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Targeting dietary dangers

By MARTIN ESPINOZA THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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Jose Olguin and his wife Francisca Vazquez have been trying to eliminate soft drinks from the diet of their 8-year-old, Jose, who as Vazquez put it, is a little bit “gordito.”

They’ve replaced soda with flavored drinks they mix themselves. But, Vazquez added, “the truth is we put sugar in the mix.”

At a Redwood Empire Food Bank canned food drive in Coddington Mall Saturday, the South Park couple sampled water flavored with slices of cucumber and mint.

“I’m seeing now that water doesn’t need sugar,” said Olguin.

That realization is exactly what healthy food advocates in Sonoma County and across the country are striving for.

Last week, Michele Obama launched a sweeping initiative aimed at changing the way American kids eat and play. The “Let’s Move” campaign seeks to revamp school lunches and playgrounds, encouraging healthier food choices and more activities in the hopes of eliminating childhood obesity within a generation.

The First Lady’s campaign was welcome news to Anthony Taylor, a health information specialist for the Sonoma County Department of Health Services.

Taylor coordinates a healthy eating project for the Community Activity and Nutrition Coalition, or CAN-C, a group of volunteers, professionals and organizations that promote nutritional health and active living.

CAN-C has launched a pilot project to spur food markets and restaurants in south Santa Rosa, Boyes Hot Springs and Petaluma's Payran/McKinley neighborhoods to offer more nutritious food choices.

Last week, CAN-C released an assessment of these neighborhoods that found each contained 5 to 9 times more unhealthy food sources, such as fast food joints and convenience stores, than supermarkets and farmer's markets. These neighborhoods suffer from a lack of access to affordable, healthy foods like fruits and vegetables and are dominated by stores that offer cheaper, prepackaged food, according to the report.

The assessment, conducted in the summer of 2008, found that 65 percent of adults surveyed in south Santa Rosa were overweight or obese, compared with 60 percent of adults countywide.

Among the key findings:

-- Approximately 75 percent of the food outlets surveyed in Santa Rosa's Roseland neighborhood and southeast Santa Rosa did not meet healthy food quality standards.

-- None of the fast-food restaurants surveyed met the healthy restaurant quality standards.

-- Most food outlets in Roseland sell fruits and vegetables at prices 10 percent higher than the county average.

-- Only three of the eight supermarkets, grocery stores and small markets surveyed in Roseland and the South Park/Kawana Springs area accept vouchers for WIC, a federally funded nutrition program for women, infants and children.

Taylor said that giving children healthier food choices, especially those in low-income areas, is critical to fighting the growing number of adults who are overweight or obese.

"What we have found is that as these kids age, they're at greater risk of becoming overweight or obese," Taylor said.

The CAN-C campaign has a two-pronged approach to getting food outlets and restaurants to offer healthier food choices.

One, known as the Healthy Food Outlet Project, encourages store owners to improve their inventory of fresh, local produce, low-fat protein and dairy items, as well as alternatives to soft drinks.

The second, the Smart Meal Program, establishes nutrition standards for restaurant meals. These standards will be implemented initially at Perry's Deli, La Famiglia Market & Deli, and two Lola's Market restaurants. They will promote entrees low in fat, calories and sodium, and high in grains, fruits and vegetables.

These entrees will carry a "Smart Meal" logo on menus, and restaurants will receive assistance with marketing and production of the labels.

Joel Russotti, chief operations officer of Lola's Market, said the market plans to host healthy food cooking demonstrations and more low-fat, low-sodium products. Menus in the restaurants will more clearly identify "healthy alternatives."

"We want to be on the cutting edge of new health trends," he said.

Promoting healthy food choices was one of the main themes at the Redwood Empire Food Bank canned food drive in Coddington Mall on Saturday. The food bank is trying to encourage donations of healthier food items, such as canned tuna, canned fruits and vegetables and canned soup.

“Right now, with the difficult economic times, there are more and more people going hungry that need Redwood Empire Food Bank services,” said Jennifer McClendon, project director for Network for a Healthier California, which helped organize the food drive.

Arturo Gonzalez, the owner of Taco Max and Max Cafe, both in Coddington Mall, demonstrated how to make quesadillas with whole wheat tortillas, mozzarella, diced tomatoes, canned olives and canned pinto and black beans.

“It’s so sad to see kids overweight, eating fast food,” he said. “In my restaurant, I serve all organic food, all natural food.”

At the demonstration, 8-year-old Jose Olguin sampled a banana split made with granola, sliced banana, low-fat vanilla yogurt and peaches and pineapple canned in their own juice.

His father, who recently lost his job at a shop in Rohnert Park that makes banners, said cooking for his son is difficult because the boy doesn’t like vegetables and will eat fruit only “if you cut it up and put it there in front of him.”

His mother’s reaction to the cucumber-flavored water, one of shock, seemed to linger as they left the event.

“It’s a good idea I got here,” she said.

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