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Family, Youth and Community Partners Luncheon With Senators

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Good afternoon.

I am so pleased to be here with you today. I welcome this opportunity to talk with you about how University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, part of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, works with Nebraska's at-risk families. I'm extremely proud of our work to help families meet their needs and develop and strengthen skills they can use to better share in Nebraska's good life.

I thank both our state senators and our Family, Youth, Community Partners for being here today. Senators, would you stand and be recognized? Thank you for your support of at-risk families, and for your time on what we know is a very busy day. Thank you, also, for all you and your legislative colleagues are doing with the governor, to steer Nebraska safely through these difficult budget times. I think we should give these senators a hand.

We do recognize that these days of reduced economic growth are stressful times for everyone, and they are days filled with often-agonizing decisions. As we
think of how the legislature and governor are struggling with major-decisions, and how the university and state agencies are deeply-concerned over what additional cuts might mean, we also must constantly remember that this economic slowdown is touching so many Nebraskans, including those most at-risk.

As a fairly new-member of the University of Nebraska community, having only been in Nebraska a little more than a year, I've been greatly impressed by the way Nebraska and Nebraskans have historically supported their university. We cannot let today's hard times minimize that. I sincerely appreciate everyone who has supported the University of Nebraska through the years, including governors, legislators, members of the Congressional delegation, members of the Board of Regents, and Nebraska citizens, including those of you who are members of the new year-old Family, Youth, Community Partners.

In return, I think Nebraskans' support has created an excellent land-grant university. A university that is working hard to get even better. A university that is an economic-engine for the state, helping small businesses succeed, creating new jobs, bringing money and services into communities across Nebraska, and reducing "brain drain." A university that is of real service to Nebraska through our teaching, research, extension education, and public service programs.

In the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources we are committed to
providing a "good-return" on your significant investment by continuing our strong
tradition of fulfilling our land-grant mission to take the university's resources to the
citizens of Nebraska, to put our expertise and resources to work for Nebraska, and
to address the concerns of our state and its citizens. We discover new knowledge
through research, we distribute that new knowledge in our classrooms and
laboratories through teaching, and we also distribute new knowledge throughout
Nebraska and beyond through Cooperative Extension education.

I personally believe Cooperative Extension is the "most-effective out-of-
classroom" educational system ever devised. Teaching is a vital part of our
university — in fact, teaching, research, and extension are the three legs of our land-
grant university mission — and extension teaches. Extension educates. Extension
provides knowledge people can use to make decisions necessary to their lives.

I think of the old Chinese proverb, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a
day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" when I think of the three
programs I'm going to talk about today — programs captured in the fact sheet and the
newsletter at your tables.

The first, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension's Nutrition
Education Programs, help educate families to become more self-sufficient by
"teaching" everything from good budgeting and meal planning to food-safety and
nutrition. To offer nutrition education programs that help low-resource Nebraskans, extension works with federal programs such as the Women, Infants and Children program and Head Start, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, 'Employment-First' programs, local food pantries and food banks, family resource centers, public schools, and social service organizations.

The newsletter on the table tells you about some of that Nutrition Education Program work, as well as other extension education activities. New numbers available since the nutrition education story was written show almost 73,650 Nebraska families have participated in NU Cooperative Extension's Expanded Food- and Nutrition Program since it began in 1969. In the fiscal year ending Sept. 20, 2001, there were 6,166 families, 7,389 youth and 1,650 older adults participating.

More than 11,250 families have participated in the Food-Stamp Nutrition Education Program since it began in Nebraska in 1994. Nebraska's Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program was one of three nationwide to receive an award for 'excellence' in nutrition education from USDA in 2000.

In February 2002, about 50 percent of the 87,616 Nebraskans receiving food stamps were children. Another 15 percent were either elderly or disabled. That means roughly 2/3 of those receiving food stamps in February are among those we traditionally see as the most vulnerable members of our society.
The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that in Nebraska, 65 percent of those eligible receive food stamps. Sadly, we must note that the number of people in Nebraska receiving food stamps is growing. The program has seen a 7.3 percent growth in the past year, according to DHHS.

When it comes to extension's Nutrition Education Programs, evaluations show 88 percent of nutrition-program graduates adopt better nutritional habits, 87 percent learn better ways to spend their food-dollars, and 61 percent make food-safety improvements. A state Department of Health and Human Services official has said partnering with NU extension provides nutrition education to 85 percent to 90 percent of the state's food-stamp recipients. He added that this training teaches recipients to make the very best use of their limited resources.

Numbers tell an important story in showing significant benefit to many lives, while individual stories further explain what those benefits mean. For instance, there's the 18-year-old with an infant-daughter who said the program taught her that she needed more calcium, and she learned, too, about eating other healthy foods. She said where before she might fix macaroni and cheese for dinner, now she tries to have fruit and vegetables when she makes meals. That's education we expect will transfer from her to the next generation.

