Making “Thrifty” Go Further

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) determines the allotment for *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* (SNAP) benefits. The TFP is the least expensive of the 4 US govern-

ment food plans. The TFP was last revised in 2006 to “provide a representative healthful and minimal cost meal plan that shows how a nutritious diet may be achieved with limited resources” (p. ES-1).¹ The TFP assumes all purchased foods are consumed at home and is based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.²

REVISING THE TFP

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, better known as the Farm Bill, called for revising the TFP. More specifically, “by 2022 and at 5-year intervals thereafter, the Secretary shall re-evaluate and publish the market baskets of the thrifty food plan based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance” (section 4002).³

According to a USDA press release from January 22, 2021, the TFP has not kept pace with economic realities that food insecure households face when purchasing and preparing food. The TFP benefits fall short of what a healthy adequate diet costs, especially in high cost of living areas.⁴ The goal is for the revision of the TFP to have federal nutrition programs better support a basic healthful diet.

TFP AND NUTRITION EDUCATION

A 1979 analysis of the TFP assessed the TFP based on Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA). This study

found that all RDAs could not be met through TFP. Regarding nutrition education, this study concluded that nutrition education can only be effective if the TFP provides adequate resources for good nutrition.⁵

In 2013, an Institute of Medicine report punctuated that adequate resources are a precursor to effective nutrition education. This report’s framework for determining SNAP adequacy depicts available financial resources, as well as time to obtain and prepare food, are primary for food security. Individual and household factors, which include nutrition education, are only effective if there are adequate resources.⁶

Jetter et al⁷ conducted community-based participatory research and found that to achieve nutritional adequacy over a 2-week menu (individual days were not nutritionally adequate), the low-cost food plan (one step up from the TFP) was needed, and foods had to be purchased at a store that has low-price bulk items.

Thus, the TFP has been inadequate to support a healthy diet for decades.

GETTING INVOLVED IN REVISING TFP

Let’s advocate for the TFP to support a healthy diet. As nutrition educators we know shopping on a budget is important. Yet, we know when budget is too limited, it is impossible to eat healthfully. This is especially in our current reality where 60% of what is available are ultra-processed foods. These foods are relatively inexpensive, high in calories, but nutritionally void. Systemic racism has created communities of color and low-income communities with even more challenged access to healthy foods and more ultra-processed foods. Just think how much easier

our jobs could be if everyone has adequate financial resources and access to healthful foods and could consider issues such as food justice and sustainability. Revising the TFP opens up this opportunity.

Pamela Koch, EdD, RD
President

Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior

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