



**National Commission on Hunger:
Maine Hunger Initiative Testimony**

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Our thanks to the Commissioners for coming to Maine to learn about hunger in our nation and to hear from people who experience it or work with people who do. Thank you for listening to the voices of those in our country who struggle with unemployment and poverty.

Preble Street is a non-profit social services agency that responds to emergency needs in our community and creates solutions to these problems. Our goal is to provide people all over Maine a chance to move beyond hunger, homelessness and poverty.

This morning over 400 people came to our soup kitchens in Portland for a hot meal. The largest soup kitchen in northern New England, we serve 3 meals a day, 365 days a year. In the last 3 years we have seen a 17% growth and served almost 400,000 meals this past year. We operate a food pantry that was serving an average of 115 households weekly in 2010, and now serves 166 households weekly. Dramatic spikes in the last quarter point toward increased growth in the coming months.

We have been watching hunger climb steadily in our state for several years. Maine has the highest rate of very low food security in New England and the 5th highest in the nation. 22% of Maine children live in food insecure households.¹

In addition to providing emergency food services, Preble Street has a Veterans Housing Services program that provides services to veterans throughout the state from our offices in Bangor and Lewiston, an employment program, a shelter for homeless youth, a shelter for homeless women, Housing First supportive apartments for chronically homeless adults, casework services, an anti-trafficking collaborative, a consumer-led organizing and advocacy group, Homeless Voices for Justice, and the Maine Hunger Initiative with 13 national Anti-Hunger and Opportunity Americorps/Vistas working throughout the state to fight hunger by connecting people with USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS).

Education, employment, and health are all fundamentally tied to nutrition. We hear every day loud and clear from all areas of the state that people can't support their families. They can't get food because they can't find decent jobs. The forest industry, the fishing industry, canning, textile manufacturing are all in distress. Giant mills sit empty. A major Naval Air Station closed. Mill towns are struggling.

We hear about the problem of people living isolated from job centers in a state with virtually no public transportation and of the lack of affordable housing if people move to the few job centers. We hear from people who can't afford housing without well-paying jobs that require an advanced education. And for those with an advanced education who are saddled with enormous student loan debt for 20 years before they can afford housing. And one injury could wipe out their job or one chronic or extended illness wipe out their savings.

¹ Kids Count Data Book 2015

SNAP Work Requirements

Our mission is to provide services and to advocate for solutions. So we fought hard—but lost the effort—last year to have our state accept the federal waiver for ABAWDs (Able Bodied Adults without Dependents) that Maine qualified for.

Seeing people every day who must beg for food, meeting the struggling veteran in the rural countryside who is trying to avoid eviction, helping a person locate employment, assisting a young woman escape a human trafficker, keeps us committed to working as closely as possible with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and FNS to maximize Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. It is one important tool in the array of tools we want to provide so they can build a safe, healthy future.

Punishing people who can't find jobs or volunteer opportunities by withholding food is bad policy.

Before January 1, there were approximately 12,000 adults in the ABAWD category. By March of this year over 9,000 people lost their food benefits.² There are not enough jobs, job training, or volunteer opportunities to get 9,000 people back on their feet in three months. In rural areas Maine's unemployment rates remain higher than pre-recession levels. Mainers who want to work can't because there are no jobs. According to 2014 U.S. census data Piscataquis, Somerset, and Washington Counties all qualify as labor surplus areas.

And each of those 9,000 people has a unique and complicated back story—the story of living in Maine, an enormous rural state with a lack of housing, employment, transportation, and healthcare options. Maybe they can work but live 70 miles away from the nearest job and have no vehicle.

We are aware of the young veterans that we work with throughout the state in our Veteran Housing Services program. Many of them are unable to work because of emotional issues or because there are very few jobs in these rural areas. Even if they had a vehicle, driving to an urban area to volunteer would cost them more in gas than the value of their SNAP benefit.

SNAP is the most effective tool against food insecurity during difficult economic times. We also know it is an economic stimulus, generating \$9 of economic activity for every \$5 in SNAP. Those 9,000 ABAWDs that no longer can access SNAP represent over a \$22 million loss to Maine's economy annually.³

Recently I met with ten food pantry directors from central, rural Maine who are concerned about the increase in need they've seen in recent months, the many requests to volunteer, and their sadness at being unable to say yes. They are only open one day a week, have multiple responsibilities, and lack the resources to organize and track the proposed volunteer efforts let alone complete administrative tasks to support SNAP eligibility program requirements.

