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Nutrition in Healthcare Leadership Team

Local Produce in Healthcare

About Us

The Nutrition in Healthcare Leadership Team (NHLT) is a subcommittee of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative (Initiative), a project facilitated by Community Health Improvement Partners. The NHLT is comprised of food service, sustainability, community benefits, and government affairs professionals from the healthcare sector representing 22 local hospitals. These healthcare professionals are dedicated to promoting optimal health in San Diego County by serving fresh, healthy, affordable foods and beverages produced in a manner that supports the local economy, environment, and community. Recognizing growing concerns about poor health outcomes related to our current food system, the NHLT set “making healthy foods the standard [in healthcare]” as one of its key goals, which includes increasing local and/or sustainable produce purchases.

Problem Statement

As of 2009, 21.9% of adults in San Diego County are obese.¹ And 34.5% of San Diego County’s children are overweight or obese.² These alarming trends are due in part to drastic shifts in U.S. agricultural policies and practices over the past 50 years. Subsidies, crop insurance programs, and other policies promote large-scale commodity crop (e.g., corn, soy, alfalfa, and wheat) production. Yet, only 2% of American farmland is devoted to fruit, vegetable, and nut production.³ In fact, the U.S. does not produce enough fruits and vegetables for each American to meet the 2010 Dietary Guidelines,⁴ but generates 58% more chicken and red meat than the USDA’s total recommended intake and an abundance of highly caloric, minimally nutritious foods and beverages.⁵ These production trends contribute to poor dietary habits and, ultimately, increased rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.

In addition, current industrial food production practices contribute to other negative health and environmental outcomes: toxic chemical exposure for farmworkers and consumers, endocrine disruptors, antibiotic resistance,⁶ and numerous ecological crises. Toxicant exposures, especially cumulative ones, disrupt a variety of necessary biological processes and increase the risks of developing cancer, neurodevelopmental diseases, and reproductive disorders.⁷

In contrast, small-scale, organic and/or sustainable farms that sell to local residents not only avoid or mitigate many of the above outcomes; they can actually build both healthier ecosystems and healthier people through fresh, nutrient-dense foods. Small-scale farmers selling locally tend to grow more fruits and vegetables and less meat—all without the aforementioned negative externalities.^{8,9} All these are reasons to localize food procurement. As if those motivations were not enough, local sourcing also significantly benefits local economies; studies estimate that every dollar spent locally generates at least twice as much for the local economy as every dollar spent elsewhere.¹⁰ This is of particular importance in San Diego County, where we have the largest numbers of small and organic farms of any U.S. county, and agriculture is a major economic driver.¹¹

Solution

Unlike other terms applied to food sourcing (e.g., Organic, Fair Trade, IPM), there is no legal or universally agreed-upon definition of local. Far from diminishing the importance of the concept, that fact encourages the creation of definitions suited to the specific context of each region. San Diego County, despite producing \$513 million in fruit and vegetable production, exports the vast majority of its food crops outside of the county.¹⁰ That fact informs the NHLT definition of local.

To enact its goal of making locally sourced, healthy food the standard, the NHLT created a common local product definition for fruits, vegetables and animal protein. By collaborating on these standards, the NHLT can more effectively communicate hospitals’ preference for healthy foods with vendors and the community, and leverage hospitals’ purchasing power to improve product selection and increase local fruit and vegetable production.

To create its product origin definitions, the NHLT conducted a scan of local produce standards from across the county and country and tried to align its definitions with other institutions and committees in San Diego County, such as the San Diego County Farm to School Taskforce, as well as local branding campaigns such as San Diego Grown 365. The NHLT’s final three-tiered definition is:

Local	Grown or raised within San Diego County
Regional	Grown or raised within 250 miles of the San Diego County border line in the State of California
California	Grown or raised within California

Citations

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