

Crow Creek families focus on healthy eating choices in 'food desert'

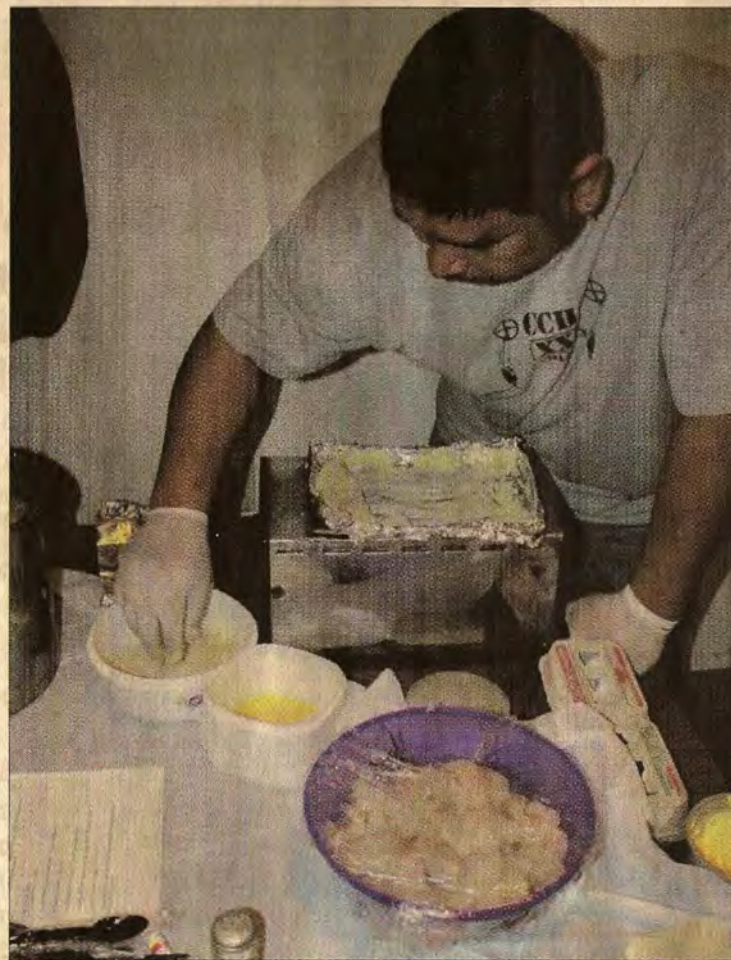
FORT THOMPSON — Diabetes is a debilitating disease and obesity is a contributing factor. American Indians have the highest rate of diabetes of any ethnic group in the world, and they face many challenges to reduce the current trends.

Obesity is appearing in children in their early childhood years. National Relief Charities has recently partnered with the Crow Creek Head Start program to address the issue of obesity and diabetes in their young population.

One of the concerns of many reservation communities is the access to fresh and affordable food choices. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Fort Thompson is considered a "food desert" location. These locations are defined as "low income areas where the nearest supermarket is over a mile away."

A 2007 study prepared for the Office of Health and Human Services entitled "Obesity and American Indians" details contributing factors for poor nutrition and diet in American Indian communities. Because there was a shift from "traditional occupations such as hunting, gathering and farming to family members leaving home in search of paid employment," the result was a decrease in the "amount of wild and home-grown foods in the American Indian/Alaska Native diet." With more processed and commercially prepared food being consumed, diets that were "historically high in complex carbohydrate/high fiber foods and lower in fat have been replaced by foods high in refined carbohydrates (e.g., refined sugars), fat, sodium and low in fruits and vegetables (Indian Health Service, 2001)."

To help the Crow Creek Head Start address the health threat for Native youth, National Relief Charities worked with Lynn Cuny, who is of both Crow Creek and Oglala heritage, to develop a culturally-rele-



Crow Creek Head Start parent, Albert Fallis, prepares a meal for a National Relief Charities community event in Fort Thompson.

vant curriculum known as Dakota Moves. Lynn is familiar with obesity and diabetes, both personally and professionally. Her uncle, Jay, developed diabetes when he was only 8 years old. Before he died, he asked one thing of Cuny: "Don't become a diabetic."

At first, Cuny laughed it off, thinking her fate was already sealed because of family history with the disease. She found out, however,

through her own life choices that her pre-diabetic state could be reversed. She is now using her lessons to help others fight off diabetes and obesity.

One aspect of Dakota Moves' curriculum involves the use of community events supported by NRC's Sioux Nation Relief Fund program. The community events service helps program partners increase awareness and positive actions revolving around health and other issues.

Specifically, the SNRF program helps reservation programs increase attendance for planned community activities, get positive information into the hands of more people and better promote the visibility and understanding of the program and its goals. In partnership with head start, a special community event was held in January to bring healthy food choices to Crow Creek families. Howling winds, below freezing temperatures and blowing snow could not keep families away from this special food demonstration hosted by NRC staff.

A key goal of the food demonstration was to illustrate that healthy, cost-effective food choices are available from the Crow Creek Reservation's small local grocer. Another goal was to highlight traditional food sources, such as fish and wild game, in order to show the benefits of reintroducing these foods into their diets. The most important goal was to involve the parents in the demonstration, from planning to implementation. Change can only happen if it comes from within the community, and several parents stepped up and volunteered to host one of the food booths.

One father made ground venison burritos – from deer that he hunted – mixed with fibrous beans tightly rolled in a tortilla and sliced for individual servings. These ingredients made a great healthier alternative to a commercially purchased burrito. Another father brought fish fillets made from walleye he caught in the local river and specially coated and baked in a small toaster oven. This helped to prove that smaller appliances can produce mouthwatering results. Other food booths included offerings of fresh vegetables, fruit smoothies, mini-muffins, vegetable omelets made with farm-fresh eggs, and black bean and corn salsa quesadillas with low-fat cheese.

All the food items used in the

demonstration had to be available and purchased at the local grocer or a food source that is or can be available in the community, such as fresh eggs from chickens, garden vegetables, and fish and wild game. At each food booth, parents and volunteers explained their recipes, the costs of the ingredients, and how many servings could be produced from their purchases. The best part was that each table had a recipe sheet for families to take home and replicate the recipes in their own homes.

The community event was more than a food demonstration, too. It was actually a "Learn and Earn" event, part of SNRF service guidelines. Each family that participated received a small electric grill – like the one used for the omelets and quesadillas – for their attendance and participation. Health was the largest motivator for most families, though. After realizing they are in charge of their food choices, they expressed interest in gardens. NRC and SNRF Grow service can help with that as well. Tilling season is fast approaching and plans are already in place to support Crow Creek families in their quest for fresher and more affordable produce.

Providing incentives to draw people to educational community-wide events such as this food demonstration is one way NRC and SNRF support reservation programs. Other popular community events include cancer workshops, community cleanups, family and parent education nights, shoe distributions, health fairs and screenings, and a variety of wellness-themed events. In 2011 alone, over 250 community events were supported for nearly 180 partners on 22 reservations across the Great Plains, with over 60,000 people participating.

For further information about National Relief Charities, visit www.nrcprograms.org or call 800-416-8102.