Recommendations to strengthen volunteer opportunities must include capacity building funds for such groups.

² <http://www.pressherald.com/2015/03/24/state-change-removed-more-than-9000-mainers-from-food-stamps-program/>

³ The average benefit amount for SNAP in 2014 \$116.23 for Maine
[http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/18SNAPavg\\$PP.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/18SNAPavg$PP.pdf) 9000x116.23x12x9/5

In addition, we need more volunteer opportunities that are less structured and allow for alternative reporting systems so, for example, individuals in rural areas could earn "credit" for assisting elderly or disabled neighbors in rural areas. This would be highly welcomed in Maine as we are also the oldest state in the nation. But it would most certainly require an infusion of funding to develop the infrastructure to identify, train, and manage those volunteers.

SNAP Education & Training, Extensions, and the Waiver process

At the Maine DHHS Public Hearing on Rule changes, many poor people's organizations and advocates gave compelling reasons for the state to make the Education & Training (E&T) program voluntary.

In rural communities mandatory programs have unintended consequences that deny assistance to people who need it most but have limited options. When people who rely on USDA benefits to improve their lives use their experiences to inform DHHS staff, more helpful rules are crafted.

A challenge with the work requirement implementation is the widespread lack of awareness among clients and caseworkers at social service agencies regarding the request for SNAP Extensions for sick people who were unable to volunteer or work. Maine Equal Justice Partners worked with DHHS to create a form explaining the extensions, and we made it available to food pantries, community caseworkers, and other places where people would see and use it in applying for SNAP Extensions. This process should be replicated in states or areas that have the work requirement.

While the SNAP E&T goal of gaining employment is positive there are significant problems.

One problem is that the E&T program is limited to four cities in Maine and is not accessible to people living in more rural parts of Maine with higher unemployment rates. Participants need to travel great distances and getting to an appointment is an overwhelming barrier.

Another problem is that only 9.75 hours per week of the 20 required can be used for the job search component. The remaining 10.25 hours must be filled by employment. But because it is challenging to find employment in many areas, we recommend volunteer hours be included with the E&T hours.

We recommend that the E&T Job Search program be strengthened to include more robust programming and substantial skills building. We also recommend that E&T avoid duplicating what the private sector already offers at Career Centers, Goodwill, Preble Street, and public libraries.

One successful effort has been the community collaboration with E&T through outreach at Preble Street. Because the E&T office is far away from downtown Portland on a bus route that takes 45 minutes with multiple stops and many people don't have bus pass money, the E&T office makes weekly outreach appointments at Preble Street.

The purpose of the E&T program is to help Food Supplement households gain skills, training, and experience that will increase self sufficiency, not make it harder for clients to access and maintain their benefits.

Another option—the Competitive Skills and Scholars program—that places people in high-demand, high-wage jobs, has extremely limited spots available. CSSP provides a long-term solution for those who can get in but, ultimately, only supports a handful of people.

Another challenge for us in Maine is that our state rule now eliminates waivers, and there is no opportunity for a public forum. We may not have another opportunity to make the case to request a

waiver and recommend that states that have declined waivers be required to have an annual process to allow the public to make the case for waivers during subsequent years.

The best solution is to prevent making SNAP a political football subject to politics or ideologies.

We strongly recommend that if a high unemployment area qualifies for a USDA waiver of work requirements, that the state administration should not have the option of refusing the waiver.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)

One of the first steps-Maine Hunger Initiative took when we launched 5 years ago was to conduct a thorough analysis of 80 food pantries in southern Maine, which revealed dramatic increases in numbers in the summer when school let out. We also learned that there were few summer meal sites. Unbelievably, 4 of Maine's 16 counties had no open summer meal sites.

With a goal of expanding open sites to all of Maine, we collaborate with the Department of Education (DOE), community partners, and faith communities to facilitate the opening of new sites each year and increase enrollment at existing ones. Last summer we supported 47 Summer Meals sites in various Maine counties, serving over 49,000 meals. This summer we have helped to open 22 new summer meal sites.

Our recommendation to the Commission is to have SFSP mandatory at all schools that have 50% free and reduced meals and already have summer programming scheduled for children. There is no reason not to feed those children who are taking part in activities at a school that qualifies as an open site.

