

MAINE
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Dr. Mariana Chilton, Co-chair
Robert Doar, Co-chair
National Commission on Hunger

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

My name is Robyn Merrill and I am the Executive Director of Maine Equal Justice Partners. We are a civil legal aid organization that works with and for people with low incomes advocating for solutions to poverty through policy, education and legal representation.

First, I would like to commend you for all of the time and careful consideration you are putting into identifying and recommending solutions to hunger as this issue demands our immediate attention. Food insecurity is far too common in this country and its impact is both devastating and far-reaching.

Before making specific recommendations on ways to improve the nutrition safety net and reduce people's need for assistance, I would like to make an overall point and share some interesting lessons we learned from people living here in Maine over the last year.

While it is clear to us based on our clients' experiences that we must improve the strength of the nutrition safety net so that it is better able to meet the need, ultimately if we are going to end hunger and food insecurity we must look beyond the nutrition programs to address some of the core causes of hunger. We must increase wages, and increase access to affordable housing, health coverage, child care and services for people with disabilities. In order to end hunger and reduce the need for public programs like SNAP, jobs must pay enough to enable people to support their families through work.

We are not alone in our belief that strategies to end hunger and reduce poverty must address and improve the economic context in which we live. Last summer, we went directly to Maine people to ask for their thoughts about the causes of poverty and the best strategies to reduce poverty. We utilized two different approaches to test the opinions of people across the State. The first was a scientific telephone survey of 478 likely Maine voters conducted from July 12 to July 16, 2014. The second was a written survey completed by 941 Maine residents with low incomes over the age of 18. The two groups – the general public and those who are experiencing poverty's effects directly –shared strikingly similar ideas about poverty. Both groups agreed that the primary cause of poverty is Maine's under-performing economy, and that the best strategies to reduce poverty involve building bridges to opportunity.

By large margins Maine people supported solutions to poverty that include raising the minimum wage; expanding access to affordable health care, higher education and child care; promoting tax credits for working families; and reducing Maine's unacceptably high rate of hunger. By a strong margin Mainers agreed that the emphasis of any reforms should be on expanding opportunity, not punishing people. Last fall, we followed the surveys up with community forums across the state with people with low incomes who responded to the survey. Participants in those discussions were keenly aware of what they were up against and what it would take to improve their circumstances and eliminate food insecurity.

The consequences of poverty that families face are shown in the experiences reported by the low-income Mainers we surveyed last year. Two in three had to go to a food pantry or soup kitchen; half didn't make enough to pay utility bills; a third had their car break down with no money to fix it; and a quarter had to move for financial reasons. Hunger was ever present among these families with sixty percent responding that they had to skip meals or cut the size of meals because there was not enough money for food.

- Single parents with low incomes had even more frequent problems with forced moves, utility bills, cars, and meals.
- Seniors with low incomes had trouble getting enough to eat. Half (48.7%) had to use a food pantry; over a third (38%) had to cut back on the size of meals.
- Families with veterans and low incomes also had trouble getting enough to eat. Nearly two-thirds had to use a food pantry (62.7%), and half (52.5%) had to cut back on meals.

Preserving and strengthening the federal nutrition safety net programs will also take us a step closer toward ending hunger. Making SNAP benefits more adequate, connecting more eligible people with SNAP and other food programs like WIC, and school breakfast and lunch, and afterschool and summer food programs will contribute to the success of an overall plan to end hunger.

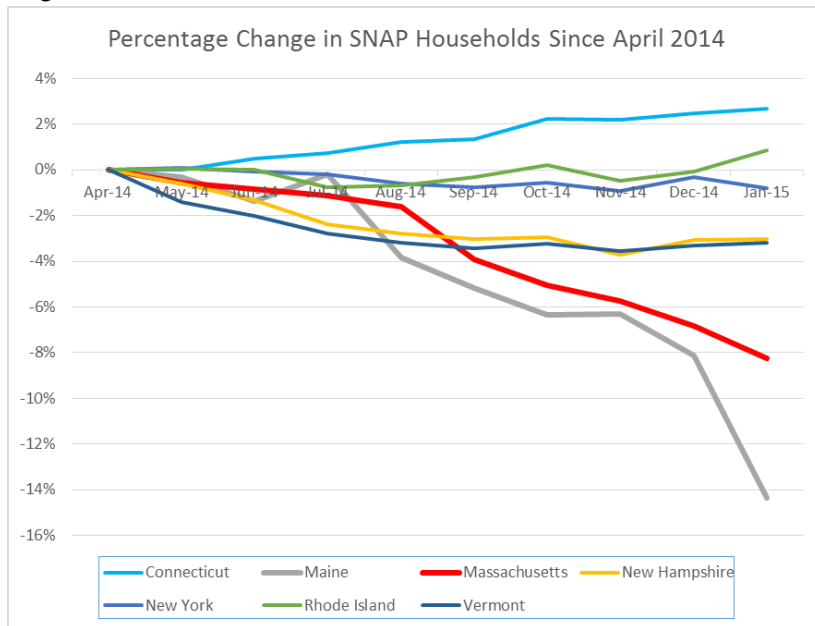
Several facts related to SNAP are relevant when considering making changes to the program:

