Successes and Challenges of Using a Peer Mentor Model for Nutrition Education within a Food Pantry: A Qualitative Study
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Introduction
- Food insecurity remains a significant public health problem in the United States, affecting an estimated 37 million individuals. (1)
- Over 84% of individuals using Emergency Food Pantries (EFP) are food insecure.
- Communities relying on supplemental food experience increased rates of obesity, metabolic syndrome, hypertension and diabetes and often consume diets of poor quality (1, 8-12).
- Delivering nutrition education within an emergency food pantry (EFP) is a valuable and sustainable approach to target food insecure and underserved populations.
- Peer mentors have been used successfully for health education and promotion.
- Little known about using a peer mentor model as a modality for nutrition education delivery within this setting.

Purpose
- Identify the successes and challenges of using a peer mentor model within an EFP.
- Identify best approaches for delivering nutrition education in an EFP community.

Qualitative Measures
- Two semi-structured, 60-minute focus groups at end of program

Methods
- 11 peer mentors recruited from Martha’s Choice Marketplace, Catholic Social Services’ largest EFP, located in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.
- > 40 years of age, high school graduates and received some supplemental assistance
- Training: 9 hands-on sessions on basic cooking skills and healthy eating principles followed by 3 peer-mentor led community workshops
- Semi-structured interviews conducted with peer mentors following training program/workshops
- Qualitative content analysis to determine key concepts, categories and themes
- Ethics approval obtained from Villanova University Institutional Review Board

Results
- Success 1: Empowering Peer Mentor Experience
  - Sense of purpose
  - Prepared
  - Supported
  - I think the peer mentor model boosted confidence level a bit when you’re going to demonstrate and when you’re meeting people. It helped you communicate

- Success 2: Appropriately Tailored Nutrition Education
  - Learned new information
  - Valued ideas
  - Motivated to share
  - It helped me as a whole think twice before eating things that are full of salt or margarine or you can eat good without frying everything

- Success 3: Use of Accessible Ingredients and Simple Preparation
  - Increase in cooking self-efficacy
  - Desire to experiment
  - This program…kind of brought back some things that I knew and helped me share with others. Like taking something and making it healthier and then having someone say, hey, this is pretty good.

- Challenge: Attracting Community Members
  - Transportation barriers
  - Food pick up is greater priority
  - Terminology used
  - I am being creative. I am making my own dressings

Conclusions and Recommendations
- EFPs provide a non-traditional setting for nutrition education
- Using trained peer mentors to deliver nutrition education in EFP has benefits
- Further research needed on health impact

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