Scott M. Hamann
60 Thornton Avenue
South Portland, ME 04106
Residence: (207) 233-2951
Business: (207) 233-2951
Cell Phone: (207) 233-2951
Scott.Hamann@legislature.maine.gov

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287- 1400
TTY: (207) 287-4469

Testimony Before the National Commission on Hunger

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Good afternoon. My name is Scott Hamann. I am a State Representative representing the people of South Portland and Cape Elizabeth, and I also work at Maine's statewide food bank, Good Shepherd Food Bank, as part of a team fighting to end hunger in our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your engagement in this critical issue. I

approach hunger relief from two perspectives:

1) In my day job, I manage a rural food access program called Cupboard Collective building partnerships between the food bank, our rural pantries, and their municipal governments to ensure consistent access to sufficient quantities of food and nutritious produce. Twice a month, we delivery food on our large, refrigerated trucks to communities that have chosen to partner with us. We are able to dramatically increase the volume of food and the proportion of produce when compared to communities that do not participate in the Cupboard Collective program. I believe the Cupboard Collective model is the most efficient way to deliver the quantity and quality of food necessary to serve food insecure individuals.

2) I also focus on improving food security in my role as a State Representative, and as a member of the Health and Human Services Committee. I didn't run for office specifically to fight hunger, in fact I ran for office to fight for economic opportunity, to improve education, and to support access to healthcare. How naive I was to think we could have any of these things until we first eradicate hunger in our state!

EDUCATION

I quickly learned that you can't say we have equal access to education if 25% of Maine children are not only hungry, but lacking the nutrition their developing brains need to grow and learn in healthy ways. Our state could double its education budget, but that doesn't mean a thing to a child who's experiencing chronic hunger or whose diet is so nutrient poor that her brain can't process the material appropriately. The structural foundation for cognitive functioning is built in childhood. And one fourth of our future leaders will have to overcome the adverse childhood experience of hunger just to keep pace with their peers. That's not equality. That's not equity. That's not opportunity. Let's fix that.

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WORKFORCE

25% of our future leaders are being raised hungry. What is that doing to our future workforce? Think forward a generation. What kind of workforce will we have if 25% of those workers were raised with hunger? What kind of economic future are we building if 25% of the people doing the work in our society have been *unnecessarily* handicapped by hunger? We know the cost of remedial job training is exponentially higher for an adult than for a child, so let's just get it right in the first place. Why wouldn't we invest in the most vital component of education (nutrition) for the sake of our most vital assets -our children and our future workforce? In the past we had the excuse of not understanding the incalculable return on investment of providing consistent and adequate nutrition to our children. Now that we know that a hungry child's brain cannot learn, we have no excuses.

Let's make sure that the recommendations that come out of this commission's work guarantee (at minimum) that every child in America never has to worry about where their next nutritious meal will come from—365 days a year.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNI1YAND FIGHTING POVER1Y

The return on investment is obvious when it comes to our children. This is not welfare, it's an investment in our future workforce.

But simply fighting hunger is not enough. Food insecurity is very often a symptom of the condition of poverty. If we are going to ever eradicate hunger in our country we have to dismantle the systemic causes of generational poverty and income inequality and build up a system that provides economic stability for every man, woman, child, senior, student, immigrant and citizen in America. This means living wages. This means leveling the playing field in the classroom. This means supporting policies that support people who don't have a place at the table, and rejecting policies that punish people for the "crime" of being poor or economically disempowered. If we empower people who are hungry, we'll no longer have hungry people.

HEALTHCARE

And when it comes to healthcare, how can we ever claim our society has good health when a shamefully high percentage of our population is subject to poor nutrition due to food insecurity? Ensuring every person has regular access to adequate nutrition so they can lead a healthy life should be a basic human right in America and the premise of any national healthcare initiatives. We can save healthcare costs if we invest in reliable access to nutrition for those at risk of or experiencing food insecurity.

I'll give you an example. In Maine, 15% of our Mainecare (Medicaid) costs—one of the state's largest expenses—are due to a higher prevalence of diabetes in our Mainecare population. We know that food insecurity drastically increases the chance a person is going to be obese, and we know that obesity increases the likelihood a person will develop type 2 diabetes. Why then wouldn't we proactively invest resources to alleviate hunger and increase access to nutrition—fruits and vegetables—if we know that the cost of doing nothing is much more expensive in the long run? The reason is that *we have dismissed food insecurity as a simple welfare issue instead of the public health issue that it in fact is*.

WELFARE VERSUS PUBLIC HEALTH

Foolishly, we talk about food insecurity in welfare terms. That's very limited, inadequate, and segregates that food insecure individual from the rest of society. Welfare is one directional; society

gives someone something they need because they do not have it. It leaves the recipient to lift themselves up by the bootstraps and absolves the rest of us from our responsibility to support our neighbors because we don't think we have skin in the game. Well whether we like it or not, we do have skin in the game. It's just a question of whether we want to pay now, or pay a hundred fold later. We see this in education and workforce development, but the same can be applied to public health and healthcare costs.

