



TAPP INTO

Success Story from Blue Cross Funded Organizations

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Changing Community Norms in Food for Asian Elders

Description of the Program

“Our goal is to ensure that our elderly participants become happier and healthier. The foods the elders eat are healing foods, not killing foods.”

Yorn Yan, Executive Director, United Cambodian Association of Minnesota

Members of the Statewide Tobacco Education and Engagement Project, (STEEP) have a long history of working on healthy eating and active living within their respective Southeast Asian American communities. One example of this work is the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota’s Nutrition Program. As part of their Cambodian Elders Program which provides the Cambodian community culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate services to assist Cambodian Elders, the nutrition program is a multifaceted program that combines community gardening, food banks, and nutrition education. The program serves over 200 elders from the Cambodian, Chinese, and Karen communities.

“The program has been a great partnership between UCAM, Presbyterian Homes Management’s Creative Senior Dining, Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging, Kolap restaurant, and Cambodian community institutions – businesses, temples, churches and community centers,” said Yan.



Over 90% of the participants take part in the garden and many of them have started gardens in their homes as well.



Elements of the program

Nutrition Education

UCAM observed a high rate of diabetes among the elders in their program. Nationwide, 37% of Cambodian Americans have diabetes and the death rate of Cambodians with diabetes is six times more than the mainstream community. To address these health issues, the nutrition program developed a culturally competent curriculum that encouraged participants to eat more fruits and vegetables. UCAM reconnects participants with their eating habits in their home countries where produce is a core part of their diet. Adapting a 2010 Cambodian Community Health education materials created by a Lowell Community Health Center in Lowell Massachusetts, the education program taught participants about portion sizes and the health impacts of foods.

Food Distribution

A key piece of the program is their food distribution. UCAM works with Kolap restaurant to provide meals to the seniors in the program three days a week. In conjunction with the nutrition curriculum, the meals are primarily vegetable based with the nutritional information on each meal given to the participants.

Community Gardening

UCAM has a community garden on their property for elders in the program to plant vegetables for consumption. This is part of the overall senior care program. Over 90% of the participants take part in the garden and many of them have started gardens in their homes as well.

Key Impacts

As expected, the nutrition program saw changes in its participants' eating and exercise habits. Participants report having a greater knowledge of nutrition and have changed their diets to include more fruits, vegetables and fish. They also saw that participants were exercising outside of the program in their own homes and neighborhoods. While not a primary goal of the program, being part of the nutrition program with the community garden and exercise classes also reduced feelings of isolation among participants.

Additionally, the program saw unexpected policy impacts:

Policy Change with Kolap Restaurant

Using the Cambodian Community Health guidelines, UCAM worked with Kolap restaurant to provide meals for their seniors that focused on produce. The primary protein for these meals was fish, as reflected in a traditional Cambodian meal. Because of their partnership, Kolap now offers these dishes as part of their restaurant's menu. UCAM is now working with Kolap to provide nutritional information on all of their menu items so that customers can make informed decisions on their food.

Change in Community Events

Another unexpected impact was that community events began to offer less processed food and more produce. Participants in the program offered produce grown in the UCAM community garden as well as their own gardens for community events and asked event organizers to reduce the amount of processed food at events and increase the amount of fresh produce.



A key part of the program's success was the focus on accessibility and cultural competency.



Lessons Learned

There are many lessons to be learned from the program to effectively create change in healthy eating and active living. Like many Southeast Asian community based organizations, UCAM is a hub for its community and provides an array of services that includes case management, tobacco education through STEEP, English as a Second Language, and mental health services. The elder's assistance program offers Cambodian elders age 60 and older with the following services: SSI, welfare, advocacy, citizenship, translation, transportation, immigration assistance, civic education, social gathering, health education, physical activities, funeral assistance, English language classes, Medicare application, cultural and traditional ceremonies, and housing assistance. Because of the tremendous amount of social capital UCAM has with its constituency, the program effectively engaged participants to improve their health outcomes.

Focus on Accessibility

A key part of the program's success was the focus on accessibility and cultural competency. They were able to adapt a curriculum that was designed specifically for a Cambodian audience. Rather than using technical language about nutrition, the program talked about food in terms of cultural practices. The meals provided were dishes that participants were used to eating in Cambodia. Also, elders in the programs were provided transportation to UCAM to participate. This allowed them to regularly take part in the program and removed a key barrier to their participation. With audiences that are Limited English Proficient, the program is conducted in multiple languages and materials are translated into a variety of Asian languages.

Holistic Approach

To prepare for the program, UCAM educated its board members on the status of community health, particularly around heart disease and diabetes, and the need for interventions to address those issues. The organization inventoried its practices and programs and their impact on health and made organizational changes to the foods they serve at their own events, using bicycles as incentives in its elderly and youth programs and leading walking classes among staff and constituents. Above and beyond the nutrition program UCAM is striving to become an organization that promotes health in all of its practices and programs.

Rainbow Health Initiative receives training and technical assistance through the Technical Assistance for Priority Populations to Implement a Norm Change on Tobacco (TAPP INTO) program. The TAPP INTO Program is a comprehensive community-competent technical assistance and training program that supports community organizations working with African, African American, Latino, LGBT, and Southeast Asians in Minnesota. The goal of the TAPP INTO program is to build the capacity of these priority population-serving organizations in Minnesota and their emerging coalitions to implement successful tobacco control programs and policies and eventually reduce tobacco prevalence, exposure to secondhand smoke, and other tobacco disparities. This work is supported by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) as part of a health improvement initiative funded by tobacco settlement dollars that addresses root causes of preventable heart disease and cancer. Blue Cross' prevention efforts with high priority populations include a commitment to build community capacity to work on health promotion efforts.