

Community garden helps fight obesity epidemic among Latinos

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Photo by Nora Sanchez

Hirlanda Nunez (left) and Magdaleno Nunez plant pea seeds on their garden plot at the Westside Community Church garden in Corvallis. The couple, who originally came from Oaxaca, Mexico, are able to grow healthy vegetables and save money. They are one of 19 Latino families planting at the garden.

Magdaleno Nunez takes a long stick and drags it through the soil, making a long, narrow groove. He bends over and places two pea seeds every three inches. His wife, Hirlanda Nunez, waters tomatoes on the other side of their small garden plot at Westside Community Church in Corvallis.

"We are thankful that the church allows us to use their property to grow our vegetables and fruits," said Magdaleno Nunez. "The community offered us (a way) to grow healthy food. We can save money during the winter."

Obesity and diabetes among Latinos in Benton and Linn counties are increasing rapidly, and organizations are responding to help with what some call an "obesity epidemic among Latinos."

The garden is one part of the solution. It brings Latinos together to grow organic produce, so their families can eat healthy foods, watch their diets and not become overweight.

Obesity is a problem that affects all communities across the United States. But Latinos, including Latino children, have the highest rates. Nearly 70 percent of Latinos in Benton County are overweight or obese,

compared to 54 percent of all residents, according to a recent study by the Oregon Department of Human Services.

Because more Latinos are obese, they are also more likely to develop diabetes, a condition in which the body is unable to control the level of sugar in the blood, according to Rocio Munoz, a chronic disease outreach specialist at the Benton County Health Department.

"Latinos are healthier when they first arrive from their native countries," said Munoz.

Lack of affordable food and resources lead to "epidemic"



By Nora Sanchez

Latino families will soon be harvesting the crops they planted at the Westside Community Garden; all the vegetables and fruit are organic.

There are many reasons for the obesity problem among U.S. Latinos, said Marcela Arredondo, a coordinator of the Congregational Wellness Project in Corvallis. Latinos have jobs that are low paying, so they cannot afford to buy healthy food, she said. "Healthy is expensive."

Many of the Latinos are undocumented, Munoz said, and they isolate themselves because they are afraid of being deported. They also feel like they don't belong in this country, because they are discriminated against. They are overprotective with their children for the same reason and they don't allow them to go outside to play and interact with other kids.

"People are living with fear, and it's not healthy," Munoz said. "They become emotionally unstable, because they are unable to feel free."

When they become depressed, she said, they lose interest in their surroundings, isolate themselves and eat more.

Another problem is a lack of grocery stores near Latinos' homes. In the south part of Corvallis, Arredondo said, there are few places where Latinos can purchase vegetables at affordable prices. Sometimes their only option is to go to the nearest 7-Eleven and buy junk food, which makes them more at risk of becoming obese, she said.

Many Latinos are low-income and don't have health insurance, meaning they don't have regular access to health care, Munoz said. They also may not know organizations and other resources that are available to them.

"Men in the Latino community think that everything is OK with them, because they don't look sick," she said. "They don't get medical care until they start feeling sick, instead of coming for regular checkups."

And because some Latinos work multiple jobs, Munoz said, they don't have the time to cook healthy meals, sit down and eat with their families, or see a doctor regularly.

Garden promotes health



Photo by Nora Sanchez

Magdaleno and Hirlanda Nunez discuss tomato plants with Oldga Lidia Perea, while Manuel Perea waters his garden plot. The families are part of a community garden that allows Latinos to grow healthy food.

Faith community leaders began seeing the epidemic of obesity in the Latino community within the past 10 years, as the Latino population increased in Benton and Linn counties. They are creating projects that prevent obesity and promote physical activities and nutrition.

The community garden is one of those projects. It is run by the Westside Community Church, which had land that wasn't being used. The church got money to set up the garden from Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. Nineteen Latino families and two churches grow tomatoes, lettuce, radishes, beans, tomatillos and peppers.

