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Testimony before the National Hunger Commission
Of
Representative Deborah J. Sanderson
Ranking Minority Member of the Health and Human Services Committee
127th Legislature, State of Maine

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Members of the Commission, good morning and thank you for the invitation to participate in this public hearing and share my thoughts and concerns regarding SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and how it relates to food insecurity. My name is Deb Sanderson and I am currently serving my third term in the Maine Legislature. I have been a member of the Health and Human Services Committee for five years; the last three serving as the ranking minority member.

The State of Maine has been proactive in helping SNAP recipients access healthy foods. We accept SNAP benefits at farmers' markets, have year-round lunch programs in many of our schools and have a "backpack" program designed to reach low-income students over the weekend.

There is no question there are adults and children in poverty who are hungry and programs to help are vital services deserving of support. However, without checks and balances of accountability and efficiencies, assurances that guidelines are being followed and tools offered to help individuals pull themselves up and out of poverty, a vicious cycle of generational poverty and dependence can, and has, occurred in Maine.

What has Maine been doing?

Tools offered: In order to combat poverty in Maine, the Department of Health and Human Services has partnered with the Department of Labor and the Department of Education to take a unified approach to assessing and determining work readiness of the individuals seeking welfare assistance benefits. This program has been highly successful in transitioning individuals directly into the workforce or, if the assessment shows a disparity in readiness, providing pathways into necessary education and/or training. It would be my recommendation that you look carefully at the three pronged, unified approach our state has implemented and create a model for others to follow. The best way out of poverty is a job, not more handouts.

Guidelines are being followed: Last year, Maine declined to renew our federal waiver allowing ABAWDs (Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents) to continue receiving benefits out of compliance with federal work requirements. ABAWDs were required to work 20 hours per week, volunteer 24 hours per month or receive job/vocational training. The Department offered a three month window for individuals to become compliant with the guidelines. Maine's SNAP participation enrollment for ABAWDs was reduced by approximately 80%. Experience in the last 5 years has shown any attempts to reform or create greater accountability with Maine's public welfare program system is met with strong resistance and an instant initiative to "reinstate as before" is brought forth. The SNAP waiver for ABAWDs was no different. In this past session, Democratic lawmakers attempted to legislatively rollback the guidelines for what we refer to as the rim counties, our more eastern and northern counties, where there is an elevated rate of joblessness and poverty compared to more urban areas. In

spite of the economic challenges however, the eastern rim counties of Maine had some of the highest rates of compliance with the federal work requirements.

While one could assume the commission's focus is on hunger from lack of sustenance as a whole, I would suggest that the scope needs to include nutritional hunger and lack of nutritious foods in one's diet.

Obesity and diabetes in juveniles is on the rise and while diet alone cannot be attributed to one being a diabetic, we all know it certainly plays a significant role in the health and well-being of someone who is. Individuals, both juvenile and adult, who utilize SNAP benefits, suffer from a higher rate of obesity than "income-eligible nonparticipants". The USDA's "*Diet Quality of Americans by SNAP participation status: Data from the national Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2007-2010-Summary*", indicates SNAP participants were more likely than income-eligible and higher income non-participants to be obese (40 percent versus 32 percent and 30 percent respectively). It also states that young children who also received WIC and NSLP benefits had higher Healthy Eating Index-2005 scores suggesting that "participation in both programs may provide added dietary benefit.

While the document, "Implications of Restricting the Use of Food Stamp Benefits" on the USDA's SNAP website contains 10 pages of excuses why restricting SNAP benefits would be a burden, clearly, the summary referenced above mentioned that restrictive programs such as WIC enhanced healthy eating through limited choice. This does not suggest that SNAP benefits be subject to the same narrow restrictions however, the word "nutritional" needs to become the major player in our food assistance programs.

SNAP-Ed dollars, intended to educate SNAP participants about healthy choices and how to shop on a budget only go so far. Human behavior has provided evidence to the contrary that healthy, responsible choices are being made; both by consumers and retail stores. The pictures below are ones that I personally took in my local pharmacy, a well-known national chain. (Photos taken October, 2011)



In light of the increasing rates of obesity and the rising costs of healthcare associated with it, not only is it shocking that a national chain of this caliber would advertise the use of taxpayer funded "Supplemental NUTRITIONAL (*emphasis added*) Assistance Program" benefit dollars on the purchase of bulk candy, but that it's even allowable under federal standards. An individual who worked at this store also shared, after the holidays are over and bulk candy goes on sale for half price, it is not uncommon to have participants come in and, quote; "fill the cart and pay with food stamps".

The SNAP program may be better served via a block grant model leaving the states to implement nutritional standards and controls if the federal government finds it too burdensome to ensure quality and efficiency in the program. I understand the grocery and food producer lobbies are often an obstacle in getting legislation passed to prohibit junk food purchases with SNAP, and that is a hurdle this Commission should call attention to in its public report back to Congress.

Regardless of whether benefits are supported by funding on the federal or state level, hard choices are being made as resources become more difficult to stretch across areas of significant need.

Maine is an aging state with many of our seniors living under or near the poverty line and many utilize several different programs; LIHEAP for fuel assistance, DEL and MSP for healthcare and medications along with Medicare and Medicaid, home visiting services, Meals on Wheels and, of course, SNAP benefits.

Each biennium, states struggle to balance budgets and resources for state and community funded assistance programs are having a hard time keeping up with the levels of need; in several cases, we aren't. The federal government, trillions of dollars in debt, is not immune.

All of our public welfare programs, not just ones addressing food security, must have measures of accountability and proven efficacy to ensure what limited resources we have are spent appropriately and as intended. While my testimony so far has discussed the need for nutritional controls and inappropriate use of SNAP, these actions are not illegal. Unfortunately, the abuse of tax payer funded public welfare benefits doesn't stop there. In Maine, we've seen a troubling trend in the number of EBT cards loaded with SNAP benefits being trafficked for drugs and traded for cash; sold for .50 cents on the dollar. It is also not uncommon for someone to purchase food for a non-qualified friend or family member and be reimbursed in cash. This is indeed, illegal. To combat the illegal activities, Maine has begun putting photos on EBT cards on a voluntary basis. While not a panacea to stop all illegal activity and inappropriate use, it does provide a tool toward greater accountability. The Federal Nutrition Service (FNS) pushed back against this measure however, the Maine DHHS continued with the initiative. I question why the federal government would actively engage in efforts to make it difficult for Maine and other states seeking to bring greater accountability to federally funded programs in an effort to save resources and reduce the cost of programming or, provide for the broadening of programs which could effectively address the topic we are here to discuss. Hunger. Every dollar being used inappropriately or illegally is a dollar that didn't go toward feeding a hungry child or a hungry senior.

In your report back to Congress, I respectfully ask this Commission to consider a strong recommendation the federal government adopt a partnership policy, rather than the top down policy in place now. Under such partnerships, each state department in charge of administering SNAP and other programs which receive federal funding could achieve the benefit of greater accountability as well as more fluidity, to best meet the needs of their vulnerable citizens while implementing measures to protect scarce resources. Without these measures, we cannot ensure resources are reaching the intended recipient and being used for the intended purpose; to support nutritional needs for someone in poverty.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah J. Sanderson
State Representative