- The benefits are far from overly generous. In 2014 the average per person per meal provided by FS was \$1.29.
- Of those receiving benefits in Maine the majority are children, elderly or people with disabilities.
- Many receiving SNAP are living in deep poverty—nearly 30% have income that is less than half of the poverty level.
- The number of working SNAP households has increased dramatically in recent years but wages are typically very low. The average earnings are approximately \$1,192 a month—well below the poverty level for a family of three.

You have been charged with the task of reducing need for government nutrition assistance programs. In order to reduce the need for assistance, people who are able to work must be able to meet their needs through adequate wages and incomes. Here in Maine, our Governor and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Commissioner Mayhew have imposed limits in SNAP that have reduced the number of people receiving assistance but have not reduced the underlying need for assistance. Maine has the fifth highest rate of very low food security in the nation. We have seen an increase in hunger in

Maine over the last four years. This is an important distinction that I urge you to keep in mind. Success cannot be measured solely by a smaller program with fewer people receiving assistance; success must be measured by a reduction in actual need, a reduction in hunger. Maine has seen the largest drop in SNAP enrollment in the nation between January 2014 and January 2015.¹ The Governor has touted this as success. But leading a state with such a high and growing rate of hunger is not something that we should be celebrating.

The chart below shows Maine’s decline in SNAP enrollment over the last year compared to other New England States:



Recommendations Related to SNAP:

We recommend applying a “hunger reduction” standard to all proposals aimed to reform SNAP: i.e. will this proposal help reduce hunger, or will it instead make it more difficult for people to get the food they need to survive and stay healthy? This should be the test of true reform.

1. Require States to Waive the 3-Month Limit on SNAP Benefits in Areas of High Unemployment:

Since January, 9,000 Maine people lost their SNAP benefits. This is because the Maine DHHS adopted a rule that limits SNAP benefits to 3-months in a 3-year period. This rule applies to certain people between the ages of 18 and 50 without children at home, even if they can’t find a job, get into a training program, or find a volunteer position *no matter how hard they are trying*.

We urge you to require that states take up the federal “waiver” of the 3-month limit on food assistance for those areas where jobs are scarce so that the 3-month limit does not apply in those areas. While most

¹ http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/snapdata2015_jan.pdf

states elect to request such waivers when they qualify for them, Maine is one of only eight states that did not. Since 1997, when the 3-month time limit was created, Maine has asked for a federal waiver of the limit *every* year for areas of the state where there were not enough jobs. This year Maine DHHS decided not to seek a waiver. This decision cannot stand as it will only exacerbate food insecurity in our state.

Many parts of the state—especially rural areas—are still struggling to recover from the deepest recession in most of our lifetimes. Jobs are not available for all who need one; neither are training programs or volunteer opportunities. Lack of transportation options in rural communities makes it even harder to meet these new requirements. This policy not only hurts people, it hurts local economies too—particularly those in rural areas. SNAP brings around \$300 million dollars to our state each year. The 9,000 people that have already lost help represent a direct loss of over \$12 M dollars annually to the State’s economy. That loss is increasing every day. Food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the state are already facing more demand for food from hungry people than they can meet. As thousands more lose food assistance this crisis will become more acute.

We fully support efforts to help people find and maintain employment. There is no doubt that a good job or training opportunity is the best hope for getting out of poverty. But today, for many in Maine, neither is available. It is important to note that this policy is being proposed with an apparent reliance on the impression that Maine’s economy has significantly improved and that jobs, training opportunities and volunteer placements are plentiful. In fact, the infrastructure needed to support the large numbers of people who have lost food assistance is simply not there. Thus the result of this action has increased hunger in Maine

Requiring waivers in areas of high unemployment would allow individuals who live in parts of the state with high unemployment rates to continue to receive food assistance when they are unable to find work.

2. Support Meaningful Education and Training (E&T) Programs Designed to Lift People Out of Poverty

In addition to being one of our nation’s strongest defenses against hunger and poverty, SNAP is a critical work support for millions of low-income families. Although the majority of SNAP participants are children, seniors, or individuals with disabilities, thirty percent of SNAP households have earned income and over forty-two percent of SNAP participants live in households with earnings. Education and Training (E&T) programs are intended to help job-ready SNAP participants find work and assist others in gaining skills, training, or experience that lead to employment and greater self-sufficiency. Changes to SNAP E&T policy in recent years have increased these opportunities but there is more that could be done.

