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

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

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and to share my thoughts about hunger in Maine and the United States as it relates to immigrant and farmworker communities. My name is Ian Yaffe, and I am here representing Mano en Mano / Hand in Hand. We are a non-profit social services and education organization based in Washington County and our mission is to “build a stronger and more inclusive Downeast Maine by working with diverse populations to provide affordable housing and education services, remove barriers to healthcare and other social services, and advocate for social justice.”

We serve an estimated 250-350 immigrants who now call the Milbridge area home, nearly 100 migrant students who are in Washington County schools most of the year, and over 300 migrant students and 2,000 migrant workers who are arriving in Washington County as I speak and we prepare for Maine’s wild blueberry harvest. Mano en Mano’s primary programs include a partnership with the Maine Migrant Education Program to provide regular school and summer services to migrant children across Washington County, scholarships for English Learners, a drop-in resource center for immigrants to get referrals to employment, housing, and social services, a multi-family affordable housing project for farmworkers in collaboration with USDA Rural Development, and more.

Mano en Mano is deeply committed to the social justice roots of our mission and as so, we hope that the services that we provide will ultimately challenge the reasons why those services are needed in the first place. Someday, we hope to work ourselves out of a job.

We provide testimony today about the impacts of hunger on immigrant and farmworker communities in Maine as well as recommendations to help minimize those affects in the future. Overall, we approach these recommendations from the standpoint that hunger is not caused by a shortage of food at the national level, but rather by inefficient or ineffective delivery of resources such food, money, or public benefits.

Context

While the purpose of this testimony is to focus on hunger in Maine, we believe it’s important to start by looking at the farmworker community nationally. Many of the families that we serve are highly mobile, so we also do not have as much data on them because they arrive and depart Maine seasonally.

Hunger among farmworker communities is difficult to quantify for a number of reasons, but we do know that during the 2014 blueberry harvest, nearly 50% of an estimated 2,000 migrant farmworkers in Washington County were served by the food pantry at the Raker's Center, a one-stop service-center that is set-up annually by the Maine Migrant Health Program and its partners. Even though Maine's wild blueberry harvest is among the highest paid cash-crops in the nation, families still arrive here hungry and without sufficient resources to provide for their families until they receive their first pay check.

According to a 2013 study by University of Southern Maine Professor Vaishali Mamgain, blueberry rakers spent a "considerable amount of money on food during the Maine harvest. Their median expenditure on food during the month-long harvest was \$500 per person, nearly twice what they spent per month in their "home" state when they are not on the move." Professor Mamgain further estimates that Hispanic workers alone spent an estimated \$285,300 on food, generating \$17,500 in state tax revenues.¹

In general, we find that farmworkers and immigrants are more explicitly excluded from public benefits and protections than most other groups of people in the United States, despite the critical role that both communities play in our economy and food system. Farmworkers lack significant protections afforded by the National Labor Relations Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), and the Social Security Act; therefore, they have historically been and continue to be excluded from such protections as the minimum wage, overtime pay, and the right to organize.

Many public benefits either explicitly restrict access to immigrant communities or make it more difficult for those communities to receive benefits through complicated forms, a lack of effective interpretation, and transportation barriers. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), for example, restricts access for immigrants in their first five years of residency. Undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers face additional hurdles for public benefits.

According to Farmworker Justice, a national advocacy group in Washington, DC, "most farmworkers do not receive any public benefits. In 2011-2012, only 15% of farmworkers [nationally] received food stamps, 16% received WIC, and 34% received Medicaid."² The Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey shows that from 1999-2010, there was an 18% increase in the number of farmworkers receiving all forms of public assistance, while the number of families receiving only need-based assistance decreased from 15% to 12%.³

Finally, in their "Hands that Feed Us" report, the Food Chain Workers Alliance found that (ironically), "of all forms of public assistance, food system workers use food stamps at the highest rate. In particular, almost 14% of food system workers use food stamps, more than 150% the rate of use by all of the employed frontline workers in the U.S. (8.3%). This means that [despite being actively employed] food system workers are half as able to put food on their own table as other U.S. workers. Taxpayers thus bear the cost of low wages and food insecurity among workers in the food system."⁴

¹ Mamgain, Vaishali. "Ripples from the East Coast Stream: Contributions from Migrant Hispanic Workers to Maine's Wild Blueberry Industry." *Maine Policy Review* 22.2 (2013): 64 -73, <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol22/iss2/9>.

² <https://farmworkerjustice.org/about-farmworker-justice/who-we-serve>

³ <https://naws.jbsinternational.com/5/5type.php>

⁴ <http://foodchainworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Hands-That-Feed-Us-Report.pdf> (72)

In our opinion, food insecurity in farmworker and immigrant communities in Maine is closely and obviously linked to economic insecurity and exists despite a clear presence of both of these communities in the labor force. Rather than focus on ways to exclude farmworker and immigrants from public assistance programs in Maine, we should focus on improving their economic security so that families do not need to depend on these programs as much. Individuals should stop receiving food stamps because they no longer need them, not because they can't find a job. We can't ignore the immediate need that hunger presents in our communities, but we also can't continue to ignore the difficulty that low income families face while working tirelessly to improve their economic security.

Increases to the minimum wage, granting farmworkers the right to organize, and eliminating farmworker exemptions from the FLSA would have powerful effects on the economic security of farmworker families and therefore reduce food insecurity and the need for public assistance programs such as SNAP and WIC.

