Evaluation of the Nutritional Quality of BackPack Program Menus

Abstract
March 28, 2012

Purpose
To evaluate the nutritional quality of food provided through the BackPack program in nine food banks across the country; this analysis will provide baseline data and identify areas of strength as well as opportunities to improve the nutritional content of food provided through the BP program.

Methods
Feeding America worked with the University of Minnesota’s School of Public Health to complete a small survey and analysis with nine (9) food banks. Participating food banks were asked to provide all the menu items in a typical backpack along with a full description of the food item (e.g. brand name, package size, and number of packages provided per pack, etc.). This menu information was analyzed by the University Staff using Nutrition Data System for Research (NDRS), a dietary analysis software application that allows for calculating the nutrient composition of food items and menus. Based on the nutrient and food group estimates generated by the software, the nutritional adequacy of the BackPack menus were evaluated using the USDA Health Eating Index 2005 scoring system (HEI-2005). The HEI-2005 scoring system is based on twelve dietary components that reflect key aspects of diet quality including fruits, vegetables, grains, milk/dairy, meat/protein, oils, saturated fat, sodium and calories from solid fats and added sugars. Using this index a diet/menu is scored. Total possible points range from 0-100. The higher the score the greater the consistency of the diet/menu with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Findings
The total scores at the food banks participating in the survey ranged from 55 to 78, with scores across the food banks averaging 67.4. The average score across the food banks is well above that of American school-age children (mean score of 55) and the American food supply as a whole (score of less than 60). Keeping in mind that an optimal total score is 100, each food bank participating in the BackPack program evaluation appears to have room for improving the nutritional quality of their BackPack menus.

Overall the study found that most food banks scored highly in the following areas: Total Fruits and Whole Fruits, Total Grains and Whole Grains, Meat/Protein, Oils, Saturated Fat. In considering the types of menu modifications needed, it appears that most food banks likely need to lower the sodium content of their menus and increase offering of milk/dairy and dark green and orange vegetables and legumes. Increasing fruit, vegetable, and meat/protein offerings are likely needed menu modifications at some of the food banks as well.

Conclusions
Our food banks performed well! While none achieved a perfect score of 100 (highest score was 78), consideration must be given to consumer acceptance and availability of foods in the marketplace in planning BackPack menus. It’s important to note that most packaged foods contain high amounts of sodium which poses a challenge to planning menus that meet sodium standards. There is also limited availability of palatable and affordable packaged food products containing dark green and orange vegetables and legumes.