Evidence of poverty, poor health, inadequate living conditions, and the plight of families unable to feed their children surfaced in the U.S. during the early 1960s. Delegations of physicians, legislators and others verified the reports, while a television documentary show, "Hunger USA" (1968), brought the national tragedy into the homes of middle class Americans and set the stage for a decision to convene a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health in December 1969.

For its part, the Federal Extension Service established a Task Force to explore why the poor of the 1960s were not currently involved in Extension's educational programs, despite Extension's history of work with poor farm families. One response to the Task Force report was the funding of five major USDA pilot programs designed to reach low-income audiences through an innovative educational approach (1). This effort marked a renewal of Extension's historical philosophy of programming for low-income audiences — investing in people's ability to help themselves. Building upon these pilot projects, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) for adults was created in 1968. In 1969 Congress saw fit to legislatively authorize and provide a budget for the EFNEP, and in 1971 they set aside some of the EFNEP funds for the establishment of an EFNEP youth component (1, 2).

Now, twenty years later, the EFNEP remains the single largest federally-funded nutrition education program in the United States. As the EFNEP enters its third decade, it is timely to discuss several significant features associated with the EFNEP's success.

1. The EFNEP's paraprofessionals are crucial to the program's educational success. The effective implementation of a local EFNEP program involves a felicitous match between client groups and indigenous paraprofessionals. The EFNEP today reaches a large, ethnically diverse population. In order to teach these clients, the paraprofessional staff must be fluent in the clients' languages or dialects, and must understand the cultures of the groups with whom they work. Today, as in earlier years of the program, many of the EFNEP paraprofessionals live in the area in which they work and participate in the life of the community. Residing in the community gives paraprofessionals the ability to bring to the teaching situation a practical understanding of the real problems their clients face, plus a dedication and a level of compassion and commitment that are unmatched. In this way, they are able to open doors that are closed to other agency staff, as well as to expand the services of the professional (3).

Concurrently, EFNEP employment also provides personal growth and career development opportunities for the paraprofessionals (4-9). In every state, paraprofessionals have increased their self-esteem, been able to leave the welfare rolls, found better jobs, become community leaders, improved their own and their families' nutritional status, earned General Equivalency Diplomas (G.E.D.), obtained Associate Degrees or other technical certificates, and even completed baccalaureate or graduate degrees, which in some cases have led to employment as Extension agents.

It is well recognized that the success of the EFNEP paraprofessionals requires consistent and skilled supervision, program management, and support by Extension professionals (10). Like other staff members, the EFNEP paraprofessionals require opportunities to improve their knowledge on the subject matter of foods and nutrition, as well as their teaching skills. We feel the EFNEP can be particularly proud of having paved the way for the successful use of paraprofessionals in a number of other Extension and non-Extension programs.
2. Many EFNEP clients become program volunteers. In 1988 47,500 individuals, many of whom were former or current program participants, served as EFNEP volunteers (11). It is difficult to assign a dollar value to the services contributed by EFNEP volunteers in the twenty year history of the program, but the EFNEP experience demonstrates clearly that volunteers are found in low-income communities. Some significant benefits that can be expected from the volunteer effort include expanded outreach, personal growth for volunteers, an increased sense of community, and often a new direction for the organization (12).

For most participants, volunteering in the EFNEP was their first community service experience. The scope of these volunteer activities has traditionally included assisting in teaching the EFNEP adult and youth lessons, securing educational resources, initiating group meetings, opening their homes for meetings, publicizing programs, and even baby-sitting so that other parents can participate in education programs or serve as volunteers themselves. Besides developing leadership skills, these participant-volunteers are often provided with a useful review of the food and nutrition information and skills they had previously learned. Although utilizing low-income volunteers in the EFNEP may be difficult at times, the rewards for such efforts are, we believe, immense.

