



## Community Health Briefs

### **Better Shelf for Better Health — HealthPartners**

#### Innovation Strategy

There is growing evidence of the relationship between hunger and poor health. Low-income and food-insecure populations experience higher rates of diabetes, high blood pressure and other chronic diseases. While food shelves have traditionally focused on surplus and commodity foods to provide adequate calories, they are uniquely positioned to collaborate with others to support better food choices for food-insecure populations.

Food shelves have many hunger and health influence points that can promote a healthier food environment. These include proportion of healthy foods provided, how foods are laid out and promoted, client services and relationships, nutrition education resources and cross-sector collaborations.

Seeing this opportunity, HealthPartners collaborated with Valley Outreach Food Shelf to develop a long-term, cross-sector partnership.

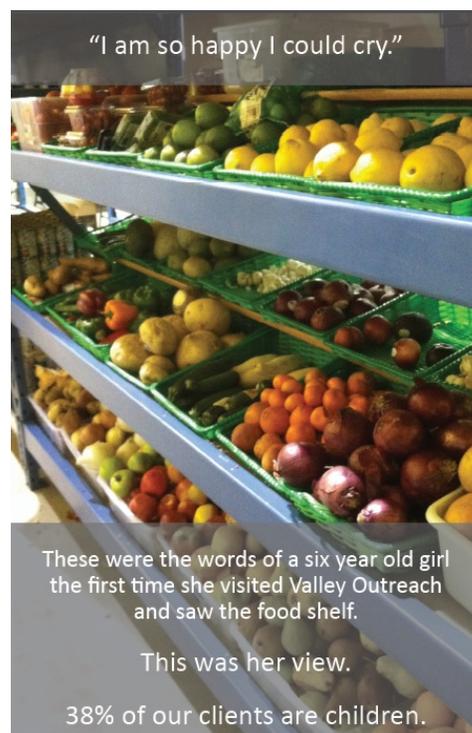
#### Root Determinants of Health Addressed in This Initiative

- Diet
- Stable Income

#### Program Description

The goal of the program, started in 2013, is to transform the food shelf system in a comprehensive and client-centered way to create a better food shelf, better nutrition and better health. Valley Outreach serves the Stillwater Area in the St. Croix Valley with food, clothing and resource guidance. Each year the food shelf programs distribute more than 800,000 pounds of food to 1,500 households and 3,500 individuals (38 percent of clients are children). Demand for food has increased 8 to 10 percent each year.

In determining nutrition priorities, there is strong evidence and agreement that plant-based foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans promote good health. These foods are lacking in most American diets. Fruits and vegetables are often more expensive and perishable than processed convenience foods, creating barriers for low-income clients. Valley Outreach clients confirm they lack access to fruits and vegetables and a client survey corroborated that the food shelf is a critical source of these foods for clients: Eighty-eight percent of clients procure at least half their fruits and vegetables from the food shelf. Food budget dollars are



primarily spent on these priority foods. Healthier donations are strongly encouraged and promoted, but all donations are accepted and distributed.

The first phase of the long-term partnership was food shelf redesign, with a focus on applying the principles of food marketing, behavioral economics and health communications to a food shelf setting. Better Shelf for Better Health created a new food environment by changing food lists, layout and inventory systems as well as donation guidelines. As a result, fruits, vegetables and less-processed foods are now more plentiful and accessible than highly processed foods.

Instead of reducing client choice to influence health, the program focuses on creative ways to maintain or even increase clients' ability to choose their own foods, while striving to influence clients to make healthier choices. This requires maintaining client choice and increasing the quantity of more nutritious foods without removing less-healthy options. Changes were selected that would influence, versus require, clients to make more healthy food choices by marketing better foods to clients.

According to the principles of behavioral economics, even small changes in the food environment can nudge a choice one way or the other. For example, consumers are more likely to select fruits and vegetables at eye level and attractively displayed. Yet entirely removing choices can make consumers feel coerced, often resulting in their making the opposite choice. When someone has ownership of a decision, he or she enjoys the outcome more and is more likely to repeat the behavior. In line with this philosophy, shopping lists are now organized by food group, with fruits and vegetables displayed first and more prominently. All messaging and promotion is simple and positive, never prescriptive or negative.

## **Results**

Client food lists now provide at least five or more servings of fruits and vegetables, per household member, per day for seven days. This reflects more than twice the amount of fruits and vegetables previously provided.

