

Jo. Co. E.A.T.S

Helping residents of Johnson County through the pandemic

Spring is often a happy time for Johnson County residents. But the impact of COVID-19 brought challenges to some that they never expected to face. Instead of planning graduation parties and making summer plans, residents began coping with furloughs, lay-offs, food insecurity, and the realization that their health was at risk. Many, who've relied on a steady income, a stable food supply, or even on others to prepare their meals, suddenly found themselves struggling to eat.

Jo Co E.A.T.S. program through Johnson County's K-State Research & Extension Office was created with these people in mind:

the family on a tight budget; the person who dislikes or doesn't know how to cook; or the couple who thinks nutritiously eating means expensive, tasteless meals. Jo Co E.A.T.S. was designed to make healthy eating a fun, affordable and accessible experience. The "E.A.T.S." in Jo Co E.A.T.S. stands for Easy Affordable Tasty Solutions.

The program began in December 2018 after Johnson County Extension was awarded a grant from K-State Research & Extension



Easy. Affordable. Tasty. Solutions.

to create a Culture of Health in Johnson County. After forming a local steering committee, it was decided the best way to use this grant was to create a project to find and showcase recipes that were healthy, delicious, affordable and easy to make.

Before the pandemic, the food insecurity rate in Johnson County was approximately 10.6% (feedingamerica.org). This meant 59,000 people in the county had trouble accessing food for a healthy and active lifestyle for themselves and/or their family. This statistic is why Johnson County Extension partnered with local food banks to provide healthy and easy pantry recipes to stretch food dollars. Recipes were selected from Extension sources or personally developed by Family and Consumer Sciences Agent (FCS) Crystal Futrell with nutrition and budget in mind. They were tested for taste and ease of use by the Johnson County Extension



Extension Master Food Volunteer, Salle Stewart, hosts a demonstration on how to cook dry beans at Village Presbyterian Food Pantry. (photo taken March 2019)

Master Food Volunteers (EMFV). Approved recipes are posted on the program's website (jocoeats.com). Advice for saving money while grocery shopping was added to the website by our FCS Agent Denise Dias.

In 2019, Extension began partnering with three local food pantries to share Jo Co E.A.T.S. recipes and information. Our EMFVs selected and demonstrated recipes from the website based on what food was available. The partnerships were a huge success as many pantries dealt with clients refusing to take certain ingredients because they didn't know how to prepare them. Jo Co E.A.T.S. and the demonstrations from the EMFVs helped changed this, as one pantry coordinator shared:

"I appreciate you coming to our food pantry and bringing your creative recipe for blue cornmeal cookies. They were very good, and it was fun for me to see our clients trying them. Your being there and bringing the cookie samples and recipes was a successful way to encourage our clients to try the blue cornmeal. Our food pantry clients took more blue cornmeal this week than ever. We have had blue cornmeal on our shelves for the past several weeks and over all this time, only 5 or 6 were taken (not 5 or 6 per week but 5 or 6 for the whole several weeks combined). This week, clients took about 20 to 30 of the blue cornmeal packages. So, your samples and recipes worked out very well."

**-Karen Whitson,
Team Leader/Food Coordinator
Church ReNewed Hope Food Pantry**



FCS Agent Crystal Fuetrell demonstrates how to make "Mama's Pizza Boats" with hot dog buns.

Unfortunately, the food pantry demonstrations were postponed once the shelter in place order was enacted, but the need for recipes did not disappear. That is when Fuetrell started creating videos on how to make simple meals and snacks for the family with easily accessible foods, which was a challenge given that standard grocery essentials like bread, rice, and milk were all sold out. This inspired the first video, Mama's Pizza Boats, which are made with easily found and extremely affordable hot dog buns.

Lacking demonstrations, Johnson County Extension wanted to keep the relationship with the food pantries while also making sure residents found Jo Co E.A.T.S. as a resource for them to use. Thus, the newsletter Quick Bites was born. This is a one-page handout with a simple recipe and tips to help save money on certain groceries. These newsletters are distributed out in English and Spanish to each person visiting the food pantry.

Finally, to help reduce food waste and subsequently losing money, meal planning is encouraged. The Jo Co E.A.T.S. website has a printable calendar to help families schedule their meals for a month. This helps people stay on budget by not buying extra food items at the grocery store and takes away the stress of figuring out what to cook. To help eliminate that stress even more, one month of ideas is already provided, and is entirely amendable based on dietary needs.

Johnson County Extension created this program to help people cook healthily for themselves or their families. Now more than ever it is important to keep up physical and mental health, so why not learn to cook better together as a family, all while staying under budget!

To learn more about Jo Co E.A.T.S. visit jocoeats.com.