All the families are low-income Latinos. The church asks for a small donation of \$5 to \$35 to cover water and seeds, but if the families cannot pay, they do not have to.

The garden helps Latino families come together in a place where they can feel safe, grow their own vegetables so that they don't have to buy them, and learn with and teach one another, said Sue Domingues, the garden coordinator and a member of Westside Community Church.

Domingues worked at the Bruce Starker Arts Park community garden last year and she noticed that only two Latino families participated. So she decided that her church's garden would focus on Latinos and recruited Magdaleno Nunez to help.

Nunez, who came to Corvallis from Oaxaca, Mexico, with his wife in the early '90s, learned to garden in Mexico from his father, who grew sugar cane. Now he is a garden mentor to the other gardening families, and brings his four children to work in the garden.

"It is very beautiful, because they get to grow their food and we teach them," Magdaleno Nunez said. He added that if one day the family is in need, or has to go back to Mexico, the children will be able to survive.

Magdaleno and Hirlanda Nunez say the garden allows them to save money, because they don't need to buy expensive vegetables at a grocery store. Hirlanda Nunez freezes and stores organic tomatoes, tomatillos and peas to use during the winter.

"We use the vegetables to make healthy foods like salads and salsas," Hirlanda Nunez said. "We prefer to grow them ourselves, because we know what's in them." The couple plans to give any leftover produce to other needy families.

The garden also builds community. Westside Community Church hosted a community gathering this year and invited the Latino gardeners and Anglo church members. The Latina women made salsa and the two groups interacted with each other, said Domingues.

Finally, the garden encourages Latino families to re-introduce the tradition of eating dinner together as a family, which many immigrants lose when they come to the United States, Arredondo said. The garden program helps inform the families that if you prevent bad eating habits now, in the long run you will save money on doctor visits, she said.

In addition to the community garden, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon administers three other pilot projects to help Latinos become a healthier community. Cooking classes at a church kitchen allow Latinos to learn how to cook healthy, the Farmers Market links families with local farmers, and the Buying Club allows low-income Latinos to use food stamps to purchase vegetables.

Overall, the projects are about "food justice," said Liv Gifford, a project manager with Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. Like many Americans, Latinos may not be aware of how, when and where their food is being produced, she said. Their food could be traveling 1,500 miles from the farm to their home.

"Food became industrial, and we're trying to make it natural again," Gifford said. To make the food healthier, Latinos need to "put a face on their food," she said, just like the Latino gardeners are doing.

"It shouldn't be just people with a lot of money who have access to fresh foods," Gifford said.

As population grows, a community unites

The Latino population in Benton and Linn counties has increased steadily in the past two decades. U.S. Census figures show that during the 1990s, Benton County had only 1,735 Latinos and Linn County had 2,177.

But over the next 17 years, in both counties, the number of Latinos has nearly tripled. According to the 2007 American Community Survey, Benton County has a Latino population of 4,800, and Linn County of 6,700 - in both counties, Latinos make up 6 percent of the total population.

Latinos come to Corvallis, Albany and other towns in the area to find work in nurseries or in the fields, in janitorial and housekeeping services, and in restaurants, said Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry, the founder and director of Casa Latinos Unidos of Benton County.

Gonzalez-Berry started Casa Latinos Unidos because she wanted to create "a place that's run by Latinos for Latinos," so that the bridges between whites and Latinos can be connected, she said.

The organization, which opened in February at the Corvallis Multicultural Literacy Center, offers interpreters, an immigration lawyer and English classes. Gonzalez-Berry also advocates for Latinos and helps them learn about their rights.

"I just see it as a great resource for our community," she said.

While some Latinos in the area are native born, some are not, she said. Many are undocumented, but some of their children are U.S. citizens. One in every six students in Oregon schools is Latino. In the future, Gonzalez-Berry said, that number will increase to one in four. The number of Latinos in Linn and Benton county continues to grow.

While many Latinos work in low-income jobs now, that will change with time, Gonzales-Berry said.

"There is a greater awareness among Latinos," she said, "that