



## CHAPTER VI HEALTH AND NUTRITION IN LA PLATA COUNTY

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***Assessment Methodology:*** The information collected for this portion of the La Plata County Community Food Assessment includes information from interviews conducted with a pediatrician, health care agencies, an ayurvedic practitioner serving the Southern Ute Community, and a nutritional expert.

Growing Partners attended monthly meetings with the Healthy Lifestyle Coalition in an effort to strengthen food networks, to gather data from the coalition regarding their efforts towards creating a healthier community and to collaborate on the COPAN (Colorado Physical Activity and Nutrition Program), health assessment of La Plata County. Responses on what it means to “eat well” in La Plata County were collected from over 125 adults and 100 youth who responded to consumer and youth surveys. And the COPAN Comprehensive Planning Grant provided data and input on national, state and local health statistics on obesity and related illnesses.

*The following is a list of the individuals interviewed and the agencies or organizations they serve or affiliate with.*

**Zane Baranowski, C.N.**

Zane Baranowski is a certified nutritionist and has worked in the health food industry for over 25 years including 11 years in Southwest Colorado. His work includes raw food material production, research and product development, packaging and marketing.

**Pakhi Chaudhuri, M.D.**

Pakhi Chaudhuri is a local pediatrician for The Pediatric Associates of Durango. Pakhi received her MD from Brown University School of Medicine in Rhode Island. She is a member of the Physicians for Social Responsibility and the American Academy of Pediatrics and serves on the board for the Four Corners Holistic Health Association.

**Karen Forest, R.N.**

Karen Forest is a Registered Nurse and Coordinator of Promoviendo La Salud, a program of San Juan Basin Health Department. Promoviendo works with the Latino

population in both La Plata and Archuleta counties, established families and new immigrants, to reduce health disparities.

**Betzi Murphy, R.N.**

Betzi Murphy is the director of The Women Infant Children (WIC) Program in La Plata County, a program that provides general nutrition and breastfeeding education, health referrals, and special supplemental foods (in the form of check vouchers) for women, infants, and children who qualify.

**Amita Nathwani, M.A.**

Amita Nathwani is Founder and President of Four Corners Holistic Health Association, Inc. Amita currently practices Ayurvedic Medicine at the Rivergate Medical Building in Durango, Colorado. Amita specializes in women's disorders and detoxification, studying the psychological aspects, cravings, addictions, behavior and education around food and diet. She currently serves forty Southern Ute Indian Women through a grant focused on a healthy weight program.

**Elise Redd**

Elise Redd is the Director of Southern Ute Tribal Health Services. Tribal Health provides some home care for elders, in-home exercise programs, diabetes prevention and care programs and Community Health Representatives, whose primary job is to provide in-home health care and transportation to medical appointments for Tribal members.

## **1. THE HEALTH AND NUTRITIONAL TRAITS OF LA PLATA COUNTY**

**Assessment methodology.** Each interviewee was asked how the populations and health concerns of the area are unique. The responses not only told a story, but painted a picture of a very split community.

Several of the people interviewed talked about the overall health of the county, and of desires to be active, fit, and eat healthy. According to Zane Baranowski, a certified nutritionist, the county as a whole is very health conscious. "La Plata County has an overall interest in being active and being thin. When you look at the number of stores that sell health bars, and active green products, Durango is on par or better with any region. The demand is absolutely there."

Pakhi Chaudhuri, a local pediatrician for The Pediatric Associates of Durango, also feels she serves a very healthy clientele, but wishes she served more Hispanic and Native clients so she had a better understanding of their needs. Currently, her clientele is very nutritionally educated and already eating healthy, organic, and pesticide-free foods. Similarly, Amita Nathwani, Founder and President of Four Corners Holistic Health Association, Inc., believes in general that people in the community have much more acceptance for holistic medicine than in the Eastern U.S.

Pakhi is positive about La Plata County's current food system, but feels there needs to be more community education for widespread support and understanding about its basic needs

and resources. “(Local food) is still more expensive and there needs to be a balance to bridge the expenses with the benefits,” she said. She is glad to see more hormone-free beef available locally, but says there still needs to be more awareness around some other factors, such as why can’t we eat the fish in the river, or in Lake McPhee. “There needs to be awareness around the environmental impacts on our food supply.”

