

**Elizabeth Pratt**  
**Testimony Regarding the Maine SNAP Education (SNAP Ed) Program**  
**July 7, 2017**

Dear Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey and members of the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging,

Thank you so much for inviting me to talk about older adults in Maine, their nutrition needs, and an overview of the program I manage, Maine SNAP-Ed. My name is Elizabeth Pratt and I am the Program Manager of the Maine SNAP-Ed program.

SNAP-Ed is the USDA's nutrition education arm of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. It offers education, social marketing campaigns, and environmental support in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and three territories. SNAP-Ed uses evidence-based, comprehensive public health approaches to improve the likelihood that low-income families will make healthier food and physical activity choices, consistent with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate.gov. SNAP-Ed is designed to complement SNAP. SNAP gives a family a fish, while SNAP-Ed teaches a family to fish. In FY 2016, 350,000 low-income seniors across the country received direct nutrition education through SNAP-Ed.

The purpose of the Maine SNAP-Ed program is to use evidence-based approaches to provide low-income Mainers with easy ways to shop, cook, and eat healthy food on a limited budget – stretching their limited food dollars.

We have 44 highly qualified Nutrition Educators who teach low-income Mainers across the age spectrum how to make healthy food choices. They work in every Maine District and are based in local community coalitions and hospitals. They work in eligible community settings and with multiple organizations to reach children in schools, Veterans, adults with disabilities, seniors and working adults. The program follows detailed guidance by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). This means that our educators follow the federal guidance related to qualifying settings and providing series-based nutrition education as well as implementing policy change work.

As you may know, Maine is the “oldest state in the country.” We have the highest percentage of older adults and many of them are low-income. Food insecurity is very prevalent in our rural state and Mainers struggle with hunger, regardless of age. Roughly 203,000 Mainers face hunger every day. The rate of hunger, or food insecurity, in the United States as a whole dropped to 12.7% in 2015. In Maine, it remained elevated at 15.8%.

Four out of 10 SNAP participants in Maine (43%) are in families with members who are elderly or have disabilities (source: Maine Equal Justice Partners Fact Sheet). Thirty-five percent (35%) of Maine seniors 65 and older had incomes less than \$25,000 per year. Twenty percent (20%) of Maine seniors 65 and older were diagnosed with diabetes (Source: BRFSS).

Seventy-two percent (72%) of adults in Maine do not eat enough fruits and vegetables. Many Maine seniors have to make hard decisions related to their food choices. Anecdotally, we have heard about seniors who have to choose between their prescriptions, feeding the children who live in their households, fuel for heating in the winter, and their own nutrition needs. Often, taking care of themselves is not the priority as they struggle to care for their children and grandchildren. At a critical time in their lives when

balanced diets are important, they are frequently compromising their dietary needs for the benefit of others or other needs.

Maine seniors have a reputation for being independent and proud. Maine is a very rural state and many seniors grew up on small farms or had gardens to help them meet their needs. They are reluctant to go to food pantries and are hesitant to ask for help despite their need.

However, Maine seniors are open to learning and this is part of why I think our program is successful in reaching low-income seniors. Our Nutrition Educators share concrete tips and strategies to compare unit price tags, read nutrition facts labels, buy in bulk, purchase low-cost fruits and vegetables, and cook simple, nutritious meals.

Our 44 educators are based in local coalitions so they are often from the same communities where they work. They are familiar with the community and they know where the eligible sites are and how to engage with them effectively and respectfully. All of our educators follow the USDA FNS Guidance to qualify sites and, to put it simply, that means that all of the sites must serve at least 50% low-income individuals. Essentially, they can only teach classes in schools that have at least 50% of the students on free and reduced meals. And they can only work in adult settings that serve low-income adults such as housing sites, worksites, food pantries, and Federally Qualified Health Centers. In Maine, it's not difficult to find eligible sites.

In 2016, there were almost 3,000 adults 60 years or older who participated in the Maine SNAP-Ed nutrition education classes. There are three evidence-based curricula we offer for this age group: 10 Tips for Adults, Cooking Matters for Adults, and Eat Smart Live Strong. In addition, many seniors participate in our Cooking Matters at the Store tours at Hannaford grocery stores – a large supermarket chain based in Maine. Our Nutrition Educators focus on teaching them how to shop, cook and eat healthy on a budget. In Maine, Cooking Matters is implemented through a partnership between the Good Shepherd Food Bank and Maine SNAP-Ed. Share Our Strength's Cooking Matters at the Store is a guided grocery store tour providing opportunities for adults to learn easy ways to shop for healthy foods. In FY 2016, 3,109 Mainers participated in these Cooking Matters store tours and were taught skills such as how to use unit price tags, how to read the Nutrition Facts label, and how to identify whole grains. Hannaford Supermarkets donates a \$10 gift card to all class participants.

