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NTD 415: Community Nutrition

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Community Assessment Part 1

Chester County, Pennsylvania is a very unique county in the state for many reasons pertaining to its demographic status. To begin, the median household income is $86,093 which is about $35,000 above the median household income for Pennsylvania as a state¹. In correlation with the high income of Chester County, almost 93% of Chester County citizens have a high school diploma or higher which is 7% higher than Pennsylvania as a state¹. These statistics may give the illusion that all of Chester County is comprised of wealthy families; however, this is not the case. Chester County has suburban and urban areas. There are two cities in West Chester and they consist of Coatesville and West Chester. West Chester is an area of middle-class families; however, Coatesville is a city where many people live below the poverty line². Coatesville is considered a food desert and is in fact the only food desert in all of Chester County². A food desert refers to an area where access to fresh foods and grocery stores is limited and sometimes even impossible³. Most people obtain food from corner convenience stores that sell bullets and cigarettes. Because of this, most of the food is packaged and extremely high in saturated fat, sodium, and preservatives³. The racial demographics of Coatesville are also much different from the overall racial demographics of Chester County in general. In all of Chester County, 6.8% of the county is Latino or Hispanic and 5.9% is African American¹. However, in Coatesville, 10.7% of the people are Latino or Hispanic and 49.2% are African American². These statistics show that less than half of the population living in Coatesville is white. On average, Latino or Hispanic families are making $18,000 less than white families and African American families are making $24,000 less than white families each year in Pennsylvania¹. This correlation is also evident in Chester County when looking at the difference between race and median yearly income in Coatesville versus other areas of the county.

A very important aspect when performing a community assessment are key informants. In class there were three key informants that provided essential information on the health status of Chester County. The first one was Kim Knipe, RD, LDN, Certified Health and Wellness Coach, Community Nutrition and Outreach Coordinator⁴. She spoke about many opportunities for student service learning at the hospital as a part of many wellness programs. She was also informative of the main diseases, illnesses, and health issues that are very prevalent in Chester County. The main ones that she touched on were type II diabetes, heart disease, and obesity⁴. As a result of these diseases being so prevalent in the county, these were the issues that her wellness programs were centered around. The last two key informants that presented in class were Marie Kessler, Food and Education Program Manager at Chester County Food Bank and Larkin Wright Kennedy, Volunteer Coordinator at Chester County Food Bank⁵. These two speakers were just as informative as Knipe; however, they touched upon very different issues in the community. The biggest nutrition related issue they focused on was food insecurity. Food insecurity refers to people who do not have enough to eat because they either cannot afford it or do not have access to it⁶. People and families who experience food insecurity tend to be people who have low-income jobs or no jobs at all and typically belong to a racial minority⁶. The Chester County food bank helps to provide these people with nutritious foods. They are also in association with many partnering locations including churches, schools, non-profit organizations, and even farms like Pete’s Produce⁵. They also provide nutrition education for people who experience food insecurity. For example, they teach low-income, low-recourse women how to cook healthy meals at home with cheap ingredients as well as how to incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables into their cooking that they may receive from the food bank⁵.

According to the key informants and existing data on Chester County health facts, three of the largest health issues in the county include type II diabetes, obesity, and food insecurity⁴,⁵,⁷. Each one of these health issues are nutrition related and affect a large number of the people living in Chester County. The first major health issue is type II diabetes. Type II diabetes, also referred to as hyperglycemia, is when the cells in the body develop an insulin resistance meaning that when there is glucose in the blood, insulin secreted by the pancreas is now unable to move the glucose into the cells⁸. As a result, the glucose remains in the blood stream and cannot be used for energy⁸. About 7% of the people living in Chester County have been diagnosed with type II diabetes⁷. However, it is estimated that a quarter of all people living in a population that have type II diabetes are not even aware of it⁸. It is crucial that people take this disease seriously. Many people believe that because it is common, it isn’t a big deal. However, in 2011, (about) 865 people in Chester County that had type II diabetes actually died from having the disease⁷. The second large health issue in Chester County is obesity. 55% of people in the county are overweight and of these people, 20% of them are obese⁷. That is more than half of the county that is overweight. Obesity is a major health concern because it causes people to be much more likely to develop conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, gout, sleep apnea, and asthma⁹. These are also very serious conditions and the one with the highest concern is heart disease. In 2011, about 13,535 people died from heart disease in Chester County⁷. With the rate of obesity growing each year, the chances of people developing heart disease will also increase. The third major health issue is food insecurity. Food insecurity differs from the first two health issues because this one is not a disease; however, people who are food insecure will often develop a disease as a result. Food insecurity is prevalent in Chester County because there are many families and entire communities who don’t have access to fresh foods and grocery stores or just can’t afford the food. In Chester County, there is a 9.7% food insecurity rate and a 14% child food insecurity rate10. Children who don’t have the option to eat breakfast before going to school often have behavioral issues and lower test scores because they are distracted by hunger10. Also, people who are food insecure are malnourished. When people think about malnourishment they often expect those people to be extremely underweight as a result. However, people who are food insecure are more often obese because the only foods they can afford are very high in saturated fats and sodium⁶. As discussed earlier, there are many health complications that result from obesity.

All of the health issues focused on above are nutrition related and can possibly be prevented. To begin with, type II diabetes can be prevented if a diet low in saturated fats and sugars and high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is followed throughout one’s life⁸. Also, daily physical activity is recommended as well because it controls and lowers blood glucose levels⁸. Obesity can be prevented with a healthy diet because it is caused by excessive intake of carbohydrates⁹. If a person is limiting saturated fats and balancing their carbohydrate and caloric intake with physical activity, he/she will maintain a healthy weight and avoid high risk of developing all health complications associated with being overweight and obese. Food insecurity is a little different because it takes more than a lifestyle change to avoid being food insecure. Food insecurity affects entire neighborhoods that are low-income and often of a racial minority (African American, Latino/Hispanic) and affects all age groups⁶. One way that food insecurity is being helped is by the Chester County Food Bank as well as by several community health and nutrition programs including Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program (SNAP), Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI), Feeding America, Meals on Wheels, No Kid Hungry: Share Our Strength, National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and many others⁶. The prevention and treatment of all of these health issues affecting Chester County as well as the state of Pennsylvania and the United States as a whole is crucial to the health and well being of the people that live here.

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