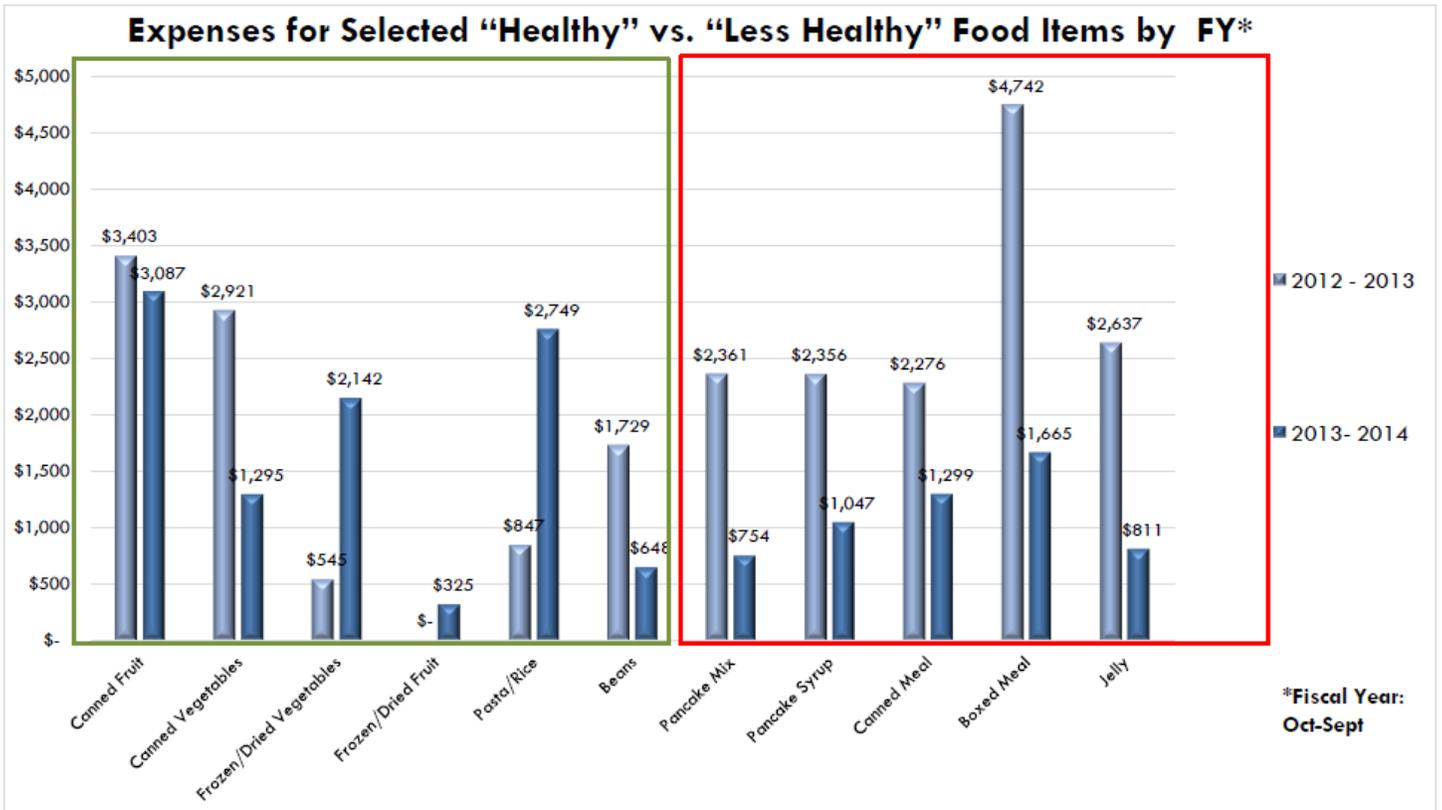
The inventory and cost data demonstrate that providing more nutritious foods is cost sustainable, and even has potential to create cost savings for the food shelf.

Based on the program's successes, Better Shelf for Better Health is being replicated in four other area food shelves. Better Shelf for Better Health is part of a statewide partnership with Minnesota hunger organizations and the University of Minnesota Extension Service to expand the work through trained Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program educators, toolkits and program methods' dissemination.

## **Contact Information**

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## Appendix A



Graph depicts the expenses for selected healthy vs. less healthy food items by fiscal year