The Future of Clinical-Community Linkages – Nutrition Education Takes Root in Maine’s Underserved Communities through a Learning Partnership with SNAP-Ed

Authors: Pamela Bruno, MPH, University of New England; Kira Rodriguez, MHS, University of New England; Tasha Gerken-Nelson, MS, RD, University of New England; Lori Kaley, MS, RDN, LD, MSB, University of New England; Ian Imbert, MPH, University of New England; Emily A. Estell, RD, MPH, University of New England; Laura Horowitz, DO Candidate; Patricia Dushuttle, MA, State of Maine DHHS, Office for Family Independence

Summary Statement:
Health professions training partnerships with the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education (SNAP-Ed) provide a deeper understanding of food insecurity and demonstrate opportunities to strengthen clinical-community linkages and improve patient outcomes.

Objective
Explore the impact of exposing health professions students to the social determinants of health through a learning partnership with Maine Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed).

Use of Theory or Research
SNAP-Ed's program theory is informed by the Social-Ecological Model, which supports the clinical training competencies for health professions students that are designed to convey a broader and deeper understanding of the social determinants of health and ensure a Social-Ecological Approach to clinical care.

Target Audience
Students with an interest in health care for rural or underserved communities and currently enrolled in a health professions program.

Methods
Course/Curriculum Description
The learning partnership exposes Maine’s Care for the Underserved Pathway (CUP) Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Scholars (henceforth Scholars) to SNAP-Ed’s evidence-based curricula. The two-year program combines didactic and experiential activities for students interested in working in underserved communities. Scholars gain competencies in interprofessional education and practice, social determinants of health, and culturally sensitive clinical care. The collaboration promotes an understanding of how nutrition-related supports create healthier, food-secure communities.

Scholars complete an online module covering SNAP-Ed program theory and participate in community-based activities alongside a nutrition educator.

Course/Curriculum Goal
Produce experiential activities for students interested in working in underserved communities.

Course/Curriculum Goal
CUP Scholars are given the opportunity to be as involved in SNAP-Ed as they feel comfortable. CUP Scholars have been able to work directly in underserved communities assisting with nutrition education and cooking activities. Scholars have led small groups making healthy recipes as well as lead entire classrooms through interactive nutrition activities. Through these experiences, students not only learn how nutrition programming in underserved communities works but get firsthand experience in making them happen.

—Emily A. Estell, RD, MPH
SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educator

Evaluation
Post-activity surveys from scholars collect immediate qualitative information on trainings, focused on quality improvements and learning outcomes. Annual post-surveys collect quantitative and qualitative data measuring competency outcomes. A storytelling approach with photographic evidence highlights results from the collaboration's first two years.

Results
Since 2018, 9 scholars have participated in the Maine SNAP-Ed learning partnership. The majority of students (89%) report they would recommend the activity to fellow students. Qualitative feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and the most commonly cited learning outcome was increased understanding of "the link between poor nutrition and its impacts on health and wellness."

Conclusions
The health professions training collaboration demonstrates that SNAP-Ed learning partnerships provide valuable real-world experience. Scholarly partnerships with SNAP-Ed have the potential to create fundamental, systemic change through cross-sector collaboration between health care providers and public health programs. These local-level changes can reduce the burden of hunger and improve health outcomes.

Scholar Evalutative Feedback
The most positive parts of this activity were getting to cook with the people who attended the classes and talk about ways to eat healthy while on a budget, and learning from others about how they do this already and ways they can improve.

—Scholar

I personally really enjoyed learning about how federal, state, and local agencies come together in a model that can execute effective change, which in this case was nutrition education for the improvement of general health outcomes in underserved populations.

—Scholar

It showed me the benefit of teaching individuals about healthy options while still maintaining a budget. It was very rewarding to introduce new foods to individuals and also help walk them through healthy recipes...

—Scholar

Contact Information:
Lori Kaley, MS, RDN, LD, MSB
Maine SNAP-Ed Program Manager
lkaley@une.edu | 207-221-4551

Ian Imbert, MPH
Maine AHEC CUP Scholar Manager
iimbert@une.edu | 207-221-4625

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To learn more about the CUP AHEC Scholars program, visit: une.edu/cupahecscholars