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Program Success Story



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Pinny Cooke House is a women's drug and alcohol rehabilitation residence. Near the end of the series of eight lessons, I heard participants discussing their enjoyment of the previous evening's group meal of vegetable and bean wraps. They were happy that the staff had been open-minded to buying the seven fresh vegetables and fruits they requested along with corn and black beans to make the tasty whole-wheat wraps. Nicole noted, "Eating healthy has helped me with my diabetes." Other participants discussed veggie variations they could try at another meal, while Elaine was in high spirits for the experience to try out her newly learned food prep skills. Julie, the youngest and most academic-minded member of the group proudly reminded everyone that the beans were from a non-dented can and that the group deserved to have "non-risky" food. Violetta admitted that she was still astonished that a low fat, low sodium and nutrient packed meal could be so satisfying and really delicious. Everyone agreed to package the leftover vegetables well and refrigerate them so that they could be used in salads over the next few days.

In eight short weeks, this diverse group of women worked as a group to plan a healthy meal, advocate (instead of complaining) to staff for the foods they wanted purchased, prepped the meal using safe food handling practices and were committed to continuing to develop meals that

benefited their overall fitness. Staff was pleased and proud to have been part of the process.

Lesson topics were taken from the Eating Right is Basic Curriculum and were selected based on needs perceived by staff, examination of food inventory and food storage, articulated as well as unspoken barriers (past experience and current habits) and interests expressed by the participants. Overall, participants already had a good knowledge of My Pyramid, the importance of controlling portion sizes and using labels to identify nutrients in their foods. Topics included the short and long-term benefits of whole grains, vegetables and fruits, hidden fats and sodium in our diets and how to reduce them, using food labeling to plan healthy shopping on a budget, meal planning and food preparation skills to develop quick, healthy snacks and meals, proper cleaning and sanitizing in the kitchen, and food safety while preparing, cooking and storing food.

Fostering an on-going positive rapport with staff and bolstering the self-esteem and confidence of the participants were key factors in the success of this group. Resistant attitudes, lack of knowledge of the importance of nutrition, inexperience with many fresh foods or how to prepare them, and stubbornly held misnomers about "healthy eating means sacrificing taste" were predominant barriers that were overcome with lessons that utilized a variety of visuals, hands-on and interactive activities and a safe environment to try new skills and foods. Additionally, it is gratifying to know that the team of staff, participants and nutrition educator affected positive behavior changes not only for the participants, but for the children they will eventually be rejoined with.

Building Strong and Vibrant New York Communities