

UF program works to provide nutrition education in Southwest Florida



Kelly Wilson
Guest columnist

Imagine a town in which residents are offered swimming lessons, but there is not a swimming pool in sight.

Maybe the swimming pools are all in a neighboring town and residents don't have transportation there, or maybe they cannot afford to pay the entrance fee.

Whatever the hindrance, the result remains the same: After finishing their lessons, kids return home incapable of swimming — not because they don't know how, but because their environment does not allow for swimming.

Healthy living is more complicated than swimming lessons and pool construction, but it's essential to ensure that everyone is equipped with both the

education and environment to practice healthier eating and physical activity habits.

Since 1996, the University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension Family Nutrition Program (FNP) has worked for a healthier Florida as the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed), implementing agency.

They expanded to Collier in late 2009. In addition to providing evidence-based nutrition education to Collier County's limited-resource families, FNP partners with various community agencies, including Blue Zones Project, to make the healthy choice the easy choice for SNAP eligible populations.

One approach FNP practices is increasing the affordability of produce by working with farmers markets to accept SNAP/EBT (formerly known as food stamps) and Fresh Access Bucks (FAB). The FAB program matches SNAP bene-

fits 1-to-1 to double consumer purchasing power, providing up to \$40 of free Florida-grown produce every market day.

Currently, there is only one FAB outlet in Collier County: SWFL Produce. Together FNP, Blue Zones Project, and other community partners are collaborating to expand this program to other farmers markets throughout the county.

Fruit and vegetable access and appeal are also improved through community and school gardening. Cultivating crops complements nutrition education, enhances taste expectations, and increases connection with food.

FNP works with eligible sites to provide technical assistance and garden supplies to give leaders the support they need to establish and sustain both the plants and the community that grows them.

Additionally, families often have to make difficult choices between paying

for food or other essentials such as utilities, housing, or healthcare. Food pantries, like Meals of Hope, serve an important role to provide hunger relief when funds won't stretch far enough for food.

FNP and Blue Zones Project's work to increase and promote nutritious options at these food distribution sites ensures that all people, regardless of ability to pay, eat well.

Through all these efforts and more, FNP works to create a community that will equitably encourage positive health behaviors everywhere people eat, shop, work, learn and play.

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