

Testimony on Behalf of the Cumberland County Food Security Council

presented by Jim Hanna, Executive Director

Re: In favor of four bills to increase access to SNAP benefits

April 27, 2017

To the Maine Legislature's Committee On Health and Human Services

Submitted in person at public hearing

The Cumberland County Food Security Council is here to support four bills, including one in transition, that would increase access to SNAP benefits:

- LD 689 An Act to Confer Categorical Eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Benefit Applications
- LD 1070 An Act to Alleviate Hunger in Rural Maine in Areas of High Unemployment
- LD 263 An Act to Provide Additional Assistance for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities Receiving Food Supplement Program Benefits
- LR 612 An Act to Support Veterans Who Participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Thank you, Maine Legislature's Committee On Health and Human Services, for hearing the public on these important proposals to increase food access. My name is Jim Hanna and I present this testimony on behalf of the Cumberland County Food Security Council. These words reflect the goal shared by our many Council members of achieving a hunger free Maine.

In my 23 years of working to build food security in Maine, state government has been an essential partner in the goal of ending hunger. Since federal welfare reform in 1996, no matter the political party, every Maine administration, except the current, has chosen to utilize the available resources that created more food access and more opportunity for poor people to achieve self-sufficiency. This approach was supported by every legislature no matter who was in control. No administration, before now, has made it a priority to make the already difficult lives of poor people more challenging, especially at greater cost to our state's taxpayers, our shared economy and the common good.

Under the current administration, Maine has established a pattern of rejecting federal resources that are investments in the security and well being of community members challenged by limited resources. There seems to be a belief that if a person is poor, they have failed, and it is their own fault. I suggest an alternate perspective that if anyone is poor, we have ALL failed to establish a humane economic system. We are all complicit if we allow a system that creates poverty.

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These bills do not provide a vision or plan for food secure communities that our Council is working toward, but they do support a safety net. We must choose program options and use all the resources available to support the health and well being of people who cannot earn enough to thrive, especially when we have paid that money to the federal government through our taxes.

The most recent USDA update of its report on Household Food Security in the U.S. verifies a pattern we have seen in recent years. Attached to this testimony is a summary profile. The research shows that Maine is third in the nation for people experiencing very low food security. Compared to other states, this measure indicates Maine has experienced recent increases in hunger that are among the largest in the U.S. The other side shows a map of the U.S. indicating Maine is an outlier in this region for having a food insecurity prevalence above the U.S. average among our people.

Not only will each of these bills increase access to nutrition for vulnerable people, it will simultaneously have a positive economic impact on Maine's farmers and farmers' markets. The SNAP program and Maine's farmers' markets have established a synergistic relationship, with over 35 farmers' markets, 13 CSA farms, 7 farm stands, and 1 mobile market in 2016 accepting SNAP benefits and using match incentives to increase low-income people's access to fresh food. When SNAP benefits are used to buy local produce, those federal funds recirculate in the Maine economy 1.7 times, providing 100s of thousands in income for farmers and helping low-income people afford healthy local produce. In 2016, SNAP recipients redeemed 0.1 percent of benefits direct from farmers (second in the nation to Hawaii). Numerous incentive grants increase the buying power of those SNAP benefits. Family farmers throughout the state have come to depend on the income they generate while supporting the health of low-income consumers as a result of SNAP benefits. This multiplier in the small farm economy is another reason to fully implement these benefits.

We respectfully request that the HHS Committee continue the tradition of accessing all the resources that improve the nutrition of people facing economic challenges. The proposed policy changes are good not only for the nutritional self-sufficiency of Maine's economically vulnerable people, but also for small farming businesses across the state.

Submitted by Jim Hanna, jhanna@ccfoodsecurity.org
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