

HJR 8 Study: Childhood Hunger

Stakeholder Suggestion: Create an Education Clearinghouse

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for the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee
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Background

The House Joint Resolution 8 study of childhood hunger generated discussion about how people can make the best use of their food-assistance benefits. Much of the discussion focused on the purchase and preparation of nutritious food, including ways to ensure that people have the knowledge and skill to use their food dollars wisely, make good food choices, and provide nutritious meals for their children. Speakers noted that several programs exist to educate school students and others about healthy food choices. They also noted that many people may not be aware of the full range of available resources.

Members of the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee agreed in November 2011 to obtain more information about a stakeholder proposal to create a clearinghouse for information about nutrition education programs in Montana. The committee also wanted to determine whether programs offered by the Livingston Food Pantry could be duplicated elsewhere.

This briefing paper provides additional detail about the request and presents options for committee consideration.

Nutrition Education: A Wide Range of Resources

A number of public and private organizations provide nutrition education in various forums and to various groups of Montanans. For example, the Montana Team Nutrition Program is the education arm of the school nutrition programs that are administered by the Office of Public Instruction (OPI). Montana Team Nutrition provides training and technical assistance to school staff members in a variety of ways, such as professional development opportunities, mini-grants, and one-on-one consultation. Topics covered by the program include menu planning, food safety, youth-based nutrition education, and farm-to-school initiatives.

In addition, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) makes nutrition education available to people who qualify for the program's food-assistance benefits. Participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) also are offered nutrition education.

Meanwhile, some school districts, after-school programs, and day-care groups provide opportunities for children to learn more about good nutrition. And other organizations, such as the Livingston Food Pantry, 4-H, and Grow Montana, promote the cultivation, preparation, and consumption of healthy foods through activities that include nutrition education.

Tying it All Together

In March 2011, the Montana Team Nutrition Program convened a meeting of groups that offer nutrition education and physical activity programs focused on the needs of children and youth. Attendees included representatives of state agencies such as OPI, the Department of Public Health and Human Services, and the Department of Agriculture, as well as organizations such as Eat Right Montana and Ag in Montana Schools. Many of the attendees had not met each other before this gathering was held. Montana Team Nutrition hopes to continue holding periodic meetings to encourage collaboration on youth nutrition efforts.

Stakeholders recommend the creation of a clearinghouse that would collect information on all available youth nutrition education programs in the state and make the information available on a Web site. The Web site could be used by anyone who wanted to learn more about ways to improve child and youth nutrition. As part of its responsibilities, the clearinghouse also would inform interested parties — such as food banks and other groups involved in efforts to alleviate hunger — of the existence of the Web site.

Stakeholders suggest that OPI may be the best entity to serve as the clearinghouse, because of its role in overseeing Montana Team Nutrition and its involvement in several statewide coalitions focused on nutrition and food security.

Options for Committee Consideration

If the committee wants to encourage or ensure the establishment of a central clearinghouse for information on nutrition education, members could consider the following options:

1. Approve drafting of a bill that requires OPI or another state agency to collect information about existing nutrition education programs, including those undertaken by local food banks and other local groups, and make the information available on a Web site.

Note: A bill would have the force of law and thus require creation of the clearinghouse. A bill should either contain an appropriation to cover the costs or direct the agency to establish the clearinghouse within appropriated funds.

2. Approve drafting of a resolution that urges OPI or another state agency to collect information about existing nutrition education programs and make the information available on a Web site.

Note: A resolution would serve merely as a suggestion to the agency. It would not require creation of a clearinghouse.

3. Send a letter to OPI encouraging the agency to take the lead in serving as a clearinghouse for nutrition education information.

Note: A letter would serve merely as a suggestion to OPI. It would not require the agency to undertake the activity.