Another successful program of MHI addressed intergenerational hunger. We opened an SFSP site at a senior housing complex whose lawn had been the neighborhood kids' short cut to the river. We identified the site as an open site per census tracking and approached the seniors residing there. They agreed to be the volunteers that ran the program, and the relationships between the children and the elderly blossomed. In sharing this idea with other Community Action Program (CAP) agencies in Maine that run senior feeding programs, we found a strong desire to mix the two programs, maximizing the benefit while reducing the cost. Streamlining the SFSP program requirements with Senior Feeding requirements would be a win-win.

A critical factor in our success is the Anti-Hunger and Opportunity Americorps VISTA program, which provides the initiative and elbow grease for implementing FNS programs.

As powerful a tool as it is, SFSP was designed for urban communities where children congregate in the summer. It is clearly a model that is at best problematic, at worst wasteful to implement in rural communities where it costs much more to drive the child to the site—if that is even a possibility—than it costs to feed the child.

A Native American representative from the Passamaquoddy tribe was moved by our testimony to leave her Committee chair and, unsolicited, ask to testify in support of our proposed legislation. Tearfully, she stated that she never thought she would see the day she'd be asking the state of Maine to replicate what was happening within the reservation. Despite all the severe poverty that she and other Native Americans suffered, they were always nourished by USDA Food and Nutrition programs. The children on the reservation always had SFSP to complement the school meals.

FNS programs that are run well work well.

One recommendation to increase SNAP benefits during summer months is to replicate the successful WIC voucher program and allow the vouchers to be redeemed at local farm stands and grocery stores for fresh fruits and vegetables. This is a double benefit as it stimulates the local farm economy.

The best solution, however, is to increase families' SNAP benefits during the summer months when children are not in school. We recommend that Congress implement the USDA pilot project that provides extra benefits to these families and support the American family value of sitting around the table sharing a meal at home, together.

Community eligibility (CEP)

Community Eligibility ensures that all students experience the educational, behavioral, and health benefits of participating in the school meal programs, improving student achievement and building a better educational environment and outcomes for their students. All children need access to healthy breakfast and lunch so that they are ready to learn and can remain focused throughout the day. Students with reliable access to nutritious food eat better and perform better academically.

MHI educated school officials about the CEP and organized an informational conference call with Maine food service directors, the state Title I administrators, national experts at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Food Research and Action Center, and current CEP participants and administrators from other states to demystify the process and link novice school districts with experienced ones. We created a CEP toolkit that explains the provision as well as outlines best practices, and participated in a CEP work group that provided guidance for school business managers and outlined newly identified procedures that make it easier for school districts to enroll in the program. We recommend replicating this process with other private partners.

Thanks to these efforts the number of eligible districts enrolled in CEP has increased from 27% in 2014-15 to 50% in the 2015-2016 school year.

School Breakfast

Studies show that students who eat school breakfast closer to class and test taking time, perform better on standardized tests. Students who eat breakfast also make fewer trips to the school nurse and experience fewer hunger symptoms.⁴

When we learned that 90% of Maine schools offer breakfast, yet only 40% of eligible children participate, we used current best practices such as breakfast in the classroom, breakfast after the bell, and "grab n' go" to see if we could inspire increased participation.

In October 2013, MHI partnered with the Lakes Region Middle School, where 53% of students qualified for free or reduced price meals but only 37% were eating breakfast. In 7 months the number of children eating breakfast at school rose from 69/day to 215/day, and by the end of the school year, the number of children eating breakfast had tripled.

Public-Private partnerships

Public-Private partnerships are a proven solution. During the American Recovery Rehabilitation Act, we were able to partner with Hannaford Supermarkets and DHHS to provide food assistance to 13,500 of

⁴ Food Research and Action Center Breakfast for Health and Breakfast for Learning briefs: <http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program/>

Maine's lowest income families with minor children. We were able to act quickly on an opportunity and carried this effort out within weeks. These opportunities need to be replicated and institutionalized.

The Anti-Hunger and Opportunity Americorps VISTA program is another example of a public/private partnership that works extremely well and should be expanded. Many MHI successes and the recommendations listed above are due to our partnership with the Americorps VISTA.