School Meals

Mano en Mano plays a unique role as both a provider of school meals through our Blueberry Harvest School and an agency that helps families sign-up for USDA's school meals programs through our Access to Essential Services Program.

As a food service provider, we find the program overly complicated with too little emphasis placed on providing meals that will help children grow to become healthy adults and know how to provide healthy meals for their future families. Far more emphasis seems to be placed on proper documentation than providing meals that teachers themselves would serve to their families. The reimbursement rates set by USDA typically cover only 1/3 of our overall food service budget, despite 100% eligibility of our students for the program.

In rural parts of Maine, the program is just not effective at meeting the need of our communities, particularly in the summer months, because the reimbursement rates are set too low causing school districts and other providers to lose money on every meal that we serve. Urban centers can achieve economies of scale and therefore make more investments in the quality of the meals that they provide, but at the current rates set by USDA, we can barely afford to serve food that's mostly been prepared in advance by wholesale distributors.

Finally, we find that despite an emphasis on healthy meals in recent years, school meals are generally overly processed, contain high amounts of sugar, and lack the kind of fresh fruits and vegetables that kids like, but are more expensive to purchase. Additionally, some families report that their kids are still hungry after a meal at school because the portions are too small and not everybody is allowed to have seconds.

We recommend that the reimbursement rates for the school meals program be increased and also that more emphasis be placed on unprocessed and fresh foods, which can only be paid for through higher reimbursement rates. In rural areas, we would also encourage more flexible program guidelines that could allow us to contract with private food service providers, as long as we can demonstrate that there is both cost savings *and* increase to the overall quality and quantity of food provided at school.

Finally, we recommend that applications continue to be reduced or eliminated so that families who need free/reduced lunches simply have to ask and not worry about the stigma that comes from being on a list of who's poor and who's not.

Food Stamps

Maine is currently making news by requiring adults without children to work at least 20 hours per week or participate in work-training or volunteer programs to continue receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) after three months. Maine's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) celebrates that over 9,000 Maine residents have been dropped from the program because of this requirement, despite the clear ability for Maine to obtain a state waiver for this requirement.

As a non-profit organization in Washington County, we've received phone calls from people looking to volunteer and been placed in the unfortunate position of saying that we aren't able to offer them an opportunity at this time and knowing that they'll likely lose benefits as a result.

We should not penalize adults who are unemployed when it comes to receiving SNAP benefits, and we recommend eliminating this provision and focusing on getting people back to work as its own goal instead of something tied to food assistance. Food insecurity alone should drive eligibility for food assistance, not employment or immigration status. In a country with as much resources as ours, it's shameful to stop providing benefits that are central to one's own health and productivity to prove a point. Maine faces a far greater challenge of underemployment and wages that have not kept up with inflation than people who are not working because they are receiving public benefits.

Finally, for those who are eligible to receive benefits, we find that the biggest barrier to participation is the application process itself. The questions on the application do not always accurately depict the family's economic situation and are not always easy to understand. For example, the number of people living in a household may be eight, but that number represents two distinct families, where each member does not contribute equally.

Another barrier to applying for SNAP is transportation. Many families do not have their own mode of transportation and need to make the 30-35 mile trip to Ellsworth or Machias to apply. One of the biggest challenges for our families is providing proof of income because for almost all of our farmworker families, income over the past four weeks is almost never representative of their economic status for an entire year.

While there is a clear requirement to offer translation and interpretation services for people applying for public assistance, it's not always offered effectively in rural areas such as Downeast Maine. Mano en Mano often provides these services at no cost to the government or the families that we're helping. Furthermore, these processes are increasingly being switched to online or phone registrations, which obviously saves resources on one end, but makes the whole application process more intimidating and inaccessible for some Maine families who are not as comfortable with technology. For these reasons, and more, many families chose not to apply at all for programs like SNAP, WIC, or free/reduced school lunch and instead try to fight food insecurity on their own without sufficient financial resources.

We recommend a simpler application process and encourage government agencies to more actively partner with organizations such as Mano en Mano to assist families who we have already established relationships and trust with.

Finally, we recommend providing more financial incentives for families to purchase healthy food, not restrict what items they can buy. According to our staff, the issue is not a lack of education or knowledge about what health food is, but a lack of access. Our families know (and tell us) what the healthier option is at the super market, but if they have to make a decision between two for one loaves of white bread or the more expensive whole wheat bread, they're going to do what they need to do provide enough calories for their families.

Conclusion

Addressing economic insecurity as the underlying cause of hunger will have a far greater effect on reducing hunger among immigrant and farmworker communities in Maine than focusing on reforming existing public assistance programs alone. We believe that children and families should not go hungry in a country with as much resources as ours, and that we cannot continue to all enjoy cheap food at the expense of the hard-working farmworkers who then go hungry themselves because they aren't paid a living wage and can't effectively organize. Organizations like the Coalition for Immokalee Workers in Florida offer us hope and demonstrate that paying as little as one penny more per pound of tomatoes at the grocery store can have dramatic effects on tomato pickers.

As community leaders and policy makers, we have a responsibility to ensure that the next generation has more opportunities than our own. We have a responsibility to rise above politics and to approach food assistance programs as responses to the morally reprehensible presence of hunger in a country with more than enough food to feed itself and a growing obesity epidemic. We should find ways to reduce the need for these food assistance programs, but not through eligibility restrictions, but rather through decreasing food insecurity among individuals and families across the United States.

Thank you for your time and your service.