

**Testimony Before the National Commission on Hunger  
July 30, 2015**

**Joan Ingram, SNAP-Ed Program Manager  
University of New England, School of Community and Population Health  
[jingram@une.edu](mailto:jingram@une.edu), 207-221-4551**

Good Afternoon, my name is Joan Ingram and I manage the SNAP-Ed program out of the University of New England, based in Portland, Maine. Thank you so much for allowing this opportunity to speak with you today.

You have heard a lot about the links between poverty, food insecurity and obesity in presentations thus far. Today I would like to spend a few minutes to share with you a local perspective on a successful federal program that works to address these challenges. Specifically, I will be speaking about Maine's SNAP-Ed program, and how it helps Mainers eat healthier on a limited budget.

As you are all probably aware, SNAP-Ed is the nutrition education and obesity prevention arm of USDA's SNAP program. The goal of the national SNAP-Ed program is to improve the likelihood that persons eligible for SNAP will make healthy choices within a limited budget and choose active lifestyles consistent with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate. People eligible for SNAP-Ed include SNAP recipients as well as those with an income up to 185% of the federal poverty level.

We know that food insecurity is a major public health challenge, as are malnutrition and obesity. These challenges lead to poor health outcomes and increased medical costs. SNAP-Ed is a multi-faceted program that has the unique aim of addressing food insecurity as well as obesity.

- SNAP-Ed helps participants maximize their SNAP benefits and use them more wisely for better health.
- And it helps people develop the skills to shop, cook, and eat healthy food on a limited budget by combining nutrition education, social marketing and environmental supports to low-income families.

In Maine, SNAP-Ed is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, and then implemented statewide by the University of New England through contracts with local public health coalitions, called Healthy Maine Partnerships. We have approximately 40 Nutrition Educators working statewide on SNAP-Ed initiatives. They reach all corners of the state, accessing rural Maine families as far north as Fort Kent, as well as in our urban centers and our cities with pockets of immigrant populations, where educators adapt programming to address the unique language and cultural challenges to eating healthy in a new environment.

Last year, the Maine SNAP-Ed program delivered nutrition education programming to over 32,000 low-income youth and adults. Approximately 25% of the participants were adults and 75% were youth.

In order to maximize impact and reach, Maine SNAP-Ed classes are conducted across the state in locations that pose the fewest barriers to attendance. For instance, we conducted programs in over 300 schools and other youth education sites, over 100 child care centers, nearly 80 public housing sites, 22 public or community health centers, 95 community centers, and over 50 emergency food assistance sites. We also deliver programming at summer meals sites, grocery stores, farmers' markets, senior centers, DHHS offices, and other locations. Much of our programming is made possible through partnerships with these locations, enabling us to deliver classes on site where our target population already visits, to further decrease barriers to attending the classes.

Maine SNAP-Ed utilizes seven evidence or practice based curricula to teach individuals and families across the entire age spectrum about healthy eating and stretching the food dollar. The lessons in the curricula are engaging, involve hands-on learning opportunities and often incorporate a cooking exercise or food sampling. They also all provide take home materials, usually with healthy recipes or other tips and tricks for shopping, cooking and eating healthy on a budget.

Our nutrition educators are in schools and child care facilities in every county, teaching children about MyPlate and sampling fruits and vegetables with them in their classrooms to expand food preference, and ultimately increase their intake of fruits and vegetables. Programs for adults are skills based and focus on simple tips to shop for and prepare healthy foods on a limited budget even through our cold Maine winters.

Maine SNAP-Ed has seen some promising results.

- Pre-school children enrolled in SNAP-Ed programs last year showed a statistically significant increase in vegetable consumption upon completing our SNAP-Ed classes.
- Youth participating in the elementary curriculum reported a statistically significant increase in food preference for three new vegetables introduced.

- Adults enrolled in Cooking Matters™ (a program of Share Our Strength) reported a significant increase in using the Nutrition Facts labels on food, eating food from each food group every day, and cooking meals from scratch. They also reported a significant increase in their "typical" consumption of fruits, green salads and non-fried vegetables.
- Teens enrolled in Cooking Matters reported a significant increase in the frequency of consumption of fruit and green salads.

But SNAP-Ed is not just about direct nutrition education. Over the past several years, there has been a greater emphasis placed on integrating social marketing as well as policy, systems and environmental change strategies with the direct education.

In Maine, we have local SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educators working with teachers on the implementation of wellness policy components such as healthier celebrations, helping establish school gardens and community gardens in settings such as public housing sites, and helping to encourage participation in federal food assistance programs such as free and reduced lunch and summer food programs.

In addition, Maine SNAP-Ed also collaborates with other federal assistance programs in schools to maximize impact. For example - in many parts of the state, SNAP-Ed Educators are working with local schools to synchronize efforts by teaching students about vegetables being offered through the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, or vegetables that the food service directors are trying to integrate to meet their meal standards. This is critical, as you can offer kids, for example, beans or greens, but if these healthy alternatives are unfamiliar to them they will be reluctant to try them. SNAP-Ed bridges that gap by teaching children about new fruits and vegetables in the classroom, increasing the likelihood they will choose them in the lunchroom.

Finally, there is also a statewide behavior change marketing campaign as part of Maine SNAP-Ed that focuses on our theme, "Shop, Cook, Eat healthy on a budget." Messages delivered through this campaign reinforce the lessons learned in the classroom, provide information to those who may not have been able to attend a class, and also promote the program. All SNAP recipients in Maine receive at least one mailing a year with tips and tricks to eat more fruits and vegetables and stretch their dollar, and we also have a website with additional resources for participants.

Not only are we seeing increases in fruit and vegetable intake, but we are also hearing from partners about the positive results. As part of an independent evaluation of the program, several partners around the state were interviewed about Maine SNAP-Ed. One partner stated,

*"For our lowest income kids, just the idea of the **empowerment** that they could **make their own foods** that they could **make the choices to eat healthy**, to eat regularly, and **how to find the best food choices** when they go shopping. I think that was really, really important for some of our kids."*

A SNAP-Ed participant was interviewed and stated, "*I learned, not just the recipes, but the way to use food... you learn little things... that stick in your head.*"

Maine SNAP-Ed is certainly not the only program designed to alleviate food insecurity, prevent obesity and improve health, but it is an important piece of the puzzle and is certainly an integral part of the SNAP program, as individuals learn how to make their food assistance dollars last, while making healthful and nutritious meals for their families.