



February 28, 2023

Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine testimony to the Committee On Appropriations and Financial Affairs in support of LD 258, An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025.

Good afternoon Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Sachs and Pluecker, and members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committees.

My name is Courtney Kennedy, and I am the Nutrition Director for Good Shepherd Food Bank. I am here today to express our support, and ask for your support, of the Nutrition Incentives \$600,000 allocation and the Statewide Hunger Relief Program \$1 million included in the budget before you for consideration. I will speak to each of those programs below, although due to time I will abbreviate my written testimony.

The mission of Good Shepherd Food Bank is to eliminate hunger in Maine by improving access to nutritious food for people in need, building strong community partnerships, and mobilizing the public in the fight to end hunger. Good Shepherd Food Bank works in partnership with nearly 600 organizations to help distribute food to community members in need. Our network of partner agencies includes food pantries, meal sites, senior centers, school programs, and healthcare facilities. In our work centering equity, we are increasingly working with communities of color to address food security in a culturally responsive way.

### **Nutrition Incentives**

In addition to our traditional partner network, Good Shepherd Food Bank collaborates with small grocers and food retailer to oversee Farm Fresh Rewards. With Farm Fresh Rewards, shoppers using SNAP/EBT earn bonus dollars for Maine-grown fruit and vegetables. Incentives programs such as Maine Harvest Bucks and Farm Fresh Rewards encourages shoppers to spend their SNAP dollars on healthy product by providing financial incentives on fruits and vegetables. SNAP incentives not only improve healthy food access and nutrition among SNAP participants, they also support farmers and small businesses, and stimulate the local economy. Since the inception of Farm Fresh Rewards in Maine, over \$500,000 of incentives have been redeemed on Maine local product by SNAP shoppers- showing growth year over year. Good Shepherd Food

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Bank feels strongly about the positive impacts this program has on the wellness of food insecure Mainers.

Our Farm Fresh Rewards stores are deeply embedded in their communities and have shared the impact that this program has had on SNAP shoppers. Families can prioritize eating local. As a food strategy for Maine we recognize the sustainable impact this program has on not only our farmers, but also our environment and our communities. Farm Fresh Rewards store include Belfast Co-op, Berry Fruit Farm, Blue Hill Co-op, Food Share Co-op, Gardner Co-op, Ginny's Natural Corner, Good Turn Co-op, Jordan's Farm, Machias Marketplace, Marsh River Co-op, Portland Co-op, Rising Tide Co-op, Rosemont-Munjoy Hill, Royal River Natural Foods, Sheepscot General Store and Spice and Grain.

I want to share with you a little about Virginia Jewel or as her community knows her as Ginny of Ginny's Natural Corner. Ginny not only takes the time to engage her Farm Fresh Rewards shoppers, but she is even willing to meet them at the Farmers' Market to share with them ways that they can shop not only at her store in Skowhegan but also take advantage of the nutrient full local fruits and vegetables at the Skowhegan Farmers' Market.

Another example is the team at the Portland Coop who are interested in responding to the ever-growing diverse shoppers they are seeing in their store. By making sure that they have culturally relevant local produce and partnering with local farms to simulate opportunity for both the shoppers and the farmers find beneficial. Building on the impact of supporting more diverse farms and building access to foods that are familiar to many shoppers who now call Maine home.

SNAP/EBT shoppers share over and over that they get to prioritize local for their families, allowing them to contribute to a strong and healthy community. I have spoken to program users who are thankful that they do not have to choose between purchasing foods that are nutrient void because they cost less, but that they can purchase and extend their food dollars on local, healthy produce for their families. Extra funds for SNAP/EBT shoppers to purchase fruits and vegetables means that more fruits and vegetables are consumed; this results in improved health, and decreased diet related diseases in program users.

Because only partial funding for Farm Fresh Rewards is awarded through Gus Schumackers Incentive Program (GusNIP) which requires a non-profit or government agencies to apply and GusNIP requires a dollar-for-dollar match for programming.

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## Statewide Hunger Relief Program

Now more than ever, in a time when many Mainers are recovering from the pandemic, inflation, and economic uncertainty, we must continue to invest in innovative programs such as Mainers Feeding Mainers that seek to strengthen food/nutrition security and our local, agricultural economy. Through Mainers Feeding Mainers, Good Shepherd Food Bank purchases local products from Maine farms on behalf of local hunger relief partners throughout the state.

Mainers Feeding Mainers has become a critical source of income for the **80 farm partners and 10 food processors** we work with throughout the state. Time and time again, farmers have shared how their contract with Good Shepherd Food Bank provides financial security and peace of mind. The program offers flexibility to farmers. Good Shepherd Food Bank can pivot and purchase what is available if our farm partners face seasonal crop failures or unforeseen challenges. Greg Jordan of Jordan Farms in Chester has shared that Mainers Feeding Mainers has helped him grow his business and invest in cold storage and new equipment. Greg appreciates the mission of the program and putting more money back into the local farm economy. In fact, last year Good Shepherd Food Bank invested **\$1 million dollars** back into the economy through the program. In recent years, 70% of Mainers Feeding Mainers farms have hired additional staff, 84% have purchased equipment and 72% have expanded acreage!

Greg also shared he never anticipated how much more exposure, interactions, and friendships would result from participating in Mainers Feeding Mainers. Last summer he met a woman at his farm stand. She is an in-home caretaker and had accompanied her clients to a local food pantry where they received beautiful produce. She told him she was impressed with the product and had to get some for herself. 92% of farm partners report higher farm revenue after participating in Mainers Feeding Mainers.

Many of the farm partners and pantries highlight the relationships they are building together. Last year **1 millions pounds** of Maine's finest produce was delivered to Good Shepherd Food Bank's distribution centers, and subsequently distributed throughout the whole state. In addition, another **half a million pounds of produce** were delivered directly from the farm partner to the pantry partner. These meaningful relationships build a strong food network in Maine.

Mainers Feeding Mainers ensures we are able to provide fresh, beautiful locally grown, nutrient dense produce to all Mainers facing hunger. We are entering our 13<sup>th</sup> growing season with this program and we continue to find ways to build stronger partnerships, more efficient, innovative ways to meet the need. In recent years, we have expanded our work with BIPOC growers and

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now partner with 15 farms. We have worked with all of our farmers to grow more culturally relevant produce such as sweet potato leaves and fresh herbs for our New Mainer populations.

We believe there is a solution to the problem of hunger in Maine. Working in partnership with the state legislature we can and will help reduce the impact of hunger in our state and make Maine a stronger, better place to work and live. These programs are important investments in the farm economy statewide. We ask you for your support in ensuring that Maine food insecure families have access to fresh, local and nutritious foods!

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony, and I ask you to keep this funding in the budget.

Sincerely,

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