In order to give you an example of the great work happening in Maine with seniors, I want to tell you about our Nutrition Educator in Aroostook County. Aroostook County is in northern Maine and it borders Canada. Heather McGuire is the educator based out of Houlton. She grew up in "The County", as Mainers call northern Maine, and was raised as many children are in this special part of our state – to hunt, grow food, forage for fiddleheads, and help out during the potato harvest. Because of this upbringing, she understands the importance of growing nutritious food. Heather teaches nutrition education to children and adults in this rural part of southern Aroostook County.

In her own words, I will share her story about her project to help low-income seniors access fruits and vegetables at a low-income senior housing site.

"As a SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educator I have had the privilege of helping put a garden in at Market Square Commons. It was around the first of April when I asked them about setting up a garden and they were all on board. Soil was donated by the groundskeeper and a local carpenter built some raised beds. The cedar planks were donated by a local volunteer and Scott Farms gave a great discount on the cedar wood. The local tenants bought the seeds and seedlings with their own money or with their returnable bottle fund. Additional volunteers in the community also donated large pots for the seniors in wheelchairs or walkers

who wanted to garden on the patio. Some of these donations came in because we shared our story on Facebook. To see the tenants wish for, plan, and plant a small vegetable garden in front of their downtown apartment building is something I am, and many others are, very proud of. To see tenants out of their apartments tending to the garden or making casual conversations is what our area needs. Many tenants, who grew up and tended to large gardens for most of their lives, now find themselves living in apartments with no access to garden plots. Planted raised beds and containers help bring the mini gardens to them!”

In addition to the garden project, Heather learned quickly how to respectfully help low-income seniors in her community access nutritious food. She learned from other Nutrition Educators in rural Maine communities about gleaning. Gleaning projects (the collection of leftover crops from farmers) have been successful in Maine because many proud seniors will readily take extra produce from farms to avoid waste rather than go to a food pantry. When Heather tried this strategy, she found that the seniors in her community would happily accept this free produce from the farmers. Then they would cook community meals for themselves and their friends.

SNAP-Ed is the one USDA program that brings the powerful combination of education, marketing, and policy, systems, and environmental support to low-income communities. It can be delivered in diverse settings such as schools, worksites, retail food stores and faith communities. SNAP-Ed interventions are customized for different rural, urban, age, ethnic, cultural and regional settings. Efforts expand beyond the classroom to engage residents of all ages in community changes that strive to make the healthy choice the easy choice. SNAP-Ed is invaluable to supporting healthy aging for low-income families in Maine and across the country.

Since SNAP-Ed promotes the health benefits of SNAP and focuses on making healthy choices within a limited budget, it builds on the short-term economic and nutritional value of SNAP food dollars while helping SNAP-Ed eligible Americans make better food and lifestyle choices. Empowering SNAP participants to make healthy food choices through SNAP-Ed is a win for everyone. American diets fall far short of recommendations for good health and contribute to excess rates of preventable chronic diseases. Our Nutrition Educators are not only teaching seniors the importance of balanced and nutritious diets but they are giving them concrete strategies to accomplish this on a limited food budget.

As the oldest state in the country, Maine has a responsibility to care for its seniors. According to “Feeding America”, there are an estimated 24,000 seniors in Maine who are considered food insecure, or don’t have enough food to sustain a healthy diet. Food insecurity among seniors is significantly underreported. Many seniors in Maine are reluctant to admit they struggle with hunger so they often do not reach out for help. In fact, our Nutrition Educators often find that seniors downplay their struggles and firmly believe that others are more deserving of food assistance.

The SNAP-Ed program is extremely important in Maine as we are able to empower low-income seniors by teaching them how to stretch their limited food dollars. In addition to the direct nutrition education, our experienced and highly qualified educators work hard to find creative solutions to address the dietary challenges low-income Mainers face. They are committed to finding strategies to help them access fruits and vegetables through their local expertise and partnerships with organizations throughout Maine who have a similar focus on food access.