Recent articles that might provide food for thought:

Midwestern States Receive Least Federal Funding for Disease Prevention
Flat federal funding and cuts in states put America's health at risk.

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and Trust for America's Health (TFAH) today released the fifth annual Shortchanging America’s Health: A State-By-State Look at How Public Health Dollars Are Spent. This year’s edition of the report found that federal spending for public health has been flat for nearly five years, while states around the country cut more than $392 million for public health programs in the past year, leaving communities around the country struggling to deliver basic disease prevention and emergency health preparedness services.

States in the Midwest received the least federal funding support for disease prevention at public health, at only $16.50 per person in fiscal year (FY) 2009, according to the analysis. This is $3.30 less per person than the Northeastern states, which receive the highest amount, at $19.80 per person. Western states receive $19.22 per person, while Southern states receive $19.75 per person.

States are expected to cut budgets even more in the coming year, which will further limit the ability of public health departments to carry out services for:

- Cancer, diabetes, obesity, and other chronic disease prevention;
- HIV/AIDS, MRSA, TB, and other infectious disease prevention;
- Food and water safety;
- Environmental health improvement; and
- Bioterrorism and health emergency preparedness.

Other key findings in the Shortchanging America’s Health report include that:

- Federal funding to states from public health from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) averaged out to only $19.23 per person in FY2009. The amount spent to prevent disease and improve health in communities ranged significantly from state to state, with a per capita low of $13.33 in Virginia to a high of $58.65 in Alaska. Approximately 75 percent of CDC's budget is distributed through grants or cooperative agreements to states and communities to support programs to prevent diseases and prepare for health disasters.
- State funding for public health ranged dramatically across the country, from a low of $3.54 per person in Nevada to a high of $169.49 per person in Hawaii. The national median is $28.85 per person. The structure of state and local health departments varies from state to state, with some states relying more on local funds.

“Chronic under funding for public health means that millions of Americans are needlessly suffering from preventable diseases, health care costs have skyrocketed, and our workforce is not as healthy as it needs to be to compete with the rest of the world,”
said Jeffrey Levi, PhD, Executive Director of TFAH. “If we are going to improve the health of Americans, we need to fundamentally rethink our approach to funding and managing public health and disease prevention in the United States.

The full report includes state-by-state pages of key health statistics and funding information and is available elsewhere on RWJF.org and at www.healthyamericans.org.


Farm-to-School Programs Motivate School Food Service Professionals
Potential to improve children’s diets without burdening school finances while helping local farmers

St. Louis, MO, March 8, 2010

During the school day, children eat roughly one-third of their nutritional needs while at school. Besides lunch, breakfast and snacks may be served, providing ample opportunities for obesity-prevention strategies by offering more nutritious food. With economical constraints interfering with schools to provide children with increased amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables, a study in the March/April issue of the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior examines how farm-to-school programs have the potential to improve children’s diets by providing locally grown produce without burdening the school’s finances.

Researchers at the Michigan State University, Lansing, examined why farmers, school food service professionals (SFSP), and food distributors participate in farm-to-school programs and how they characterize the opportunities and challenges to school food procurement from local farmers. Researchers identified three major reasons why SFSP participate in farm-to-school programs including (1) “The students like it,” (2) “The price is right,” and (3) “We’re helping our local farmer.”

There were three areas that emerged from analysis of the SFSP’s interviews about students/children participation in the farm-to-school programs which included: (1) quality, (2) influence of food service staff, and (3) relationships with farmers. The findings were best described by following two SFSP’s interviews:

“A lot of our teachers go to apple orchards so it was neat to have them served for lunch [. . .] so we had that link, cafeteria, classroom, field trip. I think they might have said something to the kids, and then the kids get a little more attention so they’re like huh, maybe I should eat this apple instead of just letting it sit on the tray.”

“The kids just love [farmer]. He’s one of the coolest guys in the world. And if we’re able to do that, it becomes a cool food and kids like cool foods, you know. They don’t want things that aren’t cool.”

A “trickle-down effect” was found for SFSP being proud to serve high-quality products that students were excited to eat.
The researchers found the farm-to-school programs benefited both the school and farmer. SFSP reported that the lower price for produce was attributed to a shortened supply chain. SFSP were able to buy produce that is not typically offered in school cafeterias such as asparagus, blue potatoes, Asian pears, etc.

Schools are an attractive market for the farmer because “perfect” products are not always needed. For example, a SFSP commented:

“I will take the outsize apples. [Farmer] will bring me bushels of apples, the tiny ones, and that’s great for our kindergarteners, our first-graders. We sort them out and the big ones children here [middle school] love so I think we’re a great market for off-size. We don’t need the perfect-sized apple. That’s great for retail, that’s what sells. But in schools, we can take the carrots that have ‘s’ [shape] in them because we’ll clean them, we’ll take the skin off, and then we’ll chop them up and it doesn’t matter to us. They’ll end up in the homemade soup that day, or on top of salad. So for us, we’re a good market and I don’t think farmers realize that.’’

This research is being presented at a time when budgets are tight and there is a huge need for nutrition education in schools. The farm-to-school program may help to promote healthful eating and improve our school food programs.

Writing in the article, the authors state, “Relationships with farmers and vendor characteristics emerged as important variables that may have contributed to the benefits that these food service professionals expressed. This study suggests a relationship between locally grown food and potential benefits such as increased consumption of fruits and vegetables among children. However, much more research is needed to better understand how these and other variables influence children’s short and long-term dietary habits so that supportive programs and policies can be developed. This study also emphasizes the need for SFSPs to understand the advantages and disadvantages of buying locally grown food from different intermediaries as well as their own motivations (eg, improving children’s fruit and vegetable intake) and interest in local food procurement. More research is needed on how different types of intermediaries influence the benefits attributed to farm-to-school programs. Finally, whether buying locally grown food directly from a farmer or through a food distributor, connecting children and food service staff to the source of their food—where and how it was grown and who grew it—appears to be a key mediator between locally grown fruits and vegetables and children’s consumption of these food items. Therefore, as schools increasingly look to distributors for their local food needs, educational materials that retain or create a link from farms to schools will be important.”

The article is “Farm-to-School Programs: Perspectives of School Food Service Professionals” by Betty T. Izumi, PhD, MPH, RD; Katherine Alaimo, PhD; Michael W. Hamm, PhD. It appears in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, Volume 42, Issue 2, (March/April 2010) published by Elsevier.
Full text of the article is available upon request; contact Lynelle Korte at 314-447-9227 or inebrmedial@elsevier.com to obtain copies. To schedule an interview with the authors please contact Dr. Betty T. Izumi by email at izumibet@pdx.edu or by phone at 517-420-6619.

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