So when we ask how to more effectively distribute food assistance benefits, or decrease reliance on food assistance, I think we're asking the wrong question. We should instead be asking how to improve the health of people who are food insecure. So I ask you to consider a paradigm shift in how we think about and talk about food insecurity. *Hunger relief is not welfare; it is a public health issue.*

When we start thinking about hunger as a public health issue, we acknowledge that we all have a dog in the fight to keep our neighbors healthy, and we start to make some very important connections. Most notably, we understand that ensuring access to nutrition is a wise investment. The most efficient healthcare we can provide is healthcare that is not needed because someone avoided illness with consistent nutrition.

We hear people claim that SNAP ought not be used to purchase soda and candy and junk food. I don't necessarily disagree with limiting SNAP to nutritious foods, but we'd have to be pretty naive to think a bag of Doritos is what's holding people back.

The welfare perspective would tell us to restrict access to junk food because that's something a person should have to earn. Yet most of us eat those types of foods ourselves sometimes, don't we? But it's welfare, I'm giving it to you, therefore I get to make that decision for you. What's worse, I'll make that decision with complete disregard for your circumstances because I've never walked in your shoes so I might not understand that you don't have a vehicle and the only food store within walking distance of your home is a gas station that almost exclusively sells these kinds of products. That's why a welfare perspective is inadequate.

Instead, take the public health perspective and look at the science: We know that food insecure people are more likely to be obese and more likely to develop type 2 diabetes. But it's not junk food that makes food insecure people obese, it's their overall calorie dense, nutrient poor diet and a lack of consistent access to nutrition and produce. Just as importantly, it's the cycles of deprivation that cause metabolic stagnation and cause blood sugar levels to dip and spike at unhealthy levels. So instead of focusing on keeping a candy bar out of people's hands, let's focus on getting produce into them. Instead of restricting what a person can buy with SNAP, let's focus on getting produce into food desert areas where fruits and vegetables are more difficult to access. That's a solution.

If you're approaching food insecurity from a public health perspective then you understand that it's a wise investment in our long term healthcare costs to invest money into programs and initiatives that keep people healthy and help them avoid preventable illnesses.

Too often we get stuck in this antiquated way of thinking that hunger relief is simply about hunger pains. It's about people in our communities and keeping them healthy, and if they are hungry or lack adequate nutrition they are not able to work to their full potential or learn at their full potential (if you're looking at our workforce or our education system). This is bad for our economy. And if people are unemployed, their hunger shows in a job interview.

When an unemployed person receiving food assistance reaches the 3 month threshold and still hasn't found a job that can provide 20 hours a week, instead of cutting them off SNAP we ought to hand deliver the 4th month's benefit along with an invitation to free job training (if that's what they need); offer them whatever educational support they want and whatever logistical support they need. Roll out the red carpet. Ask them how we can help. As a society we should wrap our arm around them and do whatever we can to help them overcome whatever is standing in their way. But don't use food as a reward or punishment, especially for circumstances beyond their control…these are people. And they're no different than you or me and they deserve the dignity of our support instead of the judgment of our policies.

CONCLUSION

1) Hunger relief is not welfare; it is a public health issue. Our policies ought to center around increasing access to nutrition, improving public health, and decreasing utilization of the healthcare system.

2) Restrictions on how SNAP benefits can be used may be well intentioned, but they miss the mark if our goal is to address food insecurity. It's more valuable to support efforts to increase access to produce than to micromanage everything someone puts into their shopping cart. It's the inexpensive calorie dense, nutrient poor diet combined with cycles of food deprivation that is the problem. Let's fix that.

3) Policies that blame and shame people for being food insecure are bad policies. Today, an unemployed person who lives in the Millinocket region—an area of the state with very high unemployment—has to find a job that will give them 20 hours a week if they are to continue their SNAP benefits beyond 3 months. Except there aren't sufficient job opportunities where they live. The SNAP recipient shouldn't be blamed for the labor market circumstances in their community. That's not their fault. We ought to continue food assistance until they find a new job, because the worst thing you can do to a person under the stress and pressure of unemployment is to take away their lifeline to food and survival. But these ill-advised policies are rooted in the welfare mentality that food should be used as a reward or punishment for a behavior. You will never starve a person into self sufficiency. Help them solve the barriers they're facing, and only then will you solve hunger.

I ask the commission to prioritize programs that not only reduce hunger, but increase access to nutrition. If that means doubling the value of a family's food stamps when used to purchase fruits and vegetables, that is a policy we ought to support If that means setting up farm stands in food deserts, that is a policy we ought to support. If that means engaging the agricultural sector to grow produce for pantries, that is a policy we ought to support. In Maine we have a program called Mainers Feeding Mainers where the food bank contracts with Maine farmers ahead of the growing season to grow produce for the state's food pantries. This is less expensive than paying to truck emergency food donations into the state, the produce has more nutritional value, and the money that funds this program goes to Maine farmers growing our economy and creating jobs. This innovative model of social entrepreneurship could be replicated in other states that have a strong agricultural sector like Maine. If we want to end hunger, improve nutrition, decrease healthcare costs, grow the economy, and create jobs we should support these kinds of solutions throughout the country.

Thank you again for this opportunity to discuss how we can reduce hunger in America.