

The Farm to Work Initiative: An Innovative Approach to Obesity Prevention

by Christine McCullum-Gómez, PhD, RD, LD, Food and Nutrition Consultant,
and Lindsay Rodgers, MA, RD, LD, Obesity Prevention Specialist, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention Program,
Texas Department of State Health Services

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 25.6 percent of adults were obese in 2007, which represented an increase of 1.7 percent from the 23.9 percent obesity prevalence in 2005 (1). The estimated prevalence of obesity was higher in the South (27.3 percent) and Midwest (26.5 percent) and lower in the Northeast (24.4 percent) and West (23.1 percent). According to these data, in 2007, none of the 50 states nor the District of Columbia had achieved the *Healthy People 2010* target for obesity prevalence among adults (2).

In their new book, *The Fattening of America, How the Economy Makes Us Fat, If It Matters, and What to Do About It*, health economist Eric Finkelstein, PhD, MHA, and co-author Laurie Zuckerman argue that the economy is the main driver of behaviors that lead to high rates of overweight and obesity. These authors conclude that successful obesity prevention strategies need to make it cheaper and easier to maintain a healthful weight (3,4). Such strategies need to address identified barriers to solving the problem of adult obesity including: lack of funding for health promotion and disease prevention, environmental factors (such as limited sidewalks and green space, urban sprawl, and reliance on cars), workplace settings not conducive to healthful eating and physical activity, lack of political leadership, and limited access to nutritious foods (e.g., fruits and vegetables) due to high prices or limited availability (5).

Approaches to encourage more healthful eating were highlighted in a meeting of representatives from 25 community programs, held at the CDC in July, 2008. Examples of strategies included increasing access to healthful foods through community gardens, farmers' markets, and local grocery stores (2).

According to Texas Comptroller, Susan Combs, "[t]he phrase, 'Everything is bigger in Texas,' rings true when we consider the current state of Texans' health" (6). "Nearly two-thirds (65.8 percent) of the state's population is overweight or obese (7). Being overweight or obese increases one's risk of developing chronic illnesses or co-morbidities such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, stroke, congestive heart failure, high cholesterol, and diabetes (6). These diseases cost employers – either directly in higher health care costs or indirectly through lost productivity when employees are sick, disabled, or not functioning up to standard (6).

Projecting the costs of obesity to 2025, it is estimated that obesity and obesity-related illnesses could cost Texas businesses \$15.8 billion per year (6). In a separate report, it was estimated that if Texas were to invest \$10 per person per year in proven community-based programs that improve nutrition, increase physical activity, and prevent smoking and tobacco use, Texas could save \$1 billion annually within five years through reductions in health care spending. This is a return of \$4.70 for every \$1.00 (8).

While individuals need to be held accountable for the lifestyle choices they make, employers can promote wellness and provide employees with incentives, knowledge, and opportunities that enable individual behavior

change. Combs believes that, "we must become a society focused on preventing obesity, rather than treating the diseases it causes" (6). One innovative approach to preventing obesity is the *Texas Farm to Work Initiative*; a program established through a partnership between the Sustainable Food Center (an Austin-based, non-profit organization) and the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS).

The Program

The *Farm to Work Initiative* is a worksite wellness program that provides employees with the opportunity to purchase a basket of fresh local produce that is delivered to individual worksites every week. The program was created to change the worksite environment in order to make choosing fruits and vegetables an easy choice for employees. The goals of the program are to: 1) increase fruit and vegetable consumption to levels that increase health through worksite-based approaches; 2) provide a supportive work environment to promote employee wellness and health; and 3) improve quality of life among employees and their families through chronic disease prevention and improved health. The program's logic model is highlighted in Figure 1 (9).

In November 2007, the *Farm to Work* program began as a pilot project at two locations: the DSHS Main Campus and Austin State Hospital. Since then, the program has grown substantially. As of July 2008, the *Farm to Work* program has delivered approximately 85,000 pounds of local, farm-fresh produce to over 1,600 Austin-area employees at six

in this issue:

<i>Student Column</i>	3
<i>Biotech and Malnutrition</i>	6
<i>Film Review</i>	8

Masthead Photo Credit: Mary Jo Forbord (HEN's Past Chair), her husband and three children own and operate Prairie Horizons Farm, a certified organic, rotationally grazed beef cow/calf operation on 480 acres in western Minnesota. The farm has been in the family for three generations, and includes more than 100 acres of virgin tall-grass prairie. The Forbords raise Lowline Angus cattle. Prairie Horizons Beef is sold directly to customers.

worksites, and participating farmers have grossed nearly \$140,000 in sales. The program also delivers to a handful of recreation centers and to the program offices of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (10). The program is a win-win situation for everyone involved: employees, worksites, and the local farmers participating in the program (9). Currently, the *Farm to Work* program has more business than it can handle. As of June 2008, the waiting list for the program included 17 businesses, city, and state agencies (10).

The local produce provided in the weekly baskets – which consists of 10-12 different fruits and vegetables – is comparatively priced, or in some cases a bit cheaper than grocery store prices. For example, one cost comparison found that items in the first weekly *Farm to Work* basket cost 13 percent less than the same items found in a local grocery store (9). According to Andrew Smiley, Farm Direct Projects Director at the Sustainable Food Center, “I think one reason we have succeeded is that it’s an easy and convenient choice, and people appreciate that simplicity of going online to order.” (10).

Unlike traditional farm subscription delivery services, *Farm to Work* requires no long-



Figure 2. Farmer Sonny Naegelin grows the *Farm to Work* crops for the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Main Campus, DSHS Austin State Hospital, Asuragen Inc. (a small private business) and the City of Austin. The Naegelin Farm – which is located in Lytle, Texas (about 20 miles southwest of San Antonio) – cultivates about 160 acres to grow a diverse array of over 30 different seasonal crops.