### **THE AGENCIES SERVING LOW-INCOME CLIENTELE TELL A DIFFERENT STORY ABOUT HEALTH AND NUTRITION IN THE COUNTY**

People working with the low-income sector of the population spoke about various issues affecting the specific populations they serve and about food access. This perspective drew attention to the fact that La Plata County is a very divided community, with food needs that are population-specific.

According to Karen Forest, who directs Promoviendo la Salud, a Program of the San Juan Basin Health Department (SJBHD) which serves the Hispanic population, health and nutrition are two things the population her agency serves has many issues with. “The Pre-Natal Program (also a Program of SJBHD) sees recent immigrants staying in hotels and having real food security issues,” she said. “They are using the microwave in their hotel rooms to cook food. That is all they have access to.” Karen feels many of their diets are really poor, especially when it comes to how much fast food they eat. She hopes cooking classes will help teach people to go to the store and purchase affordable healthy foods that they can prepare throughout the week. “Many people say they don’t buy healthy food because they can’t afford it, but possibly it takes a little more effort and planning to be possible.”

According to Elise Redd, Director of Southern Ute Tribal (SUIT) Health Services, many Tribal members she serves are not interested in nutritional education and programs. “We can have an event, like a wellness event that is open to ours and sister tribes, and we will have more people come from other communities than from our own community.”

Amita Nathwani spoke about the SUIT women she works with at Health Services. “The hardest thing I found is that when women are overweight, it becomes exhausting for them to talk over and over again about nutrition. The women I work with face many stresses in life; they deal with alcoholic husbands. We remind women to empower themselves and that food, in a healthy way, can help them revive themselves.”

Amita also feels SUIT women’s access to quality foods is an issue. “Culturally, food access is harder because SUIT women are living in a culture surrounded by a very different culture, and (what I have found is) they tend to embrace things not part of their (traditional) culture. (For example), when I walked into Shur Value,<sup>1</sup> what I found was that there was not a single food without hydrogenated oils and corn syrup. Everything was processed.”

According to Amita, Shur Value, the grocery store in Ignacio, is full, but doesn’t offer a large variety of food options. People in Ignacio must travel to Durango to purchase healthier foods. “The community needs affordable fruits and vegetables and healthy, affordable food. If you are going to cook healthy, many of those foods are more expensive.”

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<sup>1</sup> Shur Value is the only grocery store in Ignacio, home of the Southern Ute Tribe. See Chapter III on Food Resources- Grocery Stores for more information on Shur Value and other grocers.

Elise thinks a lot of people in Ignacio, given the choice, still would not purchase fresh, perishable foods, but more likely would continue to purchase canned food. The most common complaint she hears is, “It takes too long to cook healthy. It takes a lot of preparation.” And canned foods, or meals already made, require less effort to prepare.

Family advocates at SUCAP Head Start in Ignacio feel family meals may be less balanced due to fast-food diets. They feel their families are very busy and have limited time for food. But, according to the owner of Durango restaurant, P is for Peanut, there is a disparity between what people want and would do if given the means, and what they have access to. To her, food issues are more connected to monetary constraints than to time or preference. “I think people want to believe they are willing to pay for local and organic food, but in most average families in La Plata County, they can’t afford it.”

## **2. WHAT IT MEANS TO “EAT WELL” IN LA PLATA COUNTY**

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The following are comments from surveys regarding what it means to residents in La Plata County to “eat well.” To some having a full belly was important, but to others eating well takes on a more philosophical approach connected to the local food system and social responsibility. The diversity is amazing.

