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National Commission on Hunger

Dr. Chilton, Mr. Doar, members of the National Commission on Hunger:

Good Morning. We're here today discussing something that has become epidemic in America--and Maine is no exception. Hunger, particularly, childhood hunger. What is unusual about this epidemic--compared to other sweeping issues facing us, is that it's not easily seen. Who among us can point to a "hungry child."

I think about when I was growing up in Dexter, Maine. It was 1984, I was nine-years old, and I had a friend in my class named Tom. Back then, everyone knew Tom as "that kid." He was "that kid" who got called down to the principal's office. He was "that kid" who stayed in during recess. He was also "that kid" who missed a lot of school.

Later, what I realized as an adult, is that Tom was "that kid" whose family--although they worked hard--didn't have enough money to make sure Tom got enough food. He was hungry.

I tell this story a lot when I talk about childhood hunger, because not only does it show that hunger is all around us, it underscores how easy it can be to miss the signs. Childhood hunger is one of most hidden challenges facing our state.

Maine ranks second in New England and 18th in the nation in terms of food insecurity. Maine has the 5th highest rate of very low food security in the nation. In Maine, and you're going to hear this number a lot today, 86,473 children are food insecure. That's nearly 50% of all school-aged children in Maine who are hungry. And what often shocks Mainers, is that no matter where you live, no matter how wealthy or poor your community is -- there are children in your town who are food insecure. They are hungry.

As the former Chair of the state's Education Committee, one thing I learned is the strong corollary between underperforming students and schools, and schools with high percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Hunger is a roadblock to learning--and success. And it makes sense. Try skipping breakfast, or going an entire work day skipping breakfast and not eating enough and still being expected to do your best work. Do you think you could?

We know that children who live in poverty are much more likely to be food insecure. 46,645 children in Maine live in poverty - nearly one in five. We know that children who are food insecure can not reach their full potential - and this can have a devastating impact that lasts a lifetime. Hunger makes a student's journey through life and school incredible challenging. These children often times underperform in school, are less likely to graduate from high school or go on to further their education. Lower educational attainment means lower annual incomes, and increasing the likelihood they will stay in poverty. By not feeding hungry children now, we make it more likely they will be end up in poverty later in life.

With all of these challenges, it's surprising to me there exists a broad lack of awareness to the hunger crisis facing our state.

In 2011, I introduced my first bill around childhood food insecurity. The bill addressed the low enrollment rates for eligible schools in the summer meals program. We know that hunger does not end when school lets out. Summertime, vacations and even snow days create huge problems for children who are hungry. Access to food diminishes and oftentimes, they remain hungry.

In Maine, our summer food programs only touch 18% of the children who eat during the school year. My bill addressed the low participation rate by asking the elected adults in any communities where over 50% of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, to have a public conversation about establishing a summer food program. This legislation has lead to more summer food programs in Maine.

Hunger allies and I continued working on particular issues regarding food insecurity, but came to realize that our one bill approach was not addressing all the challenges and opportunities around childhood food insecurity. After some research, we realized that the State of Maine had no plan to address Maine's childhood food insecurity. To remedy this, we created the Task Force to End Student Hunger.

The Task Force to End Student Hunger spent 7 months looking at food insecurity from every angle. The findings and more importantly the creation of a five year action plan to end student hunger is the roadmap our state lacked. Instead of going through our recommendations I have a copies for each of you.

However, I will spend a quick second, sharing the most perplexing finding of the Task Force to End Student Hunger. Maine is leaving \$50 million in federal funding on the table each year. That's money that could be used to feed hungry children.

On the good-news front, we learned that fortunately, there are many people and organizations outside of government that have stepped up to fill this gap and are doing superb work.

The Maine Credit Union League has run a program for 25 years dedicated to ending hunger in Maine. In 2014, 58 credit unions and 8 chapters raised \$552,000 for ending hunger. These funds go toward local food programs, as well as hunger initiatives that have a statewide impact -- including a \$75,000, 3-year contribution to expand the school backpack and pantry programs with Good Shepherd Food Bank.

In 2014, Hannaford Bros. grocery stores donated 14.6 million pounds of food to food-relief partners across the Northeast, including 9.7 million pounds in Maine. Hannaford has also been working with regional food banks and pantries to further improve systems for recovering, harder-to-handle fresh items, making sure that there can be regular pickups and ensuring they have the protocol and equipment to handle that food safely.

Over the past 10 years John Woods, a Maine resident has volunteered his time working to end child hunger with Share Our Strength's – No Kid Hungry campaign. During that time, John built a strong network of chefs, businesses, civic groups, nonprofits and politicians to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for hunger each year.

So what's the problem? We have interest across the state; we grow a lot of food; we have churches, nonprofits, and businesses all working on food insecurity issues; strong advocates; and seemingly, it's a non-controversial and non-partisan issue. So, why haven't we solved a problem that at face-value seems doable?

First, there's a real lack of coordination between the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. For example, today in Maine, we still have no idea how many childcare centers offer food programs, who gets served, and who we are missing. State government is making improvements, but we must work better at connecting the dots between government programs supporting education and poverty.

Second, there's a lack of leadership and political will in state government. Some in the legislature on both sides of the aisle are leading on food issues, but there are nowhere near enough lawmakers rallying for this cause. Sadly, it is far too easy for some politicians to talk a good game when it comes to feeding children, but still vote against those interests at every turn.

And perhaps most insidiously, is this administration's coordinated effort of shaming the poor--embarrassing and stigmatizing the very people who are trying to get back on their feet. There seems to be a belief from this administration that public shame is the missing motivator of moving people out of poverty to self-sufficiency.

So what are we doing right? In addition to the work of the Task Force and its spin-off, Full Plates Full Potential, we have great things happening in our communities.

In Skowhegan, Laura Pineo, the food director in the Skowhegan's Schools, has led her district in implementing the Community Eligibility Provision. After implementing CEP, participation in school lunch increased from 59% in 2013 to 81% in 2014, while participation in school breakfast increased by 27%. She is feeding hundreds of more children daily without increasing her staff.

In York County, several food and poverty advocates, including the United Way of York County, York County Community Action, and Healthy Maine Partnerships have created a group called Partners for a Hunger-Free York County. Their priorities are to increase access to healthy foods and improve education on integrating these foods into everyday diets, and they have done incredible work. In 2012, York County saw 49,000 summer meals served to students in need. Through concentrated work and collaboration, Hunger Free York County was able to increase that amount to over 70,000 summers meals in 2014 -- a 45% increase in just two years.

Finally, here in Portland, a single mom and a top notch waitress heard from her daughter that many of her classmates did not have snacks at East End School, so she created the Locker Project -- the first-of-its-kind in the district. The Locker Project's signature program is a snack pantry where students, teachers and even parents visit to get food. Last year, the Snack Pantry regularly fed more than a dozen new Kindergarten students who were living in difficult home situations and coming to school hungry every day with no prospect of having enough food at home in the evening. They happily selected snacks every morning and went home with a bag of snacks at the end of every day.

These are just a few examples of communities recognizing the problem of childhood hunger and coming together to help solve it. But, this is not just a school problem, and it's not just a family problem. This is a community problem. It's our problem. We have a responsibility to help those in need among us. And, it will take each of us working together and in partnership with the State of Maine and the federal government to ensure no child goes hungry in Maine. Thank you very much.