

# Helping Families on the Edge

by Gary Abdullah

HELEN SANGREY IS NEITHER an economist nor a politician, but she says she couldn't miss the signs. As a nutrition



educator for the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) in Juniata County, she knew long before any official announcement that recession was here.

In the square building across the street from the county courthouse in downtown Mifflintown, Sangrey each week offers 90-minute, hands-on training sessions that teach low-income families cooking, food safety, meal planning, shopping tips, good nutrition, and general survival. Working in partnership with the Juniata County Food Pantry, her goal is to help people be more self-sufficient. And she's seen the evidence piling up for months—increasingly, people need what she and others like her have to offer.

After clients request food two times, the pantry director looks to recruit them for Sangrey's program, so class enrollments can be a reliable if unscientific bellwether for the economic winds of the region. And she's watched the county's occasional breezes build into stiff prevailing gusts.

"It's happening all over central Pennsylvania—several large companies have

that keeps parents from taking a job outside the home or attending programs to improve their economic survival skills and employability. That's why Central Intermediate Unit #10, a public education agency serving three central Pennsylvania counties, offers free child care to clients who visit Clearfield for educational workshops as part of its "Even Start" family-literacy program. "Even

with hopes of someday opening her own affordable day-care facility.

Anecdotal evidence of personal economic struggles notwithstanding, trying to pinpoint the official start of the nation's current recession appears to be a full-employment program for economists. While the National Bureau of Economic Research's Business Cycle Dating Committee says the major indicators

**"Even Start" provides adult education, parenting guidance, and job-skills training to parents with children up to seven years old.**

closed down and what are left are low-paying jobs just above minimum wage," she says.

"We're seeing a lot of unemployment and underemployment in the county. Many people are on fixed incomes and there's nothing they can do. The food pantry director says the need for food has almost doubled from last year.

Among pantry clients, requests for fuel assistance more than doubled from 30 to 69 households this winter."

A new, troubling sign is unique to Juniata County's rural nature. Skyrocketing gas prices combine with sudden job loss to create hungry families with no way of picking up free food when it's given to them. "They call and say they need food but don't have gas money to get here," Sangrey says. "We're trying to set up pantries in churches at both ends of the county so participants don't have to drive as far. We could be there on Saturday morning so people could get food and attend our classes in the same trip. We've never taken food from the pantry to a church before, but it's heartbreaking for someone to have to wait another week before they can drive to get food."

Besides high gas prices, lack of affordable child care also can be a barrier



Start" provides adult education, parenting guidance, and job-skills training to parents with children up to seven years old. Penn State Cooperative Extension's Clearfield County office collaborates in the program by conducting nutrition-education classes.

Jenn Conklin is employed as a part-time child-care worker by the Intermediate Unit, but the mother of three—with a fourth on the way—has also benefited as a program participant for about five years. "If it wasn't for these programs...", she says, her voice trailing off. "They saved my life. I wouldn't be where I am today." In addition to adult- and nutrition-education classes, Conklin has taken three online child-care workshops through Penn State Cooperative Extension's Better Kid Care program and is considering the program's Childcare Development Associate credential training,

**Ronda Stiles, nutrition education adviser in Clearfield County, teaches a class at Centre Grove Church in Hyde, Pennsylvania. Extension educators are joining forces with food pantries to offer classes and food assistance in rural churches.**

for recession finally may have been met in February 2008, the unofficial consensus is that hard economic times actually have been here for quite a while. As of May, at least 25 states were expecting budget shortfalls for the 2009 fiscal year, according to the independent Center on Budget and Policy Priorities—the largest number since 2002, according to the *New York Times*.

State budget deficits take their place among a series of bad-news dominos: rising unemployment, a prolonged housing slump and associated severe credit crisis, and fuel costs that continue to set

new records almost daily. The Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center reports that since 1998, the number of households receiving food stamps is up 49 percent in Delaware County, 54 percent in Bucks County, 75 percent in Chester County, and an incredible 82 percent in Montgomery County. The center's statewide study found that the number of people receiving food stamps has risen 40 per-

families," she says. "It's just that times have changed—we've never paid this much for gas and the cost for food is higher than ever—so it's higher on our radar screen now. People are always looking for good ideas on managing finances more effectively, and we can help them modify their behavior to save money and be more resourceful. Part of extension's underlying philosophy is to help people

A tasty verification of Penn State Cooperative Extension's responsiveness to local needs is Nutrition Links, the college's umbrella nutrition program that includes EFNEP and Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Tracks (PA TRACKS). Both programs employ nutrition educators to help people at or near the poverty level, and Nutrition Links state coordinator Elise Gurgevich says the Nutrition

Links curricula focus on the time- and money-saving advantages of eating meals at home.

"The emphasis is always on helping people with limited resources eat healthy on the money they have," Gurgevich

***"When you're working with people who are down on their luck, you really need to be there, close enough to walk in the other person's shoes."***



**Nutrition educator Helen Sangrey works with clients in largely rural Juniata, Mifflin, and Huntingdon counties. As many of central Pennsylvania's larger companies have closed, some families have become hard pressed to make ends meet while working in lower-paying, minimum-wage jobs.**

cent, to nearly 1.2 million, since March 1999. And energy costs continue to set new records, with crude oil prices climbing from \$66 per barrel in May 2007 to more than \$133 in May 2008.

