



brighterbites™

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Sharma: Eliminating hunger and food waste in the U.S. is an achievable goal

Brighter Bites has distributed over 8 million pounds of produce to more than 20,000 families, and nearly 75% of them say the lifestyle change has stuck.

By: Shreela Sharma



The USDA reports more than 40 billion pounds of post-harvest loss of produce estimated at over \$50 billion each year. Concurrently, we have more than 42.2 million Americans who are food-insecure without lack of regular access to food, especially healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables.

As a behavioral epidemiologist, one of the first questions I ask when I teach a class is: “How many of you eat?” I usually get laughter from my students because it is such a rhetorical question. It is an important consideration, however, when you think about food as a behavior linked to disease. Unlike smoking, physical activity and other behaviors linked to health, eating is not optional. A need that must be met.

On World Food Day, commemorated earlier this month, we celebrate food and consider solutions to end hunger worldwide. But we must also understand hunger, food waste and chronic disease in the United States and how

they are intricately linked. We have an epidemic of food insecurity and obesity that coexists within the same people—families on a limited budget. Moreover, fruits and vegetables, the two most commonly linked foods to optimizing health and preventing disease, are also the two most perishable and commonly wasted foods.

Food waste in the U.S. is occurring primarily at three levels: production (e.g. farm), retail (e.g. grocery store), and consumer/household. The USDA reports more than 40 billion pounds of post-harvest loss of produce estimated at over \$50 billion each year. Concurrently, we have more than 42.2 million Americans who are food-insecure without lack of regular access to food, especially healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables.

In Texas, rates of children consuming fruits and vegetables are among the lowest, while obesity and hunger are among the highest in the U.S. Food insecurity, especially among children, is invisible because of the high intake of unhealthy foods leading to obesity. These children may “appear” healthy, yet they are suffering from chronic malnutrition. So while we have a food waste problem, we are also struggling with food insecurity and obesity. Can we address food waste and convert it into a public health opportunity?

Yes. A case-in-point is the program, Brighter Bites.

In 2012, concerned mother Lisa Helfman approached me with an idea. She had been participating in a produce co-op where she received a box of fruits and vegetables every week, and noticed her children’s eating habits begin to change. She said to me, “I was at a birthday party with my 5-year-old son who asked me if he ‘had’ to eat cake? And he

would rather have fruit instead!” We wondered if we could replicate this behavior change we saw in her family among those in highest need. As it turns out, you can—and we did.

Together, we built a nonprofit called Brighter Bites. Our formula is simple. Produce distribution using primarily reclaimed produce, plus Nutrition Education in school and for parents, plus fun food experience consisting of a healthy-recipe tasting, all done using a co-op concept during the school year and the summer. When the parents come to pick up their children, each family receives two bags of beautiful, fresh produce at no cost and they taste a recipe made from a hard-to-use item in the bag. Parents and children try fun, healthy recipes and receive the education and the ingredients to try it at home.

We started in 2012 with one school and 150 families; to date, we have distributed 10 million pounds of produce to more than 20,000 low-income children and their families across more than 100 schools, Head Starts, YMCAs and community centers in Houston, Dallas and Austin.

We have found that this approach is bringing lasting change. Along with my colleagues at UTHealth School of Public Health, we conducted a two-year study evaluating the effectiveness of Brighter Bites. Compared to those in the control group, families who received Brighter Bites demonstrated significant increases in the amount of fruits and vegetables consumed by children and their parents. There were significant improvements in the home environment, including cooking at home, understanding and using nutrition facts labels to make grocery purchasing decisions, eating more meals together as a family, and having more fruits and vegetables available at those meals. Cost associated with the produce was a mere \$2.65 per family for an average 57 servings (about 30 pounds) per week.

What is particularly compelling about Brighter Bites is the framework used. Brighter Bites is addressing food waste and converting it into a public health opportunity by leveraging the support of other nonprofit and for-profit organizations like H-E-B Grocery Co. and Sysco. Sysco is collecting produce directly from farmers across the country and then sending it to local food banks. Our local food bank partners are aggregating this donated produce from Sysco and other sources, and then distributing it to our Brighter Bites locations. Through these partnerships, we are able to tackle food waste by finding more produce that might otherwise be tilled under or go uneaten, and conquer the last mile of delivering the produce to our underserved families while teaching them how to use it.

While World Food Day is often seen as a day where we think about people in other countries who cannot access food, let’s not forget about food-insecure residents here at home who don’t have this basic need met.

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