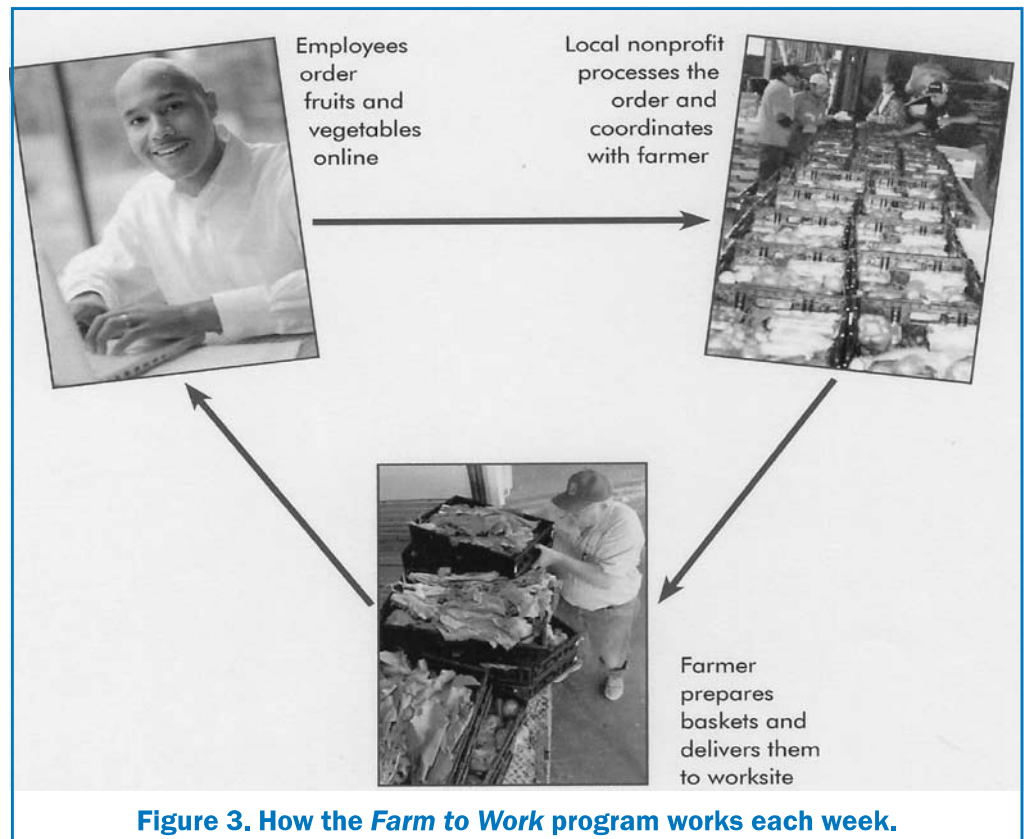


Figure 3. How the *Farm to Work* program works each week.

term commitment to participate. Instead, the *Farm to Work* program operates on a weekly cycle so participants can order produce baskets as frequently as they prefer. The program operates on a year-long basis with two possible exceptions depending on the weather – a three- to four-week break in August/September and another three- to four-week break in January/February (9). Sonny Naegelin, owner of Naegelin Farm – a family farm that has been farming in Lytle, Texas, for five generations – supplies produce for the *Farm to Work* programs at DSHS Main Campus, DSHS Austin State Hospital, Asuragen Inc. (a small private business) and the City of Austin (see Figure 2). Kevin and Becky Ottmers, owners of Ottmers Family Farm, supply produce to Convio Inc. (an Austin technology company), and Gundermann Farm supplies produce for the DSHS Howard Lane worksite. While the produce is not certified organic, participating farmers provide worksite employees with produce that is sustainably grown – that is, the farms use natural methods to build healthy soils and avoid use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers (9).

Each week, employees at participating worksites have the option to place an order for a basket online, which costs \$25. Figure 3 outlines the process by which employees receive their *Farm to Work* produce baskets each week. While it varies at each worksite, employees can order anytime before Monday afternoon to receive their produce on Thursday. The *Farm to Work* ordering website, hosted at sustainablefoodcenter.org, lists sea-

sonal produce that is available. Employees often welcome the surprises they receive, but there is a trade box available at the pick-up site where they can exchange produce with other employees. Recipes, food preparation tips, and storage information are available

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to help employees learn to use the produce they receive. Unclaimed produce is donated to a charitable organization. In the case of DSHS, unclaimed vegetables are brought to Austin State Hospital’s Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services, where an activity-therapy program helps patients learn cooking skills and participate in an event called *Stir-Fry Thursdays*. The children’s enthusiasm for these vegetables has spawned a new project for the children – raised in-ground gardens on campus.

(continued on p. 10)

Where to Find More Information

Those interested in starting a similar worksite wellness program can find more information in the *Farm to Work Toolkit* and *Farm to Work Toolkit Supplement*. The *Farm to Work Toolkit* includes a summary of key program components, tips for obtaining legal clearance and other legal concerns, a worksite feasibility checklist, a timeline for implementation, information on produce distribution and staffing produce distribution, evaluation tools (including a farmer survey and online pre/post employee surveys), and website content. The *Farm to Work Toolkit Supplement* includes sample memos, internal communications, and marketing artwork used to implement the program.

Both resources are available online at:
www.texasbringinghealthyback.org.

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10. Zaragoza S. Central Texas workers eating up Farm-to-Work program. *Austin Business Journal*. June 20th 2008.

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