

Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazza and distinguished members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee, my name is Greg Dugal, representing HospitalityMaine, and I am testifying in favor of LD 1751, which would make permanent the ability of restaurants and bars to serve beer, wine, and cocktails to go In Maine statute. From the day that the Governor closed restaurants but encouraged them to continue selling take out with their favorite “beverage,” HospitalityMaine has been at the table and thankful and appreciative of the efforts by the Governor’s staff, DAFS, BABLO and this committee, both in March 2020 and 2021 and today, to throw the restaurant industry a lifeline.

I believe it bears mentioning that fully two years from the beginning of the pandemic, the virus still rages. It has taken on different forms but the devastation it has left on the hospitality industry with restaurants specifically will be hard to reverse. Most restaurateurs have modified service in some way and are trying different ways to keep their businesses solvent and viable and beer, wine and cocktails to go are just one of those fixes. In many instances, it has now become a big part of the business model. We honestly believe that issues exacerbated by the virus may not be totally resolved by September 2022, when the current allowance for “to go” ends and that it may last for months and even years.

In a poll of HospitalityMaine members in July of 2020, 93 of 117 respondents said that they included beer and wine in the manufacturers original package as part of their takeout menu, a whopping 80% and over 50% of those who responded used the cocktails to go feature of this allowance. For this program to end abruptly as this statute sunsets could be devastating to our industry. Regardless of the status of the virus, it will be years before restaurateurs get back to the levels of business they once had. 2021 restaurant sales were only 3% higher in 2021 versus 2019, the last normal year, and that was against a backdrop of 8% inflation based on cost of goods and labor over the 2 years, hardly a sustainable formula.

We conducted a survey again in September of 2021. I fully believed that the number of members using this program would have diminished over time. The lack of employees and loss of general interest over time could have surely made it more difficult for restaurants to continue, but that was not the case. 74% were still doing beer and wine and 71% were doing cocktails to go- 20 points higher than when restaurants were shuttered in 2020. When asked if they would continue the program this winter, 76% said yes for beer and wine and 62% said yes to cocktails to go.

This program is working, and it has been a lifeline to small business in Maine and for these purposes we believe that the program should be given permanent status in Maine State statute. Please give us a fighting chance and vote LD1751 out of your committee ought to pass. Thank you for your time.