

BAY AREA & STATE

Nurses bring healthy eating class to San Francisco's SROs

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Photo: Michael Short, Special To The Chronicle

Jovita Zamora, a resident of Bishop Swing Community House, shows off the produce she was able to buy with the free tokens provided by the program last month at the Heart of the City farmers' market at United Nations Plaza.

The incentive was clear: \$30 worth of free food from a San Francisco farmers' market in exchange for taking a healthy-eating course that could save their lives.

The former homeless residents of the Bishop Swing Community House in the South of Market neighborhood — many suffering from high cholesterol, diabetes and other ill effects of unhealthy eating — gladly took the bait being offered by Bay Area nurses Jennifer Lee and Amy Stevenson.

“I’ll be 50 next month. I really need to eat right,” said Linda Jones, a resident of the housing development on the 200 block of 10th Street, who took the course with the goal of losing weight.

Jones, who suffers from asthma, said the course inspired her to drop her guilty pleasure — drinking 2 liters of ginger ale a day. On her field trip to the Heart of the City farmers' market, she used her free tokens to buy peaches and grapes.



Photo: Michael Short, Special To The Chronicle

Nurse Amy Stevenson (right) gives a hug to Silvia Fuentes after their visit last month to the farmers' market. Fuentes was one of the students in the healthy eating course offered by two Bay Area nurses.

Course takes off

Since May, Lee and Stevenson have also introduced their healthy-eating program at three single room occupancy hotels in San Francisco, holding hour-long classes once a week for small groups of residents. The nurses cover topics like nutrition basics, reading food labels, portion sizes and hydration. The courses culminate in a field trip to the farmers' market in San Francisco's United Nations Plaza.

Lee and Stevenson, who are also master's students at Samuel Merritt University in Oakland, first tried teaching the course at the Crosby in the Tenderloin for a class project last fall. They hailed it a success and decided to find a way to expand their reach.

They applied and were accepted to the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship Program this summer, which provides \$2,000 each to fellows involved in service targeting an "unmet community health need."

"What we tend to see and work with are folks who have high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes," said Stevenson, 43. "They really want information just like a lot of people do when they go to the doctor."

So far, they have brought the five-week course to the Elm and Mentone SRO hotels in the Tenderloin and the Canon Barcus Community House, another housing development for former homeless people South of Market.

With their limited resources, Lee and Stevenson could only offer \$5 of farmers'

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market tokens to residents in their program. But staff at Bishop Swing pitched in an extra \$25 in tokens for each of their residents who attended at least three classes as a way to encourage them to choose healthier lifestyles.



Demand for low-income units illustrates trend

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, about 20 residents carrying reusable Trader Joe's bags walked in a long line down 10th Street toward vendors selling fresh fruits, vegetables and grains.

Kathleen Sears, 60, said she took the course to get a handle on her blood sugar.

“I wanted to learn about having diabetes and bringing it under control with food, rather than being insulin dependent,” she said. “You learn a lot of ways to prepare food that’s still tasty. It doesn’t have to be junky, it doesn’t have to be processed, it doesn’t have to be oversalted.”

Sears bought three baby eggplants at the market and had plans to make eggplant parmesan for dinner.



Photo: Michael Short, Special To The Chronicle

Bishop Swing Community Housing resident Linda Jones shops for grapes at the farmer's market at U.N. Plaza in San Francisco, CA Wednesday, August 19, 2015. Samuel Merritt University's School of Nursing students Amy Stevenson and Jennifer Lee created a free five-week "healthy eating" course for SRO residents that culminates in a field trip to the farmer's market in U.N. Plaza, where they give the residents \$5 to buy as much food as they can and then show them how to cook it.

More work ahead

Lee and Stevenson plan to visit four other SROs, keeping up the project until November.

Although the class focuses on physical health, Lee, 37, said the field trip provides an added factor: helping the residents feel at ease in a community not always welcoming to the homeless.

"This is a way to focus on something positive," she said. "There's such marginalization, in terms of homelessness. This trip helps them to feel comfortable. It's a healthy socialization."



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Bishop Swing Community Housing residents hold bags of produce they bought at the farmer's market at U.N. Plaza in San Francisco, CA Wednesday, August 19, 2015. Samuel Merritt University's School of Nursing students Amy Stevenson and Jennifer Lee created a free five-week "healthy eating" course for SRO residents that culminates in a field trip to the farmer's market in U.N. Plaza, where they give the residents \$5 to buy as much food as they can and then show them how to cook it.

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