For Marilyn Corbin, associate director of Penn State Cooperative Extension who leads statewide programs for children, youth, and families, the growing troubles are less shocking when seen in historical context.

"For 100 years, extension has been providing programs for resource-stressed

be more independent in society versus dependent on social services. And we believe that by empowering people with knowledge at teachable moments, we're helping them improve their quality of life."

Corbin says extension's statewide network of county educators is essential to its goal of being close enough to understand and affect specific local conditions. "When you're working with people who are down on their luck, you really need to be there, close enough to walk in the other person's shoes," she says. "Our programs are accessible to the public, and we try to hold meetings at a variety of locations so people can find us if riding the bus or coming right after school. Whether it's nutrition, family finances, consumer information, quality parenting, or child development, we provide a variety of educational programs to help a family improve the overall quality of life."

says. "But now we also can suggest strategies for eating out on a limited budget—something we've not stressed before."

Nutrition Links education specialist Julie Haines says strapped families trying to stretch limited food dollars and possessing limited cooking skills find that, at times, going out to dinner can be a food cost-cutting measure. "For example, if you have a big family and go to a buffet at a family-friendly restaurant where children eat for free, you'll eat at a price that you can't match at home," she says. "So what's economical can really vary, and we really have to think about how to advise people. Our programs help people make healthier choices whether they are cooking or eating out.

"Poverty is complicated," Haines notes. "You have to be savvy to survive on a limited income. Sometimes it involves combining benefits or assistance

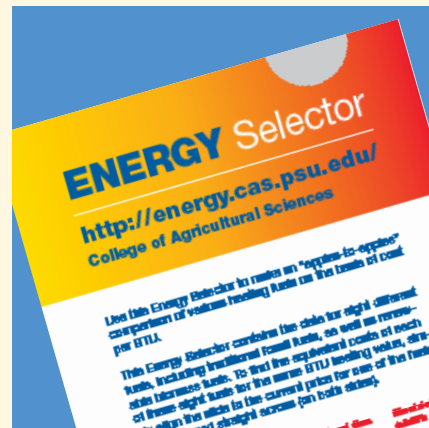
# Ag Engineer Energized to Cut Power Costs



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For consumers struggling to keep up with a drastically climbing cost of living, energy costs pose special challenges. Gasoline, natural gas, and home-heating oil prices have skyrocketed; electricity prices are poised to rise sharply with the expiration of government-imposed rate caps; and utility shutoffs are increasing. As the era of cheap energy comes to a screeching halt, the work of a Penn State agricultural engineer is gaining new relevance.

Dennis Buffington's research and extension activities, according to his faculty Web page, focus on "strategies for optimizing energy usage to increase profitability and cash flow of agricultural production and food processing enterprises," as well as programs to help residential consumers learn "efficient usage of energy without sacrificing health, safety, and comfort." As one whose expertise ranges from Pennsylvania's electricity deregulation to the energy coefficients of burning shelled corn as fuel, he's been extension's energy circuit-rider, traveling the state to speak to farming cooperatives, youth groups, and beleaguered community organizations about saving energy and money.

One of his regular gigs is with the Pennsylvania Aging, Utilities and Economic Education Consortium, a nonprofit organization supported by the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, the state Public Utility Commission, and several electric and gas utility companies. "The consortium conducts roundtable events about four to six times a year in various locations throughout the state, targeting areas with large populations of elderly and/or low-income families," he says. "At each event, I give five or six 25-minute presentations that cover basic energy efficiency in the home."

When invited, he also shares his knowledge with county extension audiences. Whether they're elderly inner-city apartment dwellers or rural poultry farmers, Buffington

preaches the same message. "The same principles apply to both, but how they are applied can vary from a poultry house to a residential building," he says. "Energy is the same, but a home is different from a commercial greenhouse, where you're concerned about proper light, temperature, and ventilation rates for plants."

In either case, he says, his goal is to reveal the tremendous opportunities to use energy more efficiently and reduce consumption significantly without sacrificing the comfort or conveniences to which users have grown accustomed. "We also want them to know that the 'greenest' and cheapest energy is the energy that you don't use because of an effective energy-management program," he says. "We're all looking for some new approach or invention to solve our problems. Solar power, microturbines, or hydrogen fuel cells may become feasible in the future, but we all have opportunities now to use energy more efficiently—to gather the 'low-hanging fruit.'"

Buffington says he's happy to talk about energy-efficient practices but avoids any mention of "conservation"; he prefers "efficiency" because there's too much baggage with that "C" word. "For those able to remember the '70s, 'conservation' conjures up sacrifices," he says. "If we have the right mindset, we can use far less energy and use it efficiently so that we're not sacrificing comfort and conveniences."

Tips that he dispenses in his energy presentations include looking for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency-backed "Energy Star" designation when buying major appliances, office equipment, lighting, electronics, heating and cooling equipment, windows, motors, pumps, and other items.



