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Morris Healthy Eating project launches campaign to increase local consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables

Summary: MHE is making its local food environment research available in a community food assessment report.

(January 28, 2011)-A University of Minnesota, Morris-based initiative is launching a campaign to increase access to and consumption of healthy, fresh fruits and vegetables—especially those that are locally grown—and thereby help to improve the health of Morris college students and the region’s population as a whole.

Known as the Morris Healthy Eating Project, the effort has spent the last two years researching the local food environment to determine barriers and assets to improving healthy eating among students and residents in the region. Those findings are detailed in a 95-page community food assessment, which is being made available to community members. The report details a vision for a healthier community and presents a community action plan.

“While Morris and the surrounding communities face many challenges to eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, we found that not only is there a desire to do so, there are local networks and organizations that can turn that desire into reality,” says Mary Jo Forbord, Morris Healthy Eating coordinator at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM).

Forbord says that local challenges to healthier eating include only 16 percent of college students currently eating the recommended five daily servings of fruits and vegetables as well as limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, especially locally grown produce, in Morris. The costs associated with fresh fruits and vegetables are an additional concern for many consumers.

Research shows that increased physical activity, coupled with eating more fruits and vegetables, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, can help protect against heart disease and some cancers, help manage diabetes and weight, lower cholesterol and blood pressure, and reduce the likelihood of heart attack or stroke.

Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables can also directly impact the growing obesity epidemic, a leading contributor to illness and death. A 2007 Minnesota College Student Health Survey found that two out of five Morris college students are overweight, obese, or very obese, including nearly half of males, and more than a third of females—rates comparable though slightly above students on other Minnesota campuses. Studies show that two-thirds of Minnesotans are overweight or obese, the highest percentage in the state’s history.

Not only is obesity affecting the health of the citizens of the region, it is costly. A study by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Health projected that adult obesity-related health conditions could cost Minnesota at least \$3.7 billion annually by 2020, if trends continued.

“Morris, like the rest of Minnesota, is experiencing a growing obesity epidemic that is not only costly in terms of public health, but is directly affecting the pocketbooks of our residents,” says Dr. Joan Goering, Stevens Community Medical Center. Goering serves as medical director for the project.

The assessments findings include:

- Nine out of 10 UMM students agreed that if they ate more fruits and vegetables, they would reduce their risk for some chronic diseases and cancers.
- Eight out of 10 UMM students had started making changes to eat a healthier diet or planned to in the next three months.
- Nearly nine out of 10 Pomme de Terre Food Co-op (PDT) customers stated that they would purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at PDT, especially locally grown and organic produce including apples, bananas, greens, tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, and potatoes.
- Stevens Community Medical Center staff members value the affordable, good meals available in the hospital cafeteria. Four out of five SCMC employees agreed that they would eat healthier if a “healthy lunch of the day” was identified.
- A survey completed by 350 Morris residents found that nutrition is their highest priority when choosing foods to purchase. Eighty percent would purchase locally grown food if it were available in the grocery store.

Sandy Olson-Loy, vice chancellor for student affairs, says the project will connect leaders in education, healthcare, and the local food system with community collaborators to advance policy changes and programs that will help improve the local food environment. Central to that effort will be creating a community dialog on the benefits of eating healthier, educating students and citizens in how to purchase and prepare healthier foods, serving more fresh fruits and vegetables on campus and in community-based institutions such as schools and the hospital, expanding the healthy foods available at community events and gatherings, overcoming barriers to accessing to healthier foods, and expanding gardening and farmers markets within the region.

“Ultimately, the goal of Morris Healthy Eating is make fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods the easy choice on campus, within greater Morris and in Stevens County for people of all ages and incomes, for every meal every day,” says Olson-Loy.

The Morris community food assessment can be viewed and downloaded [online](#). Copies can also obtained at the Morris Public Library and on the Morris campus at the Information Center, Wellness Center, and Rodney A Briggs Library.

Morris Healthy Eating is led by the UMM Office of Student Affairs in partnership with the Pomme de Terre Food Co-op, Pride of the Prairie Local Foods Initiative coordinated by the University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, Sodexo (provider of campus dining services), and Stevens Community Medical Center. Community collaborators include Kadejan Inc., Morris Area Farmers Market, Stevens County Human Services, Stevens Traverse Grant Public Health, University of Minnesota West Central Research and Outreach Center, and West Central Wellness—a regional Minnesota Statewide Healthy Improvement Program Initiative.

If you'd like more information on the topic of this article, please contact [Mary Jo Forbord](#).

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