

# Success Story

## Clinical-Community Linkages—Connecting Food Insecure Patients to Hunger Resources

### SUMMARY



Maine SNAP-Ed is working with **Good Shepherd Food Bank** and clinical partners to **identify and support food insecure patients** in southwestern Maine. SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educators have helped expand use of the evidence-based, two-question **Hunger Vital Signs™ screening tool** at medical practices in Androscoggin County. They work with primary care and hospital staff to ensure patients from households identified as being at risk for food insecurity

get connected to food pantries, emergency food bags, SNAP-Ed nutrition education classes, and the community networks that provide food assistance to help alleviate hunger. Integration of the screening tool ensures that food insecure patients, especially individuals struggling with chronic illness, have regular access to nutritious foods. In the first year, close to **5,000 patients were screened and 400 were connected to services, including 342 community resource guides, 47 emergency food bags, and locally gleaned fresh produce.**



### CHALLENGE

Maine has the **highest rate of food insecurity** in New England and one of the highest rates in the United States. A person or family is considered food insecure when they do not have regular access to nutritious food because of limited funds to buy groceries. In Maine, **16.4% of households are food insecure.** This means more than **200,000 Mainers, including 1 in 5 children, are impacted by hunger.** Food insecure Mainers are at higher risk for diseases often associated with poor diet such as diabetes and heart disease.



### Maine SNAP-Ed

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education

Maine SNAP-Ed is a USDA-funded program that teaches low-income Mainers skills to make healthier lifestyle choices. By making sustainable changes to the environment, Nutrition Educators are fostering healthy behaviors that aim to reduce the burden of obesity across Maine.

In 2019, **7 SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educators** are working to create **health care clinical-community linkages** to connect health initiatives and resources with health care systems to meet the local nutrition, physical activity, or obesity prevention needs.

In addition to supplying local partner agencies with healthy foods to serve community members, **Good Shepherd Food Bank's Community Health and Hunger Program** connects food insecure patients with community resources and the food they need to live healthier lives. The program provides training to health care providers to implement the **Hunger Vital Signs™** screening questions as part of routine visits. The Food Bank can also provide healthcare partners with **free, pre-packed emergency food bags** and a **list of local emergency food access points.**



## SOLUTION

Nutrition Educators partnered with **Central Maine Medical Center's family medicine residency program** and **Good Shepherd Food Bank** to better serve their food-insecure SNAP-Ed population.

Educators championed the nationally recognized screening tool, coordinated partner efforts, and helped expand services to food-insecure patients.

In the first year at the clinical site, **SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educators:**

- Facilitated Hunger Vital Signs™ trainings for family medicine residents
- Provided direct education to food-insecure patients
- Developed and distributed resource guides to link patients to emergency hunger services
- Distributed the Maine SNAP-Ed "Eating Better on a Budget" cookbook
- Installed a refrigerator at the residency program so that locally gleaned produce could be stored and added to the 10-lb, non-perishable food bag

## SUSTAINING SUCCESS



Students from UNE's Area Health Education Center (AHEC) CUP (Care for the Underserved Pathways) Scholars Program volunteering at a SNAP-Ed nutrition education class in Washington County.

The support of health care providers is essential to screening for hunger and connecting at-risk patients to services. The **University of New England (UNE)** is working to **increase awareness of hunger and related risk for chronic disease within health profession programs** by educating students through food insecurity trainings, rural health immersions, and SNAP-Ed volunteer opportunities. These efforts train students to understand and address health disparities and the social determinants of health in underserved communities.

Clinical-community linkages are essential for creating systems that make it easier for Maine's at-risk families to lead healthy lives. Maine SNAP-Ed will continue to support efforts to **scale up the Androscoggin County success to additional practice sites** and share lessons learned with nutrition educators and health profession students across the state. This will increase capacity to link patients to the resources and education needed to reduce the burden of hunger.

*"It has been extremely rewarding to provide nutrition education to the patients. They not only are getting emergency food, they are getting support, resources, and a class to help them take charge of their health."*

— Maine SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educator

*"The SNAP-Ed 10 Tips for Adults Class has been a tremendous asset for patients and providers alike. The Nutrition Educator is able to create a low-barrier learning environment for participants at all cooking skill levels. Providers would highly recommend this class to any practice looking to improve patient outcomes."*

— Case Manager, Family Medicine Residency at Central Maine Medical Center

For more Success Stories from the Maine SNAP-Ed program or to get in touch with your local Nutrition Educator, please visit [www.mainesnap-ed.org](http://www.mainesnap-ed.org).

Data sources are available upon request by emailing [mainesnap-ed@une.edu](mailto:mainesnap-ed@une.edu).

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