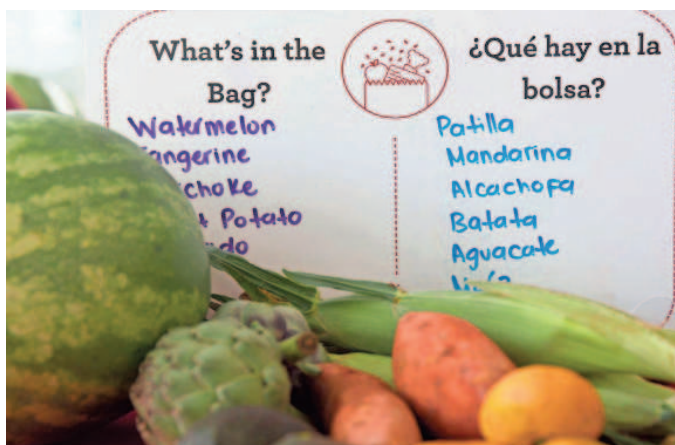


Food deserts and free lunch

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
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

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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Albeiro Juarez waits outside the Boys & Girls Club of Collier in Immokalee to receive his grocery bag distributed by Brighter Bites on July 25.
MORIAH RATNER/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Food deserts

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Nonprofit Brighter Bites is working to help families in Southwest Florida get access to healthy options. The Texas-based nonprofit was founded in 2012 by two women determined to bring nutritious food to underserved communities.

Since Sanchez works so many hours, she used to stop by McDonald's often to pick up a quick dinner so her kids could eat earlier.

"Brighter Bites helps us get better access to healthier food," Sanchez said. "They give us veggies we probably wouldn't buy, but we get to try them out."

Her daughter, Jazlynn Maldonado, enjoys drawing, DIY crafts and making slime, and she likes the watermelons best. Sanchez's son, Jeremiah, tries to catch fish in the backyard and likes the oranges best.

Sanchez graduated from Immokalee High School and knows a lot of her former classmates who get food from Brighter Bites, too.

"I think (Brighter Bites) helps a lot of people out, (because) a lot of people are in the same situation as I am," Sanchez said.

During the school year, Brighter Bites works directly with Collier County schools where many kids receive free or reduced lunch, such as Eden Park and Lake Trafford elementary schools. During summers, the Boys and Girls Club hosts Brighter Bites because nearly 300 kids are there every day during the summer anyway.

Parents drop their kids off before work and when they come pick them up, they can grab a bag of groceries. Each family receives 50 servings of fruits and vegetables per week, said Marcela Romero, program director for Brighter Bites in Southwest Florida.

Families don't need to pay for any of the food, which saves them \$35 or more each week on groceries.

Volunteer siblings Austin and Ashlyn Farah help distribute the food to families.

"I carry the big stuff," said Austin, 6.

"Not really," said sister Ashlyn, 9.

Inside each bag are tips and recipes for how to store and prepare the food. There are also ideas for healthy kid-friendly snacks.

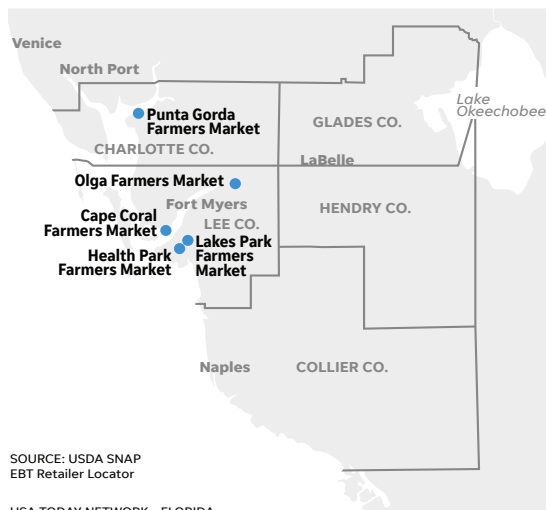
"Last summer, a parent had a kid with diabetes and thought this was the best thing they could get," Romero said.

Brighter Bites partners with Lipman Family Farms in Immokalee and Fort Myers-based Harry Chapin Food Bank, which distributed 22.3 million pounds of food — equating to 18.6 million meals with a value of \$37.3 million — throughout Southwest Florida from 2016-17, according to its website.

Researchers at University of Texas School of Public Health conducted a two-year study evaluating the impact of Brighter Bites on 760 students and their families at nine schools in Houston from 2013-15. They found that parents who received food from Brighter Bites made more homemade family meals, had healthier snacking habits and ate less added sugar.

As for the future, Julian Morgan, unit director of the Boys & Girls Club of Collier in Immokalee, said the Boys & Girls Club will continue to host

Farmers markets in Southwest Florida where SNAP benefits can be used



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Brighter Bites for as long as they want to set up and distribute food there.

Morgan's favorite part of hosting Brighter Bites this summer was getting to see the faces of families receiving fresh fruits and vegetables.

"It's heartfelt," Morgan said. "All the families benefited this summer because kids are eating healthier. We definitely want Brighter Bites to come back."

Amid food deserts, growing numbers of kids need free or reduced lunch

Southwest Florida boasts some of the wealthiest communities in the nation, but there are growing numbers of kids in need of free or reduced lunches.

During the past 10 years, the number of students in Collier County schools needing free or reduced lunches has steadily increased by 22 percent, or 13,583 students.

About 68 percent of students in Collier County public schools needed free or reduced lunches

in 2018, which is approximately 32,791 kids.

"Almost all of the kids use the Brighter Bites program," said Morgan from the Boys & Girls Club.

Immokalee is historically an agricultural community, so Morgan says the dwindling farms may be one reason Collier County is seeing such an increase in kids needing free or reduced lunches.

"Just because you live in Immokalee doesn't mean it's cheap," Morgan said. "It's tough to keep up."

Brighter Bites focuses especially on bringing healthier options to food deserts, and in Southwest Florida there are more than 125, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

USDA defines a food desert as a geographic region where at least 500 people or one-third of the population lives farther than 1 mile (in urban areas) or 10 miles (in rural areas) from the nearest supermarket. There can be convenience stores, but they either lack a variety of fresh produce and meat or cost more than many are willing to pay.

Poverty adds to the distress. Almost 160,000 people in Collier, Lee, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties have limited or uncertain access to nutritious food, based on 2015 data from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap.

In 2012, Florida Gulf Coast University

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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.