We also run a Farm to Pantry effort, raising private dollars to pay farmers to grow fresh vegetables for their local food pantries. This effort is complemented by other private funds to purchase laptops for pantries so recipients can access on-line SNAP applications, employment opportunities, medical assistance, and other benefits. This has been a situation where local faith-based food pantry partners are particularly helpful, as many elderly trust their church more than the government.

Another public/private partnership we are involved with, Full Plates Full Potential, is a collaborative that encourages private capital to initiate and grow SFSP and School Meal Programs, fighting childhood hunger while generating economic development through an estimated \$48 million in federal funds

It is important that private charitable organizations are a partner, not a replacement. Without SNAP benefits more Mainers turn to the charitable food system and the unorganized "system" of local, independent charitable efforts is woefully inadequate to meet the demand. Though the growth of food pantries in Maine has been steady for the past 20 years, it has not been able to keep up with the demand. All nonprofit anti-hunger organizations and local charitable efforts are struggling for funding from Maine's limited supply of money.

The Public in Public/Private Partnerships is more important than ever.

Heat and Eat

Changes made to the "Heat and Eat" program in the last Farm Bill hurt 6,000 elderly and disabled households in Maine by blocking access to much needed SNAP dollars. Information about the change was not clearly conveyed and was confusing. Community action agencies lacked the resources and staff needed to meet the volume of applicants. Many SNAP households went months without enough money for food while they waited for a LIHEAP appointment, and many seniors had difficulty getting to their CAP agency because they no longer drive and have limited access to transportation.

To improve implementation, SNAP recipients should be informed more about LIHEAP and its application. DHHS caseworkers should also receive more training about rule changes. To eliminate unnecessary hoops, USDA should also look at ways to streamline the LIHEAP application process for SNAP recipients. With a shortened online application, social service agencies could help people apply.

Cost of a healthy diet

In the summer of 2012, the Maine Hunger Initiative tested the cost of the USDA Thrifty Food Plan, the basis of how much SNAP benefits are needed for basic nutrition. We shopped for the USDA Thrifty Food Plan at 21 stores of all sizes in Cumberland County and found that at all stores the maximum SNAP benefit was insufficient to purchase the Thrifty Food Plan. At a minimum, the Thrifty Food Plan cost 67% more than the average family of four receives in SNAP benefits each month.

The study also highlighted the regional variation in food prices and the challenge that low-income individuals and families face around issues of accessibility, transportation, and food availability.

For many low-income families, finding adequate transportation is difficult, particularly when it comes to bringing perishable food items home in sufficient quantities. Families who must ride a bus (in the few areas where public transportation is available) or walk long distances must limit the amount and type of food they can purchase. Ironically, the Thrifty Food Plan calls for many items that require refrigeration or are cheapest in bulk, items which a family that must take the bus or walk are much less likely to buy.

Smaller, neighborhood stores and stores in locations which are more accessible in remote areas are also more likely to be overpriced and do not stock the type of nutritious food items that form a healthy diet. However, they are often the food sources of low-income families who might not have transportation to bigger grocery stores.

Consequently those who need food assistance the most are forced to pay the most for food.

This information is not surprising to many SNAP recipients who find that nutritious foods are too expensive to regularly purchase.

The inadequacy of the current SNAP benefits does not allow households to escape food insecurity.

We recommend that Congress replace the USDA Thrifty Food Plan with the Low-Cost Food Plan as the basis for the maximum SNAP benefit. The Low-Cost Food Plan is a more accurate reflection of food pricing in struggling urban and rural communities.

Split Issuance

The proposal to split SNAP to promote a more balanced nutritional intake for participants by increasing their shopping frequency is well intended but misguided. The idea is that more frequent shopping would result in a more consistent supply of perishable food items such as fresh produce and milk.

This thinking fails to recognize the realities and challenges of living on a low-income. Transportation is already a strain for families, and additional trips to the grocery store would be a huge burden. Rural clients are encumbered by multiple trips and costs to get to stores. More time spent purchasing food also means less time for food preparation, taking care of children, or earning an income.

People also use various strategies to make their food dollars stretch, such as using store discounts, buying in bulk, and avoiding waste. Splitting SNAP prevents using these cost-saving strategies, while failing to effectively incentivize healthy buying or eating habits. With the current Thrifty Food Plan, there is not enough benefit issuance to purchase a healthy diet.

Split Issuance is an imprudent policy that is not cost effective, would not increase assistance, and would not improve nutrition. This policy only makes it harder for struggling families.