3. The EFNEP changes the nutritional behavior and lifestyles of its participants. The EFNEP has been a notably successful nutrition education program. Adult and youth participants not only learn about foods and nutrition, they also learn how to apply this knowledge to improve their own diets and those of their families (13, 14). Longitudinal studies of the EFNEP participants indicate that clients sustain their improved practices up to five years after completion of the program (15, 16). Dietary change is only part of the EFNEP story. As participants gain a measure of control over one part of their lives (i.e., better nutrition), they become more confident in their ability to make further changes (17). JoAnn McCloud Harrison, State EFNEP Coordinator in Georgia, summarizes what many other EFNEP personnel have observed: "We see significant changes in people's self-esteem: they become empowered in feeling they can take control over some aspect of their lives, particularly their health and the health of their family" (18).

4. The EFNEP is voluntary, focused, and flexible.

Voluntary — Eligible individuals choose to participate in the EFNEP. This indicates they are ready to learn; they have reached a "teachable moment" in their lives and are ready to respond to what the program offers.

Focused — In establishing the EFNEP, Congress defined the audiences, identified expected results, and specified the primary delivery method. The EFNEP's outcomes are defined in terms of behaviors. For learning to occur and desirable practices to be adopted, the educational experience must have depth, must be of sufficient duration to effect change, and must be relevant to the client's needs; thus ensuring that individuals who lack basic skills and knowledge will acquire and apply this information for the betterment of the health and well-being of the entire family.

Flexible — The EFNEP's program content and duration are based on participants' prior knowledge, needs, interests, and abilities. Participants are actively involved in setting their own educational goals, and this, in turn, affects the number of lessons (six to twenty-four) that are taught by the paraprofessional. The instructional strategies employed by paraprofessionals (one-to-one, group, mail, or any combination of these) and the content of the lessons themselves will depend on the participants' assessed needs and learning styles (13). This focused but flexible approach facilitates participants' progression through the EFNEP and enables more low-income clientele to participate.

In addition to describing significant features of the EFNEP, it is crucial at this time of intense competition for federal funds to identify potential ways of continuing to enhance the EFNEP's effectiveness as a Congressionally-mandated educational program designed to improve the total diet and nutritional welfare of low-income families and youth. We consider the following points to be of special importance.

Utilize the infrastructure of the Cooperative Extension System. The Extension system is a long-established network linking the federal government, state land grant institutions, and local communities. Extension possesses a knowledge base, experience, and a capacity to conduct research that enhances program effectiveness. It also involves participants as well as leaders in program decisions. These organizational attributes contribute to the EFNEP's effectiveness and efficiency.

Assure that the EFNEP clients have an opportunity to participate in other Extension educational programs. Articulation between the EFNEP and other Cooperative Extension programs has posed a challenge since the EFNEP began. The new emphasis on issues programming in Extension should facilitate the transit of the EFNEP participants into other Extension educational programs.

Resist the temptation to make the EFNEP Extension's nutrition education program for all low-income audiences. The EFNEP's greatest success has been with hard-to-reach, difficult-to-teach, low-income urban and rural families. We believe this group should continue to be the EFNEP's first priority. In recent years, there has
been a change in the nature of America's poor, with many single-parent and even dual-earner households being classified as low-income (13). Other segments of Cooperative Extension than the EFNEP will be more effective in addressing the needs of emerging and somewhat better educated low-income groups.

**Retain the EFNEP's programmatic focus on nutrition education.** Research has shown that EFNEP participants are improving resource-management and decision-making skills, and increasing self-confidence as well as learning food and nutrition related skills (15, 16, 19). We believe that participants will apply these management and decision-making skills learned through nutrition education in other aspects of their lives.

**Increase the effectiveness of the EFNEP's interagency cooperation and interaction at every level.** Effective coordination efforts, which occur most frequently at the local level, are the basis for establishing referral networks, sharing resources, avoiding duplication of effort, and providing better service to the target audience. Differences in organizational styles, priorities and "turfs" prevent optimal interagency cooperation from being established, and efforts should be made to overcome these obstacles.

**Allow continued flexibility for states and local communities to develop innovative ways to meet the nutrition education needs of the poor.** Over the past few years, Extension has recognized the need for increasing flexibility in the EFNEP accountability requirements. This increased flexibility is a positive step. In addition, a broad interpretation of the EFNEP's Congressional mandate encourages innovative and creative problem-solving. It is this interpretation and the "individualized" approach built into the program's operations that enables the EFNEP to serve the critical and diverse needs of the poor.