It is clear that simply providing job search training is not enough, particularly in a weak economy. The FSET USDA Toolkit indicates that job search programs are not necessarily helpful in reaching that goal: “in a healthy economy, job search may be effective in helping work-ready SNAP clients find employment. In a weaker economy, however, job search may not be as effective.” (Toolkit, page 8). Maine’s economy is not “healthy.” We have not yet recovered from the recession and unemployment rates still remain above pre-recession levels.

Moreover, the Maine Department of Labor makes clear that “jobs that do not require education beyond high school are way down. Growth has been concentrated in occupations that require post-secondary education. Many job seekers do not qualify for openings in growing fields of work. This is a serious impediment to growth.”

<http://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/publications/pdf/PresentationToWorkforceBoardNov2013.pdf>

It is clear that skills are a critical component of economic success both today and in the future. Yet according to data compiled from the American Community Survey 32%--nearly 1 out of 3—of all non-working SNAP participants do not even have a high school diploma. Only 24% had some college and 7% had achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher. SNAP participants who are working are most often employed in low-wage, insecure jobs. SNAP households are more than twice as likely to be employed in the low-wage service sector of the economy and are significantly more likely to work night shifts than other working adults.

http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=muskie_capstones

For many, if not most of these individuals, gaining skills that will both increase their employability and their wage-earning capacity is the single most important need that must be met. Simply offering job search training does not address this far more significant underlying need.

Based on these findings as well as our own experience working with SNAP households, we strongly urge you continue to promote meaningful E&T opportunities for people receiving SNAP. It is important to ensure that opportunities for remedial, pre-vocational, high school equivalency preparation, and English as a second language programs are available to all who need and want them. It is critical that we provide meaningful E&T opportunities for people who are able to work. It is also important that we acknowledge the difficulties many people have in accessing training opportunities and provide supports necessary to ensure they are able to participate, including assistance with transportation and technology.

Any E&T program should be *voluntary, not mandatory*. Maine’s FSET Program has long been a voluntary program for good reason. Voluntary programs allow people the opportunity to participate in activities that are helpful to them without fear of losing their benefits. Mandatory programs are far less likely to result in constructive engagement with positive results. In fact, many years ago when Maine mandated participation in an early predecessor of today’s FSET program, more people lost food assistance than obtained jobs that enabled them to become self-supporting. This program was abandoned.

The USDA E&T Toolkit acknowledges the negative image of work programs (page 28), an image that is reinforced by mandating participation. This image is associated with punishment, not constructive engagement. Mandatory programs carry the message that the purpose of participation is to avoid losing food assistance rather than improving prospects for employment in any meaningful way. Programs should be voluntary and we would encourage you to consider changes that will make participation in these programs more feasible, meaningful and constructive. Please continue to build on the successful pilots that are implementing innovative and promising approaches and strategies that help SNAP participants gain skills and education that may lead to jobs and increased earnings. This will work to decrease the need for assistance and increase families’ ability to put food on the table through work.

3. Increase Opportunity for Creative Community Partnerships to Design Incentive Strategies that Will Enable SNAP Participants to Purchase Healthy Foods

With broad bipartisan support in Congress, the 2014 Farm Bill provided opportunity for creative community partnerships to design incentive strategies that help SNAP participants put more fruits and vegetables on the table while at the same time benefiting local food producers and economies. This approach builds on the success of pilots authorized by a previous Farm Bill that showed participants consuming 26% more targeted fruits and vegetables than non-participants.²

Incentivizing healthy choices and making these choices more affordable is a far better alternative to imposing additional food restrictions in SNAP. A comprehensive study of the potential impact of such restrictions conducted by the Illinois Public Health Association supports USDA's opinion. This study asked and answered perhaps the most important question related to this approach—would the proposed restriction have the desired effect of reducing consumption of sugar sweetened beverages? These researchers found that such a restriction would have limited impact on these purchases for two reasons. First, SNAP recipients spend both SNAP and out of pocket dollars to make grocery purchases, thus wages or other cash would likely be substituted for SNAP to make these purchases. Second, and most importantly, they determined that there is a population wide lack of understanding of the health harms of these products. Given that overconsumption of these products are not limited to SNAP recipients, but are a society-wide problem, a universal approach would be a far more effective approach to curb these purchases.³

Thus, if there is serious interest in improving health outcomes through better nutrition we should look elsewhere for more promising, evidence-based strategies to address this problem. We must begin by looking at nutritious foods that are most often missing from a family's diet—fresh fruits and vegetables. Accessing fruit and vegetables is particularly challenging for low income families due to their higher cost and often limited availability in certain communities.

Of the nearly 1,000 people with low incomes who we surveyed last year, the vast majority (87%) believed that supporting the purchase of healthy foods for people using SNAP benefits is an effective poverty reduction strategy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and provide our perspective on this important topic. I am happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

² <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/HIP-Final-Summary.pdf>

³ http://iphionline.org/pdf/SNAP_Decisions.pdf