

# TRADICIONES SALUDABLES- HEALTHY TRADITIONS

## CULTURALLY TAILORING NUTRITION EDUCATION THROUGH FOOD PANTRY PARTNERSHIPS TO ADDRESS CARDIOMETABOLIC RISKS

March 12, 2026

### PROJECT PROPOSAL

#### 1. Summary

When addressing cardiometabolic risks in the Hispanic/Latino community, culturally conscious nutritional guidance is often missing. This disconnect has contributed to slower progress towards equitable health outcomes, in addition to existing social determinants of health. Food plays a crucial role in the community, serving as a central part of cultural traditions and celebrations. This project proposes cooking workshops that leverage food pantries and charities as trusted community hubs to connect residents and health professionals and adapt culturally familiar foods in a healthier way. By providing culturally conscious nutritional guidance, trust and a meaningful pathway for health interventions can be created.

#### 2. Statement of Need

Obesity disproportionately impacts the Hispanic/Latino population, with Hispanics having the second-highest age-adjusted prevalence of obesity (CDC, 2017-2020 survey). Obesity is recognized as a major health concern due to its strong association with multiple cardiometabolic diseases and cardiovascular risk factors such as dyslipidemia, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and sleep disorders (Powell-Wiley et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2023).

In communities with large Hispanic and Latino populations, these conditions represent a significant and growing burden on individuals and healthcare systems. As a Spanish interpreter at a free health clinic in Lake County, Illinois, observations highlight the prevalence of these cardiovascular risk factors among this community. Additionally, I have witnessed how close family and community members with obesity and/or cardiometabolic diseases manage their conditions and interact with medical professionals. Despite medical treatments and nutrition recommendations, long-term management of cardiometabolic diseases often remains difficult and slow.

Broadly, our relationship with food reflects cultural heritage and traditions, which are important in shaping community identities and strengthening social bonding. The problem is not the cardiometabolic diseases alone, but the intervention strategies behind nutrition that fail to account for the significance food plays in culture and social bonding for the Hispanic/Latino communities. Nutritional guidance for patients with cardiometabolic diseases needs to prioritize integrating cultural foods into meal plans and leveraging healthy substitutes when possible (Malmin et al., 2024; Stubbe, 2020).

In the Lake County, IL area, there is a clear need for the development of culturally responsive nutrition interventions that incorporate traditional foods, food availability in the area, and nutrition education to create meaningful and sustained lifestyle changes regarding cardiometabolic diseases.

### 3. Community Served

The pilot project will begin by serving the Hispanic/Latino populations in Round Lake, Illinois. The Round Lake community is a greater Chicago area suburb in Lake County, just North of Chicago's Cook County. The Round Lake zip code, 60073, encompasses Round Lake Park, Round Lake Beach, and Round Lake. As of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, their populations are 7,836, 27,091, and 18,654, respectively (census.gov). Of these populations, 49.5%, 56.1%, and 35.8%, respectively, are of Hispanic or Latino origin (census.gov).

Part of describing the Hispanic/Latino populations in Lake County includes the assessment of food insecurity. From 2015 to 2020, 7.1% of Lake County residents reported experiencing food insecurity, with the data accounting for factors such as unemployment, poverty, demographic, and household characteristics. Data from 2016 to 2020 reports child food insecurity at 8.6%. (Lake County Health Department Community Health Assessment, 2022-2026). Five different census tracts in Round Lake are identified as food deserts, with some at ½ and 1 mile and others at ½ a mile (USDA Food Access Research Atlas). Food serves as a physical link connecting individuals to their heritage, culture, and communities. This becomes particularly important among immigrants and for the identity of first and second generations (Weller and Turkon 2014). In Round Lake, you will find several ethnic grocery stores, panaderias (bakeries), and family-owned Hispanic/Latino restaurants that are run and supported by the Hispanic/Latino residents.

In 2019, 30.1% of Lake County residents had high blood pressure, and 45.5% had high cholesterol (Lake County Health Department Community Health Assessment, 2022-2026). Out of the top ten causes of death among Lake County residents (2010-2020), the number one cause is heart disease, and positions seven and eight are diabetes and diabetes of the nervous system, respectively. When surveying the data for the Round Lake zip code in 2022, heart disease is the second cause of death, and diabetes is the fifth (Lake County Health Department Community Health Assessment, 2022-2026). From 2010 to 2020, the 60073 zip code had an average age of death of 68.9 years old, compared to Lake County at 75.2 years old. Additionally, when filtering by race in the county, Hispanics had an average age of death 13.7 years younger than the average age of death among non-Hispanics in the county (Lake County Health Department Community Health Assessment 2022-2026).