- *Eating nutritiously, feed the body, feed the soul.*” Consumer Survey, Durango Natural Foods Farmers’ Appreciation Day Event
- *“Eating food without hormones.”* Youth Survey, grade 11
- *“Apples, vegetables, fruit - all the healthy food.”* Youth Survey, grade 5, 10 years old
- *“Eat a bit of everything. Everything on the Food Pyramid.”* WIC participant
- *“Healthy food that gives you energy and keeps your body in good shape.”* Youth survey, grade 11
- *“Whole grains, organics, fruits and veggies, free range meat, local.”* Consumer Survey, Taste of Durango
- *“To eat food in appropriate portions that is grown organically and hopefully locally.”* Consumer Survey, Taste of Durango
- *“To eat a balanced meal.”* WIC and Food Stamp participant

## **3. DIABETES AND OBESITY**

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Up until 130 years ago when the Ute and Navajo homelands covered modern day Colorado, eastern Utah, and northern New Mexico, life patterns followed the seasons. Later, this healthy, active lifestyle of hiking in the mountains to harvest fresh food and visiting neighbors was replaced by a more modern Western way of living. And with this transition, Native health problems began to rise.

Currently the incidence of diabetes among Native Americans is more than double that of Caucasian populations. According to Indian Health Services 2003 data, Southern Ute Tribal

#### United States Data on Obesity

- 127 Million American Adults are overweight; 60 million (22.2%) are obese
- In 2002, the Surgeon General estimated the cost of obesity at \$117 billion a year
- 300,000 deaths in the US each year are associated with obesity
- People living below the federal poverty level are twice as likely to be obese

#### US Children and Youth

- The most endangered group is America's youth, who may for the first time ever have a shorter life expectancy than their parents
- In 2003, children's overweight rate was more than three times what it was in 1980
- In 2003, 31% of US youth, age 10-17, were overweight

#### Colorado Data

- Between 1990 and 2001, obesity in Colorado more than doubled. The estimated cost of obesity-related medical expenses in Colorado in 2003 was \$874 million or \$1710 per person

#### Colorado High School Students

- 44% ate vegetables only 1-3 times in past week
- 29% ate no salad in the past week
- 52% watched 2-5+ hours of TV a day
- 39% ate fruit only 1-3 times in past week

Statistics were presented by the COPAN (Colorado Physical Activity and Nutrition Program), Comprehensive Community Project, and Planning Workshop in Durango Colorado on 8/23/2006.

members have a diabetes rate of 15% with a 75% chance that those affected will advance to cardiovascular disease and renal complications (a high incidence compared with other Native nations). Advanced diabetes carries with it a high level of morbidity and mortality.

The Southern Ute (SUIT) Health Services focuses on teaching tribal members healthy food preparation and healthy eating in order to prevent diabetes and to encourage weight loss. To get people more active, the Diabetes Program at Southern Ute (SUIT) Health Services has been encouraging people to exercise at home. "We have a recreation center here, but a lot of people won't use it," said Elise Redd "They go there and they feel like everyone is thin, so they won't go. Health Services has purchased equipment that people can take home and work on personal fitness. Then they can transition to the recreational center once they are comfortable."<sup>2</sup>

According to Elise, there is a level of acceptance for overweight people in the

community, and people eat out a lot. The Family Advocates at SUCAP Head Start, a Montessori school located in Ignacio, feel some of the local doctors disregard the prevalence of diabetes and obesity among children. For example, they claim parents with overweight children have been told by their doctors that their child's weight is "Normal since the rest of the family is large. And, so not to worry, they will grow out of it."

According to Amita Nathwani, "Diabetes and high blood pressure are not all about sugar. There are things like salt-sensitive and non salt-sensitive people that need a combination medication." This makes paying attention to diet and personal needs so important when combating or preventing diabetes.

Practitioners mentioned some of the common approaches found in food marketing designed to fight diabetes and obesity may not be solving the problem. For example, products labeled sugar-free, fat-free, or cholesterol-free used alone will not change the factors behind diabetes or obesity.

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<sup>2</sup> SUIT Health Services uses the Polar Body Age Exercise System. For more information see: [www.polarusa.com/medical/wellness](http://www.polarusa.com/medical/wellness)

## **4. WHAT SOME EXPERTS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT NUTRITIONAL EDUCATION**

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### **OUR CURRENT NUTRITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM IS NOT WORKING**

Zane Baranowski noted that our current nutritional education is not working. “If our primary focus has been that it is best to get all the nutrients from food, then we all need to come to a very good understanding of what food actually is. The knowledge the general public has been given by governmental agencies about what *is* food is inadequate. They have allowed white breads, cereals, sugar and corn syrup products to count as food. They allow nutritionally-compromised over-processed foods to be part of their recommended daily food choices.”

