

Food deserts and free lunch

SW Florida residents seek better access to healthy food



TOP: Victoria Salas, left, hands a grocery bag full of healthy produce to Albeiro Juarez and his mother, Gregonia Franco, during the Brighter Bites program hosted at the Boys & Girls Club of Collier in Immokalee on July 25.

ABOVE: A whiteboard lists the healthy produce in the grocery bags distributed by Brighter Bites.

PHOTOS BY MORIAH RATNER/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Callie Schmidt

Naples Daily News
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Oneida Sanchez walked into the Boys & Girls Club in Immokalee with her 7-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter to get a grocery bag stuffed with healthy produce and a large watermelon.

Sanchez works full time doing maintenance at the Seminole Casino in Immokalee, but she struggles to make ends meet for herself and her two children.

They were all born in Naples and live in Immokalee, where the kids attend Lake Trafford Elementary School. Since Sanchez starting working a second job in the cafeteria at the Boys & Girls Club, she averages 60 hours a week and doesn't qualify for food stamp benefits anymore.

"They said I make too much, even though I'm by myself," Sanchez said.

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professor Thomas Felke was presenting about seniors in Collier County living below the poverty line to a crowd of policymakers in Naples when a woman stood up from her seat and interrupted him.

She couldn't believe what she was hearing from this professor and was sure nothing he said could be correct. When Felke started repeating his methodology and data analysis, the woman interrupted him again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, this is Naples, there are no poor people in Naples," Felke quoted the woman as saying.

Felke often relays this story from 2012 to his students at FGCU, where he is the interim department chairman and professor of social work.

"There's such a juxtaposition, and there's an invisibility to these social issues," Felke said. "It gets lost in the beaches and palm trees and Fifth Avenue South."

Although these issues may get lost on some people, the reality is that Collier, Lee, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties have higher numbers of food deserts than the statewide average, according to Felke's research. In the five-county area, there are 175 census tracts — often a cluster of several neighborhoods — designated as food deserts.

"There is seemingly a disconnect between households in poverty and those who are receiving benefits. It's less than half," Felke said. "There needs to be more educational outreach to let people know that they are probably eligible for these programs and they're not taking advantage of them."

For senior citizens, Felke said he knows there's a large stigma issue. People assume that because Naples is known for being one of the wealthiest cities in the U.S., people in poverty living would be impossible.

More than 11,500 households in Collier County receive SNAP benefits — or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps — according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey estimates from 2012-16.

When Felke conducted a research project with University of Michigan

students in March studying food access points in Immokalee, they found there was "nowhere in Collier County where people could use SNAP benefits to get healthy food, which makes no sense," Felke said.

Another observation by Felke and his students was a clear discrepancy between prices of the same items at different stores. For example, they went into a Walgreens and noted the price of a gallon of milk was a little more than \$2. But when they went to convenience stores closer to the residential areas, that same gallon of milk would cost anywhere from \$4 to \$6, meaning that some Immokalee residents are overpaying for groceries due to this discrepancy.

"The food access points (in Immokalee) aren't designed well to store the produce and sell it," Felke said.

Their findings are backed by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Currently, SNAP benefits can be used at four farmers markets in Lee County — Cape Coral, Health Park, Olga and Lakes Park farmers markets — but none in Collier, Hendry or Glades counties, according to a USDA spreadsheet. In Charlotte, people can use SNAP benefits at Punta Gorda Farmers Market.

A national well-being improvement initiative called Blue Zones Project in Southwest Florida seeks to help make healthy choices easier for everyone, and Felke's history with food and poverty research made him the perfect candidate to work with educational outreach and community gardening.

There is an effort at Blue Zones Project to try to increase the number of farmers markets in Southwest Florida where people can use SNAP benefits, Felke said.

And in the second phase of the study, Felke and university students are planning to ask Immokalee residents about where they shop and why they make those decisions.

"I thank that woman (who interrupted) every day that I come to work because she opened my eyes," Felke said. "She helped me realize that I'm working in the right place."

The Fort Myers News-Press contributed to this story.