Promoting fruits and vegetables through double dollar programs would be a better alternative.

Food Choice and SNAP

SNAP does what it is intended to do:

- helps low-income households stretch their food dollars so that other money can be put towards other essentials such as rent, utilities, and medication. SNAP benefits
- allows people to purchase nutritious foods that they do not necessarily have access to at food pantries and soup kitchens. SNAP

- helps families become financially stable and make the transition to self-sufficiency.

SNAP benefits are modest at best. The average household received about \$278 a month in 2012, and the average recipient received about \$133 a month, or about \$1.48 per meal. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, SNAP recipients spend over 85% of their benefits on fruits and vegetables, grains, dairy, and meat and the purchasing patterns of SNAP households mirror those of other moderate-income households.

Moreover, low-income people are making similar food choices as the rest of America.

Freedom of choice is a matter of respect and dignity. This is something people living in poverty are all too often denied, and SNAP recipients should have the same freedom of choice at the supermarket as any other person has.

In Maine, where we have the oldest population in the country, food choice and SNAP means that seniors can purchase what they need for special diets even if it includes a special treat. We don't want to deny an elderly person that choice.

Based on the findings that low-income people are no different than other people, placing purchasing restrictions on SNAP unnecessarily increases stigma and causes confusion at grocery store checkout lines, all of which inadvertently causes higher rates of food insecurity.

Block Grants

The strengths that exist in the current safety net ensure that nutritious food is available for those that need it during difficult economic times, and block granting SNAP would weaken the most effective points of the program.

As an entitlement program, SNAP can seamlessly respond to increased need during economic downturns. When more people need services—e.g. when there's a natural disaster, a recession, or inflation—SNAP provides reliable food access to everyone eligible.

If it were block granted, SNAP could lose the flexibility needed to respond to spikes in food assistance. States would be forced to cut benefits or create waiting lists to cope with increased need and could divert funds to other priorities even when there are unmet needs with respect to access to food.

Understanding that the majority of SNAP benefits go to very low income families with children, seniors, and the disabled, it is imperative to keep this as an entitlement program

Block granting SNAP would also have a negative impact on oversight and limit how states could be held accountable to national standards.

Block grants intentionally minimize administrative requirements and there are often no standards for data collection, making it hard to compare program performance across states and complicating congressional monitoring.

Photo EBT

Maine's Department of Health and Human Services' attempt to implement photo IDs is fraught with problems. It is very costly at \$7/ card and has no relationship to stopping Maine's extremely low rate of

fraud. Implementing costly measures with no supporting data demonstrates a lack of appropriate accountability that we cannot afford.

Food insecurity vs. very low food security

It is important that solutions to national food insecurity in our land of plenty can and must account for all those who are food insecure. We know that citizens who are properly nourished make for more productive workers and children who are properly nourished make for better students which make for productive workers.

An analysis on the correlation between nutrition and learning conducted by Deloitte and the Share Our Strength No Kid Hungry revealed that students who participate in school breakfast programs achieved 17.5% higher scores on standardized math tests. They attend 1.5 more days of school per year, and students who attended class more regularly are 20% more likely to graduate, typically having at \$10,800 higher annual salary and a 4% greater employment rate than those who did not graduate.

Considering only a narrow scope of the people in our nation, those neighbors who struggle with very low food security, is short sighted, and we ask Congress to create action and solutions for all who are food insecure.

It is not sound science or sound public policy to restrict help to only a portion of the food insecure.

Conclusion

Our country has the ability to provide nourishment for all. We owe this to our children and grandchildren and those who will come after us to eradicate the food insecurity that results in damaging health effects that affect our communities economically and socially.

Collaboration and communication are the keys to successful efforts, even in the most difficult of times. We appreciate having the USDA NERO office, Maine DHHS, our elected delegations, nonprofit partners and people experiencing hunger working with us through these challenging times.

The true solutions to food insecurity are a strong economy, equal educational opportunity, and livable wages for all. In the absences of those things, we are in a crisis mode.

From some vantage points the economy looks robust. But it's more like a building that has been gutted and rebuilt without shoring up the foundation. It may look attractive, but there is ample evidence that the foundation is deteriorating. And we should have paid attention to that first.

The best we can do when all we can do is help keep our neighbors safe, such as now, is to ensure the best practices and responses to food insecurity that come from collaborations of the private and public sector.