### **IT IS IMPORTANT TO BEGIN TEACHING NUTRITIONAL EDUCATION WITH MOMS VERY EARLY**

Pakhi Chaudhuri begins teaching nutritional education with new moms very early. One of the first handouts she gives to her patients’ parents cites the importance of serving organic baby foods. Pakhi recommends agencies and physicians “especially offer services to new moms. They are in a unique place and are often very willing to make changes and are motivated to learn. It is a good time to introduce new education. With parents of older children, it is easy to fall back into old patterns that have already been established.”

Everyone needs nutritional education. Healthy choices and education need to not only be focused on lower income, but wealthier families as well. Everyone needs to see the worth of eating well. Families with more money don’t necessarily make healthier eating choices; they need to see that nutritional programs are not just charitable programs for low-income populations. (Pakhi Chaudhuri)

When asked about the role schools play in regard to nutritional education, Pakhi recommended there be modeling in the cafeteria. However, she said, “Nutritional education is hard to teach in the schools if it is not emulated at homes. Children don’t want to hear that they are not doing healthy things at home. And the education won’t stick without reinforcement at home too. What I tell parents, is to bring in the healthy snacks and then back off.”

### **THERE ARE VARIOUS QUALITY AND QUANTITY ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOOD WE EAT**

According to Zane Baranowski, there are certain quality and quantity issues of food to deal with. He claims the USDA’s five food groups in the Food Pyramid, are all quantity related and are not monitored for the qualities they possess. “They never mention the nutritional aspects of food that are missing or being altered by processing and/or chemical-based agriculture. For example, we talk about eating more vegetables, yet we don’t talk much about the actual quality of the vegetables we eat, only the quantity. Mineral content alone has been tested to be much higher in organic foods than in conventional foods. Until the true qualities of foods enter into the equation, all of our nutritional education is not only ineffective, but untrue.”

## BETTER EDUCATION DOESN'T ALWAYS TRANSLATE INTO BETTER FOOD CHOICES

According to the assessment's Consumer and Youth Surveys, many respondents, although able to recite a clear educated message about nutrition and what it means to *eat well*, did not connect these principals with their everyday actions. For example, when asked about their food choices and which restaurants they frequent, some chose fast food as their top restaurant choice.

Zane Baranowski agrees. "Better education doesn't always translate into better food choices. We are too busy, have too much work, are lazy, and deal with constant emotional blackmail by our children (when it comes to making food choices). Convenience has become more important than quality."

## 5. IS THERE A CONNECTION BETWEEN AYURVEDIC MEDICINE, NUTRITION, AND LOCAL FOOD?

Interestingly, a common theme of expert interviews centered on the importance of ayurvedic principles with regard to food and nutrition as preventative medicine.

Ayurvedic medicine is an alternative medical practice that claims to be the traditional medicine of India. *Ayurveda* is based on two Sanskrit terms: *ayu* meaning life and *veda* meaning knowledge or science. Ayurvedic treatments are primarily dietary and herbal. Patients are classified by body types, or *prakriti*, which are determined by proportions of the three *doshas*. The *doshas* allegedly regulate mind-body harmony. Illness and disease are considered to be a matter of imbalance in the *doshas*. Treatment is aimed at restoring harmony or balance to the mind-body system.<sup>3</sup>

Because ayurvedic medicine is focused on prevention and takes an individualized approach, it is seen as being very different than most Western medicine attitudes towards health and nutrition. According to Pakhi Chaudhuri, a Durango pediatrician, there is a strong disconnect between health and nutrition in Western medicine. "Some Western medical schools don't even offer classes on nutrition. Medical students have had to petition their school to offer even one class on nutritional education." Pakhi believes Western medicine has a "rudimentary understanding of nutrition. Ayurvedic medicine addresses the issue much better and the study of genetics is finally catching up with it."

Elise Redd, Tribal Health Services Director, stated in her interview that the Southern Ute Tribe was in the process of hiring an ayurvedic nutritionist based on the fact that an ayurvedic approach better deals with their health and nutritional issues. We are choosing "to go with an ayurvedic nutrition program. The principles are friendlier to tribal traditions. They constitute a very individualized approach."