### 4. Proposed Program

The “Tradiciones Saludables - Healthy Traditions” project aims to integrate the need for effective nutrition interventions in managing cardiometabolic diseases of the Hispanic/Latino community with the goals of the Lake County Health Department of increasing the reach and education of community members.

- *Assemble a program team with local food pantries, local community leaders and partners that already have a network of reach into the community, health professionals such as a dietician and healthcare provider, and one or two community members who know how to make a few traditional Hispanic/Latino dishes.*
- *Collaboration will be necessary prior to the event to create flyers, recipe handouts, and a short presentation.*
- *A nutrition and cooking workshop will take place at the Catholic Charities Schreiber Center, located at 101 North Cedar Lake Road, Round Lake, IL 60073. This center has a meeting space and a kitchen that can be utilized for the workshop. Food donated by the participating pantries will be used as the ingredients.*
- *The event will begin with a small presentation on the meal that will be prepared that evening. The ingredients that will be used, the different nutritional benefits of the ingredients, and the alternatives being substituted will be discussed. Attendees will be encouraged to ask questions. Then, the event will transition into the cooking portion. The attendees will be divided into groups to work on the recipe as they follow the culinary team. Finally, we will enjoy the meal together at the end with some good conversation! Surveys will be distributed; the event and surveys will be language inclusive.*
- *Key members involved:*
  - Catholic Charities Schreiber Center Pantry and Soup Kitchen*
  - P.L.A.N. Food Pantry – Pastor Michael Pimpo*
  - Maria Colugna – Community Outreach and Engagement Specialist for Round Lake School District*
  - Maria Padilla – Community Member in Bilingual Parents Advisory Committee & Key Culinary Lead*
  - Elizabeth Stencel, RDN, LDN, CDCES – Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center*
  - Jeffrey Damashcke, PT, DPT, PhD – Lifestyle Medicine Expert & point of contact for recruiting a community healthcare provider (MD, PA, or NP).*

## 5. Evaluation and Impact

The Community Health Improvement Plan of 2022 – 2026, proposed by the Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center, has established a SMARTIE goal to “provide trusted and accurate health information to community members by equipping and empowering local community champions to deliver culturally tailored health education to community members by 2026.”

Therefore, attendees will be asked whether or not they felt that the event taught them something new about nutrition and/or using healthy alternatives, and they will also be asked about their level of satisfaction with the food’s taste. The responses to these questions will be used to determine whether or not the project is considered a success. A successful outcome would include enjoyment from attending, finding that the food is very similar in taste, learning something new about nutrition and alternatives used in the recipe, and a good likelihood of recreating the meal. Long-term significant achievement would come from an increase in the community’s trust that health professionals have a strong understanding of their culture and that they are willing to support patients with culturally inclusive health plans.

The primary method of measurement will be information collected on surveys. An initial survey will be given after the workshop to evaluate satisfaction with the event and the food. Participants will be asked if they are likely to attend a similar event in the future and if they are likely to recommend the event to other friends or family members.

A second follow-up survey will be conducted 3 weeks after the event to see if anyone has recreated one or more of the recipes, how they felt about recreating the dish (difficulty and satisfaction), and if others (friends, family, etc.) had tried it and their general feedback (good or bad).

## 6. Sustainability

There are several avenues for the project’s ability to continue after the pilot event. Almost immediately, it can become a series that takes place once or twice a month, specifically selecting recipes for the season. It can become a community event that many look forward to because of the ability to learn, do an activity, and build community.

Collecting data and demonstrating high participation numbers among the community can allow the program to expand with public health grants and other forms of funding. This could lead to a permanent placement of the event at Catholic Charities Schreiber Center Pantry. In the success of this program, the model can be implemented into pantries around Lake County or even nationally. A partnership with the Lake County Health Department can be advocated for to train and provide dedicated experts, like registered dietitians and healthcare providers, in helping run this program. With portions of Lake County, specifically Round Lake, facing food insecurity, many residents rely on food pantries. Therefore, it is critical that there is a strong partnership between dietitians and health providers and the food pantries to make decisions on what types of food should be purchased for distribution based on their community demographics.

Implementing these workshops in food pantries requires resources, and some may face the barrier of not having kitchens or appropriate ingredients to hold the events. Using low-cost pantry items and minimal kitchen appliances can make the recipe more accessible. Additionally, an immediate implementation like the distribution of flyers with recipe guides on healthy alternatives can allow people to benefit from this project, even if they aren’t able to attend the workshops (work, transportation, etc.).