When we ponder the future of the EFNEP, we do so in light of its federal funding history, which is graphically illustrated in Figure 1. Since 1982 the EFNEP has had virtually level funding at approximately 60 million dollars. During this time, the purchasing power of the dollar has declined, while salaries and other program costs have steadily increased. In 1988, with a federal EFNEP appropriation of 57.6 million dollars, the EFNEP could afford to hire only about one-third as many paraprofessionals as could have been employed with the same dollars in 1982. Yet, the proportion of families with children trying to exist on incomes less than 125% of the poverty index has increased from about 15% when the EFNEP began to nearly 20% today (20). If the 1982 funding level of 60 million dollars had simply kept pace with inflation (average of 5%), today's EFNEP budget would be approximately 84.5 million dollars. Had the EFNEP budget been increased over the years in proportion to the growing number of poor families in the U.S., its current appropriation would be even higher.

In partial compensation for the effective decrease in federal appropriations, some states and counties have allocated in-kind resources and non-federal dollars to the EFNEP (21). In other cases, efforts have been made to secure external grants to support EFNEP activities or to enter into contractual arrangements with other agencies and organizations. Countless barriers to these efforts exist, including the requirements for matching non-federal funds and a lack of interest by most funders in providing operational dollars for an existing program, regardless of its proven success. Some funding sources specifically disallow proposals that appear to duplicate the EFNEP (22).

One possible source of additional funds is redistribution of USDA funds. Since Extension is designated as the lead agency for education within the USDA, we believe it would be reasonable for the EFNEP to be given both the funding and the authority to provide the nutrition education component for all of USDA's family nutrition programs, including WIC, CSFP and Food Stamps. If Cooperative Extension provided nutrition education to USDA's family food program recipients, families would be encouraged to develop the knowledge and skills to benefit maximally from their increased access to food.

What will happen if the EFNEP's federal appropriation is not increased? Clearly, the scope of the program will be further curtailed as operational costs increase. One possible result might be the federal allocation of funds only to those states with the largest number of low-income households. Secondly, some states might voluntarily withdraw from the program when it becomes prohibitively costly to operate, or they might restrict their remaining EFNEP units to the most cost-efficient sites — probably the large cities. This would result in the denial of the EFNEP's services to more families in critical need, especially those in rural areas where health.

![Figure 1. Provided by Nancy B. Leidenfrost, EFNEP National Program Leader (11).](image-url)
and social services are already often inadequate. A third possibility is for Congress to rewrite the EFNEP mandate, placing emphasis on the dissemination of nutrition information rather than on achieving desired behavior and practices. We feel this course of action would result in a paradoxical situation in which some decision-makers would be impressed with the increased number of individuals contacted, even if the intended clientele neither understand the nutrition messages they receive nor know how to apply the information.

Today, diet is recognized as a modifiable risk factor associated with chronic disease; low income is another risk factor associated with these preventable illnesses (24, 25). The EFNEP is saving tax dollars — the education provided through the EFNEP reduces health care costs for its participants.

Congressman L. Panetta, Chair of the House Budget Committee, stated his view on the future of the EFNEP: “I'm very optimistic about the future of this program because I think there is a growing recognition that the investment we make in programs like this saves us tremendous funds... EFNEP is basically the component... that insures that those that receive the assistance are going to make the right decisions when it comes to the nutritional needs for their family... [if] they do that, then the dollars that are spent in those programs will ultimately save money in the future in terms of health care costs, the loss of education, the loss of employment that could occur... I think there is a recognition by Congress... this is not just good for people in terms of good nutrition information, it is a good investment in the future” (26).

As we face the challenges of the 1990s, we are confident that the EFNEP will continue to be a positive force for enabling low-income individuals and their families to improve their lives and their futures, for it gives them the tools and the opportunity to excel. What more, we wonder, could a nation want for its families and its children?

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