Pakhi Chaudhuri believes nutrition should be less about dieting and more about an individualized nutritional diet. Obesity often results from emotional eating, so, when working with young adults, she checks on their moods and behaviors associated with eating. She

"When shopping, walk the outer edge of the grocery store. There you will find your whole foods: dairy, meats, fish, produce, and grains."  
**Pakhi Chaudhuri**

<sup>3</sup> <http://skepdic.com/ayurvedic.html>

encourages things like no eating in front of the TV, no kids on diets, no soda, and limiting juice. Pakhi does not teach nutrition from the USDA food pyramid; she emphasizes more fruit, veggies, and protein. Pakhi stresses the need for whole foods and family time.

Amita Nathwani, an ayurvedic practitioner, is currently working with women from the Southern Ute Tribe on issues of diabetes, obesity and other digestive issues. She is incorporating local wild and cultivated foods as part of her nutritional program. As part of her research, she looks into what grows in the area to help determine what she and her patients should be eating.

According to Amita, the food we eat is directly connected to how healthy we feel. “We believe in the qualities of nature [and] what better way to go through nature than with food? If we eat the right foods, then the rest is minor. We will never make real strides if we continue to eat processed foods and things that are not meant for the body to digest. For women SUIT Health Services works with, their bodies are not used to breaking down processed foods.”

Amita sees many patients with digestive disorders. She focuses on using herbals remedies and always seeks out local plants and foods as medicine. If Amita finds a recipe for treatment, she will first look for local products that carry the same properties as the medicine recommended, and prescribe those instead.

Amita believes that historically, people had better diets and took better care of themselves, and she uses this belief as part of her medical treatment. “When I work with women from the tribe, I ask them to look back at their childhood. For the most part, they were very healthy in their youth. Because it is the generation of forty-and-over that I work with, I try to get them to remember (how they lived and ate) and explain the simple concepts to me, remembering that there is a more natural way of living.”

Zane Baranowski, a certified nutritionist, echoed the same theme regarding ayurvedic medicine and how taking a more individualized approach to diet is beneficial. “The difficulty is that there is no single message for everyone. Different ages, groups, genetic strengths and weaknesses generally call for different diets and medicines,” he said.

## 6. FOOD PROJECTS OF INTEREST

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In each survey or interview, participants were asked to describe three community food projects that would best address the food needs of the populations they serve. They were also asked to share information on how best to work with diverse populations. Here are some of the responses and suggestions they shared.

- **More Local Food Direct Sales Opportunities in Ignacio:** The Agricultural Extension Program currently sells bulk beans and potatoes at reduced cost. More farm stands, and people selling on the side of the road, and a farmers’ market would be good. (Elise Redd, Director of SUIT Health Services)

- **An On-Site Community Garden:** At SUIT Health Services, where people could garden as a community. A lot of times the Tribal Elders want gardens, but they can't do it on their own. (Elise Redd, Director of SUIT Health Services)
- **Nutritional and Affordable Cooking Classes:** This was mentioned by the San Juan Basin Health Department, Promoviendo la Salud, Family Center of Durango and WIC.
- **A Traditional Foods Cooking Class:** Use buffalo meat to teach the benefits to using a local, low-fat, lean meat. A lot of people are shocked to eat it. They are not used to that kind of meat. (Elise Redd, Director of SUIT Health Services)
- **Grocery Store Tours:** Have someone go to Wal-Mart and take people around the store to tell them more about certain products. Teach people how to read labels for serving size, salt and sugar content. Break down the language barrier for those folks who can barely read English. (Karen Forest, Promoviendo la Salud)
- **Community Events with Native Foods** (Amita Nathwani)
- **Better Availability of Higher Quality Foods at the Local Grocery Store** (Amita Nathwani)
- **Education:** On what they are eating, and what simple changes such as cutting portion size and overeating can do. (Amita Nathwani)
- **Outreach to New Moms and Dads** (Pakhi Chaudhuri)
- **Help WIC get a grant for Farmers Market Nutrition Program:** (Betzi Murphy, Director, WIC)
- **Teach Fast, Cheap and Easy Snacks:** And offer education about the importance of family meals and not over-scheduling activities. (Pakhi Chaudhuri)