh and preserved produces of proteins, grains, fruits, and vegetables) included in the bag for meal preparation. No ID was required, and seniors were respectfully approached for communication during the distribution. The mid-term survey suggested that all senior participants (n=40) thought the project helped reduce food insecurity during COVID-19. 1/3 of participants mentioned being more confident and capable of preparing healthier meals. The project illustrated that skill-building and dignified services in emergency food programs can do more than provide food. To enhance the capacity of food security, the first step is to equip individuals with intentions and skills to combat food challenges. Therefore, in addition to food distribution, food donor projects should also focus on fostering individuals’ food literacy development to empower them and aid public health.