

Collaborative Action: For the Wellbeing of New Mainers

Summary

Community and government organizations in Cumberland County, Maine have been collaborating for years to address the circumstances and environment affecting New Mainers and individuals seeking asylum and to overcome barriers to nutrition security such as transportation, income, and inadequate kitchen facilities in temporary housing. The organizations undertaking this work include farms, food security organizations, nonprofit organizations focused on immigrant and refugee populations, and local community members.

In 2022, **Maine SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educators** collaborated with these entities to support New Mainer and asylum-seeking communities with the following nutrition security approaches:

- **Evidence-based nutrition education**, such as Cooking Matters at the Store and Cooking Matters for Parents and Caregivers, at local grocery stores and temporary housing sites, reached **305 individuals seeking asylum**
- **Fresh and culturally relevant food events**, made possible by the Growing to Give Farm and the Locker Project, reached **152 individuals**
- **Over 200 direct education participants** received **food safety materials in English, French, and Portuguese**

Social and Community Context

The cities of Portland and South Portland have received hundreds of individuals and families
Maine SNAP-Ed Annual Report 2022

seeking asylum each year over the past few years. Whether people are healthy or not is complex and is affected by their circumstance and environment. Numerous community organizations, as well as the city governments, continually work to address the circumstances impacting this community.

People seeking asylum are eligible for SNAP, Medicare, General Assistance, and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) benefits. Due to federal government policies, individuals seeking asylum are not allowed to legally work for six months. Relying on benefit programs can cause confusion and difficulties for individuals trying to navigate the varying restrictions for each benefit program.

Lack of transportation, as well as cultural and language barriers, also create difficulties for those seeking asylum around being able to purchase what they and their families need. Many New Mainers seeking asylum do not have permanent housing and have been temporarily housed in hotels. Most of the hotel rooms do not have kitchens or amenities needed to cook for themselves and their families. These barriers contribute to nutrition and food security issues, as well as isolation and a loss of stability.

From the USDA: "A household is food secure if all members, at all times, can access enough food for an active, healthy life. At a minimum, food security includes:



- Readily available nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and
- The ability to acquire those foods in socially acceptable ways without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies

Nutrition security builds on food security, emphasizing the co-existence of food insecurity and diet-related diseases and disparities. Nutrition security, in turn, means consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote wellbeing, prevent disease, and, if needed, treat disease....Nutrition security is an emerging concept that complements efforts to increase food security while also:

- Recognizing that Americans, in general, fall short of an active, healthy lifestyle, aligned with our Nation’s dietary and physical activity guidelines, and
- Emphasizing that we apply an equity lens to ensure our efforts to promote access, availability, and affordability to foods and beverages serve all populations and address the connection between food insecurity and diet-related chronic diseases.”³

Providing culturally relevant foods to populations is an aspect of food and nutrition security because familiar foods can promote wellbeing, allow people to feel more comfortable when asking for help, and reduce food waste that may occur from not knowing how to prepare unfamiliar foods.

Community Assets

Community and government organizations working to meet the needs of the asylum-seeking community made Maine SNAP-Ed interventions into collaborative action around nutrition security:

- The Locker Project, connecting food-insecure children in Maine with nourishing food to improve their learned capacity, health, and future
- Asylum-seeking community members and community-adjacent individuals such as Community Health Workers, providing feedback on cultural relevance of material
- Casco Bay Inn, Quality Inn, Best Western, and Howard Johnson, serving as temporary emergency shelters and assisting in setup and promotion of SNAP-Ed events
- The Immigrant Welcome Center, serving as a hub of collaboration to strengthen the immigrant community
- Good Shepherd Food Bank, a key hunger relief organization [in Maine] with hundreds of partners. One staff member, who operates the mobile African Market, played a pivotal role in providing cooking appliances and culturally relevant supplies
- Catholic Charities, operating a resettlement program and providing translation and interpretation services for programming
- Portland Public Health’s Resettlement Program, providing housing and General Assistance for New Mainers seeking asylum
- Maine Association for New Americans, providing free transportation between hotels and grocery stores for nutrition education
- WIC staff, attending store tours to answer questions about using WIC benefits
- Fedcap, specializing in vocational training and employment resources that provided an intern who supported the promotion, delivery, and adaptation of direct education programming



Collaborative Action

Maine SNAP-Ed programming and activities to reach and support the asylum-seeking community and supplement the work of the collaborative partner organizations included:

Direct Education

- Collaborating with partners to make direct education as culturally relevant, appropriate, and accessible as possible
- Creating a welcoming space, including playing music at the beginning and end of classes with song suggestions solicited from participants or playlists made by community-adjacent individuals
- Selecting culturally relevant recipes that could be prepared in hotel rooms with sparse or nonexistent kitchen amenities
- Working with community-adjacent individuals to review MyPlate and identify culturally-familiar foods
- Sharing how to access foods discussed in classes and identifying where culturally relevant foods are in American grocery stores through Cooking Matters at the Store, reaching 124 individuals, with transportation to grocery sites made possible by the Maine Association for New Americans
- Working with translators to develop new educational materials and conducting Cooking Matters for Parents and Caregivers, reaching 181 individuals, with French and Portuguese interpreters
- Identifying appetizing and user-friendly recipes for microwaves, the only amenity in temporary hotel room housing

- Identifying recipes for donated instant pots, purchased with funds from the City of Portland and Good Shepherd Food Bank
- Gathering culturally-relevant recipes from community members and participants

Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) Strategies

- Collaborating with community-adjacent film producers to develop food safety videos
- Creating food safety documents in English, French, and Portuguese, that were distributed to 238 direct education participants
- Working with Growing to Give Farm, which grew culturally relevant foods distributed to 77 individuals
- Collaborating with the Locker Project to distribute fresh produce, reaching 75 individuals

Sustaining Success

The future of this work for SNAP-Ed educators will focus on how to continue relationships with community members and not “lose people through the cracks” as they move from temporary housing to more permanent housing. The educators are working to find new ways to meet the community’s needs as those needs evolve and community members establish themselves in Maine, obtain work permits, and begin generating their own income. Future educational topics include:

- Budgeting
- Increasing American culture and grocery store literacy and confidence

- Unit pricing, a concept that educators report having difficulties explaining to those unfamiliar with American culture

Other SNAP-Ed planned sustainability efforts include:

- Continuing to identify culturally relevant foods that make MyPlate more relevant to the asylum-seeking community
- Translating the food safety video into French and Portuguese
- Conducting more series of Cooking Matters curricula, with adaptations to demonstrate cooking in limited “kitchens”
- Continuing to adapt curricula to meet the community’s needs
- Participating in a collaboration between Avesta Housing and the Immigrant Welcome Center to provide education to New Mainers at Avesta Housing sites
- Further prioritizing trauma-informed practices, such as holding space for participants to say what they need, share knowledge with each other, come together as a community to make familiar foods, and gain an element of accessibility to their cultural foods within their current means

[3. United States Department of Agriculture. USDA Actions on Nutrition Security.](#)