Another University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension program that
figuratively "teaches people to fish" is Building Nebraska Families, launched in 1999.

There is a great deal of emphasis these days on moving people from welfare to work, but when people make that transition it means more than just getting a job. Successful transitions, those that last, include building self-sufficiency through money management and, often, through improving everything from communications and parenting skills to nutrition and time management.

Extension's Building Nebraska Families reaches out to people who face multiple obstacles to success, such as debt, low self-esteem, anger, and little self-responsibility for making their lives better. Building Nebraska Families provides intensive one-on-one training so participants can build their own self-sufficiency by improving money-management skills, parenting skills, nutritional knowledge, communications skills, and goal-setting skills.

Building Nebraska Families has grown from working with families in 12 counties to working today with families in 37 counties. More than 100 people participate in the program. New funding from the Department of Health and Human Services supports additional extension educators to work with program participants, bringing the number of extension-educators with this responsibility to 11.

Program participants say the program has helped them improve their time management and problem-solving skills, feel better about themselves, and earn more
money at their jobs. The average-income for participants entering the Building Nebraska Families program is $446.19 per month. After completing it, their average-income has risen to $808.76 per month. Some participants credit the program with helping turn their lives around.

Both our Nutrition Education Programs and Building Nebraska Families are possible through partnerships between UNL Cooperative Extension and others, including the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Without these partnerships, these programs would not be possible.

One of our extension educators working with Building Nebraska Families tells the story of a woman we'll call "Sue" – not her real name – who had two young children, no job, little family support, and a stack of bills. "Sue" was reluctant to work with the educator, but after a month of missed appointments and excuses they began to meet. It was another month before "Sue" could start to share her feelings. Extremely low in confidence, "Sue" didn't want to go out and look for a job. She didn't want to ask for help in solving her problems.

"Sue" and the extension educator started working on self-esteem and management skills. Making bread together one day provided the opportunity to talk about cleaning and household management. Gradually "Sue" began to pick up her home, to sweep and vacuum. She started meal planning, organized grocery
shopping, and sit-down-meals with her children. She began to spend time with her children, to establish a schedule for them and to spend "one-on-one" time with them.

"Sue" now lives in a different, neatly-kept apartment. She has been working "almost a year now," and continues to work on her money-management skills. She takes "much interest" in her children and their activities, which include weekly library trips. She serves as a room mom, and has family-time at least once a week.

The extension educator says "improved self-esteem" and feeling good about herself have been key to "Sue's" success. "Sue" has graduated from the Building Nebraska Families program, but she-and-the-extension-educator continue to stay in touch. "Sue" once told the extension educator, "You didn't just tell me things, you showed me how to do things!"

Doesn't that echo the importance the proverb places on teaching someone to fish?

I'd also like to tell you today about our research relating to welfare reform and rural women. Our researchers are surveying 42 rural Nebraska women of all income levels for three years; their work is part of a regional study that includes only women eligible for food stamps. Our researchers chose to do a more inclusive study to compare how income influences the lives of women in the same community. Participants tell researchers about child care availability, medical
services, and transportation in their communities, their incomes, jobs, expenses, and spending habits.

In preliminary results, researchers find child care availability a major concern, with many women working nights so they and a spouse or partner can share responsibilities for child care, or they rely on family and friends. They also find most women like living in their communities, and while they realize they may give up something economically to live in small towns, they value the strong community connection. We hope in the future policy makers will use these findings in welfare reform policies. Currently many policies that address the needs of at-risk families are written only with urban areas in mind.

I'm pleased to have had the opportunity to talk with you about these programs today. Cooperative Extension works in so many areas — from agriculture and natural resources to food safety, health and wellness to communities, families, and youth, including our popular 4-H program, now celebrating its 100th anniversary. Cooperative Extension so often is so woven into the fabric of a community that people aren't fully aware of the breadth and diversity of its programming, and the many, many benefits extension provides Nebraska.

I thank all of our Family, Youth, Community Partners for your understanding of the importance of this programming, and for your passion for strengthening the
skills and brightening the futures of Nebraskans, including our most at-risk citizens.

The way Family, Youth, Community Partners and Cooperative Extension engage with each other, the way you help us hear and address the needs of constituents, is vital to our land-grant university mission to take the resources of the state to Nebraskans. Would all our Family, Youth, Community Partners stand?

Thank you for your dedication and for being engaged with your university and state to constantly enhance educational programming of benefit to Nebraskans, particularly children, youth, and families. Thank you, partners and senators, for all you do on behalf of Nebraska and its citizens. And thank you again for this opportunity to be with you here today.

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