An Energy Star product uses significantly less electricity than older models, offering savings each month over the life of the appliance.

"Using programmable thermostats in your home lets you set the temperature lower while you're sleeping or out of the house during the day," Buffington says.

"In the summer, you can use drapes to block out the sun during the day, and during the winter close the drapes at night so heat won't radiate out. Make sure doors and windows are tightly insulated. And there are big savings in switching from incandescent to compact fluorescent lights in those fixtures that are used at least three hours a day. Even if you only switch three or four bulbs, you'll usually recoup costs and start to see savings in a year.

"None of this is revolutionary, and that's the beauty of it. These are simple things that are doable, not in three years, but today. Some require a little money, but they're all done easily, with no contractor. Typically, I'm talking to older and lower-income audiences. Some have opportunities to radically change things, others don't. If you live in a housing project, you can reset your thermostats, but you can't install programmable thermostats or replace your windows."

Those looking for more advice can visit Buffington's Energy Strategies Web site at [energy.cas.psu.edu](http://energy.cas.psu.edu). There, they'll find a cost calculator that makes valid comparisons between various forms of energy, a calculator that evaluates shelled corn as an alternative to conventional fuels, an explanation of electricity deregulation, and many other resources for private homes, farms, and motor vehicles. Other energy publications can be found online at [www.age.psu.edu/extension/factsheets/h/energyindex.htm](http://www.age.psu.edu/extension/factsheets/h/energyindex.htm).

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from several programs. Low-income folks have been using these strategies forever, but the rising cost of food will cause everyone to use them. For people right on the edge, it'll all be new to them. They have no previous generation to say, 'Here are the tricks I've learned.' Other extension educators who have done nutrition education for higher-income audiences are now using our materials, and that's happened because of rising food prices."

Haines explains that the rising costs of living have been devastating for many families that once were at least getting by. Their income is no longer enough to cover all expenses, but they are ineligible for income-based assistance programs. "Now there's a new group of people using food stamps that never did before," she says. "They're the new 'poor' people, and educating them is different. This set of people doesn't have enough money to buy food, and they may not have the skills to best utilize all the help that is available to them either."

Marilyn Furry, a faculty specialist in financial literacy and education, remembers several of our country's up-and-down economic cycles. "In the '70s, Pennsylvania had high unemployment and 18 percent interest rates," she says. "Going back to the '80s, there was 10 or 11 percent unemployment when Clearfield lost three plants."

In response to such economic downturns, Furry and others developed an 11-part series of booklets titled *Bouncing Back When Your Income Drops* to provide practical strategies for families that have taken an income hit while reminding them that it's not the end of the world.

"Even high-income families have lots of events during their lives," Furry says. "Prolonged illness, a family member going to war overseas, the death of a spouse, divorce—these external factors will touch every family. When families face tight times and have less money to buy goods and services, they have to come to an agreement to reduce spending and decide what is important to the family, what they want to accomplish. And a family that involves young people in discussions of financial matters will do a much better job of managing money. Young people get most of their finan-



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**A shattered housing bubble and skyrocketing fuel prices have caused ripple effects on the economic well-being of families, some of whom struggle with food availability and transportation costs.**

cial information from their family—not from schools."

Consumer issues specialist Cathy Bowen, a coauthor of the Bouncing Back series, notes that the booklets reinforce sound principles for managing finances. And sound principles, she says, always trump quick fixes.

"Hiding from a problem will not make it go away," Bowen says. "You need to tackle it, and you need credible experts that will help you avoid more financial stress. When you're having difficulty, solutions that look too good to be

true can be tempting because you want to fix the problem quickly. Sometimes you just need time and hard work."

Along with the Bouncing Back series, Penn State Cooperative Extension offers educational programs and dozens of free publications dedicated to financial and consumer literacy, including cutting credit costs and budgeting. The publications can be used as stand-alone material or as the basis for extension classes. Since most people don't get personal-finance education in high school or college, these publications and classes are often a new experience for users, according to Bowen.

"No one is teaching about basic financial literacy—spending, record keeping, credit, savings, life insurance," she says. "When we offer a class, enrollees often say they wish they'd had it in high school because it would have saved them a lot of headaches. To be financially secure, families must be able to save, spend based on goals, and manage debt responsibly. Through tight financial times and booming economic expansion, our aim is to provide the skills and information that help people get the most from what they have."

*Faculty and staff referenced in this article are Helen Sangrey, nutrition education adviser serving Mifflin, Juniata, and Huntingdon counties; Marilyn Corbin, state program leader for children, youth, and families and associate director of Penn State Cooperative Extension; Elise Gurgevich, Penn State Nutrition Links state coordinator; Julie Haines, Nutrition Links education, development, and training specialist; Marilyn Furry, associate professor of agricultural and extension education; and Cathy Bowen, associate professor of agricultural and extension education.*

**To learn more about programs mentioned, visit these Web sites:**

**Penn State Nutrition Links:**  
[nutrlinks.cas.psu.edu/index.cfm](http://nutrlinks.cas.psu.edu/index.cfm)

**Financial and Consumer Literacy:**  
[consumerissues.cas.psu.edu](http://consumerissues.cas.psu.edu)