

Success Story

Walkability and Reading: How StoryWalks® are Transforming Maine Communities

SUMMARY

Maine SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educators collaborate with community partners to implement **policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change initiatives** that promote physical activity. **StoryWalks®**, which combine literacy with being active outdoors, increase the use of walkable destinations, such as local trails, parks, and libraries.¹ Youth and their families enjoy great children's literature while exploring walking routes in their neighborhoods and communities.

Strong partner support and buy-in fosters successful SNAP-Ed implementation and sustainability of StoryWalks across Maine. In 2023, **6 Nutrition Educators** partnered with **8 schools, 4 Head Starts/early care and education facilities (ECEs), 1 public botanical garden, and 1 library** to implement **StoryWalks®** in rural communities, reaching over **2,400 young Mainers** and their families in 5 of Maine's 16 counties.

SOCIAL & COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Increasing physical activity and reducing sedentary behavior improves well-being. In Maine, 43% of youth report that they exercise, dance, or play sports for at least 60 minutes 5 days a week, and about 74% of adults report engaging in physical activity in the past month. Evidence shows that ongoing point-of-decision prompts like StoryWalks promote physical activity choices.²



StoryWalks® increase community walkability, especially in rural areas where there are more barriers³ to physical activity, making them an important approach for promoting physical activity equity.⁴



Maine SNAP-Ed

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education

Maine SNAP-Ed is a USDA-funded program that offers nutrition and cooking classes and supports projects that address food and physical activity needs in the community. Trained Nutrition Educators reach Mainers in all 16 counties. Nutrition Educators are integrated into the communities they serve and work where Mainers eat, live, learn, play, shop, and work.

For more Success Stories from Maine SNAP-Ed or to get in touch with your local Nutrition Educator, please visit mainesnap-ed.org.

Data sources are available upon request by emailing mainesnap-ed@une.edu.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider. Maine SNAP-Ed is funded by the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, which is administered by the Office for Family Independence (OFI) at the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and implemented statewide by the University of New England (UNE) through contracts with local community organizations. Maine SNAP-Ed educates families experiencing low income on low-cost healthy eating and active lifestyles. Contact mainesnap-ed@une.edu or (207) 221-4560 for more information.



COLLABORATIVE ACTION

Educators built upon existing relationships with community partners and schools or established connections with new partners to implement StoryWalks®. In addition to stations displaying the storybook pages, recipes and nutrition information are integrated into StoryWalks®. One StoryWalk featured the book *Pumpkin Jack* and included pumpkin recipes and donated pumpkins.

Educators apply an **equity lens to their physical activity access work**, with some StoryWalks being built on handicap accessible trails, while others make cultural connections by the books that are selected. Stories in 2023 included *First Blade of Sweetgrass*, with an Indigenous cultural connection, and *Before We Eat*, highlighting the community's connection to farming.

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

The StoryWalks® in 2023 reached over 2,400 youth and their families at 8 different sites. Notably, in-person SNAP-Ed health education curricula reached 1,144 (48%) of those youth, increasing the program's impact through multi-level programming.

Community partners are ready to help ensure the success long term, with **sustainability efforts in progress or in place for the StoryWalks®**. For example, the Porter Memorial Library has provided space for this project, and over three years' worth of books have been sponsored by local businesses, organizations, and individuals. Viles Arboretum in Kennebec County has provided ongoing support for the StoryWalks® at their public botanical garden, making their StoryWalks® a part of their Children's Forest Initiative.

CONCLUSION

Community-driven PSE change initiatives such as Maine SNAP-Ed's StoryWalks® collaborations aim to increase access to physical activity opportunities, specifically for youth in and out of school. Throughout Maine, SNAP-Ed is working to support community efforts to increase opportunities for physical activity. In 2024, an additional six StoryWalks® were added to Maine SNAP-Ed's community programming, reaching three new counties. Partner sites and communities provide funding, volunteer labor, construction materials, and sustainability support, ensuring these StoryWalks will remain a viable option for youth and their families to be more active in their communities.

COMMUNITY ASSETS

Successful implementation of StoryWalks in communities is dependent on collaboration with and support from community organizations such as the schools, Head Starts, libraries, and outdoor public spaces like arboretums that host the StoryWalks. One educator leveraged donated gift cards to purchase supplies for building the stations. Thirty-two (32) stations for another StoryWalk were built by the staff and clients of an organization that provides services to adults with developmental disabilities. Sites with permanent wooden stations ensure the sustainability of the environmental change by assuming responsibility for ongoing maintenance.

“The StoryWalk at Porter Memorial Library has seen an outpouring of support from the library team and the community alike. Through the generous support of local businesses and residents of the Machias area, we have three years of books sponsored! This rotation of thoughtfully selected books ensures this project will be a staple on the library grounds for years to come.”

-Washington County Nutrition Educator

¹ Lenstra, N., & Carlos, J. (2019). Public Libraries and Walkable Neighborhoods. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(10), 1780. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16101780>

² Point-of-decision prompts for physical activity | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2020, -07-15). Retrieved Aug 28, 2024, from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/strategies-and-solutions/what-works-for-health/strategies/point-of-decision-prompts-for-physical-activity>

³ Gilbert, A. S., Duncan, D. D., Beck, A. M., Eyler, A. A., & Brownson, R. C. (2019). A Qualitative Study Identifying Barriers and Facilitators of Physical Activity in Rural Communities. *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, 2019(1), 7298692. [10.1155/2019/7298692](https://doi.org/10.1155/2019/7298692)

⁴ Lenstra, N. (2017). Movement-Based Programs in U.S. and Canadian Public Libraries: Evidence of Impacts from an Exploratory Survey. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 12(4), 214-232. <https://doi.org/10.18438/B8166D>