



January 22, 2024

Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine testimony to the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry in support of LD 2093, An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Foods.

To Chairperson Ingwersen, Chairperson Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry,

My name is Courtney Kennedy, and I am the Director of Nutrition for Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine. I am here today to express our support, and ask for your support, of LD 2093, An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Foods.

According to the recently released USDA Household Food Insecurity in the U.S. Report, Maine has the highest rates of hunger in New England with approximately 10% of Maine households experiencing food insecurity last year. The food bank and food pantries are hearing that more Mainers across the state are having trouble meeting their basic needs due to rising costs, reduction in SNAP benefits, and other economic factors that impact household budgets. A sampling of data from 40 food pantries in Maine indicate that food pantry visits have increased by more than 35% between 2022 and 2023, and an estimated 15% more households are accessing pantries that have never had to access a pantry previously. While need can vary greatly from one community to the next, our sampling of data and the anecdotes we hear indicate that need is growing during these challenging economic times.

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is a critical program that helps 170,000 Mainers purchase food. SNAP 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. Good Shepherd Food Bank collaborates with small grocers and food retailer to oversee Farm Fresh Rewards. With Farm Fresh Rewards, shoppers using SNAP receive point of purchase discount for Maine-grown fruit and vegetables. Farm Fresh Rewards stores are deeply embedded in their communities and have shared the impact that this program has had on SNAP shoppers, including bringing more customers into their stores. 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, Sheepscoot General Store, Blackies Farm Fresh Produce and Papa's Produce.

An example of this amazing collaboration is the team at the Portland Coop who are interested in responding to the ever-growing diverse shoppers they are seeing in their store. The Coop invests in partnerships with local farms to make sure they can provide culturally relevant local produce that is beneficial for both the

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shoppers and the farmers. Below, please see testimony from store partners who continue to share the positive impact of this program.

SNAP shoppers share over and over that they get to prioritize purchasing local produce 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. These incentives for SNAP shoppers to purchase fruits and vegetables means that more fruits and vegetables are consumed which results in improved health and decreased diet related diseases. LD 2093's funding will allow potential expansion of this program. More families, farms, and grocers can participate. And we recognize the sustainable impact this program has on our farmers, our environment and our communities.

Sincerely,

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Blackie's Farm Fresh Produce, Auburn

- "We had one customer that specifically stated that she comes to our farmstand because of this program and the variety of local products she could buy through the Farm Fresh Rewards program. Many people say they love the program, but this customer specifically comes to our farm store as she can double her money and support local!"
- "Farmers are very excited that we accept Farm Fresh Rewards as it gives more opportunity to get farm fresh produce and allows those families to stretch their EBT funds!"
- "When discussing the FFR program, our staff continue to share how grateful customers are to receive the 50% off fresh fruits and vegetables. It's almost like they think it's too good to be true until they look at their receipt and see how they only used half of their purchase towards their EBT funds, giving them more funds to feed their families!"
- "We continue to have customers that are new to FFR and are surprised and so happy to learn that they can get 50% off. Recently we had a gentleman that came in for some tomatoes and it was slow in the store so our cashier took the time to share the program as they saw he was paying with EBT. It was like Christmas; he was so grateful to learn of the program and was excited to come back and continue to take advantage of the opportunity!"

Blue Hill Co-op, Blue Hill

- "Customer - the new method of FFR has caused the customer to do all their shopping at the co-op."

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- “Many customers have told us they no longer shop at the local grocery store previously known as Tradewinds. The business was recently sold to Hannaford. We have received high praise from customers about the freshness of our local, organic produce options.”

Ginny’s Natural Corner, Skowhegan

- “50 individual usage of FFR. I am seeing my older population using FFR more now that it has changed.”
- ““WOW!” after new rewards customer saved money on their purchase.”
- “It's Awesome!” (Regular customer about changes). Staff are finding it easier to explain and do. User friendly! We had 40 customer transactions receive some reimbursement, with the average reward \$8.47.”

Jordan’s Farm, Cape Elizabeth

- “One new customer unfamiliar with the program said he's now going to come back to shop with us more often because he's excited to get a discount on our veggies!”
- “We've heard from a few customers that they didn't know this program existed and were very excited to learn at checkout that they were getting a discount”.

Papa’s Produce, Scarborough

- “We are seeing the monthly EBT customer appear weekly now. We are getting EBT customers back into our store that haven't shopped with us since COVID. The \$2k we put through our register means we technically sold \$4k worth of produce via EBT - this is a dramatic increase over last August. This program is absolutely increasing our sales!”
- “One farmer who grows for us has noticed the EBT customers are able to buy more now that they receive 50% off.”
- “Seems like our EBT customers are spending more per transaction because of the discount. They are VERY impressed that Good Shepherd is paying for half of their transaction. Many seem genuinely thankful.”
- “We picked up at least 5 new EBT customers/month as word gets out.”

Rising Tide Co-op, Damariscotta

- “As a person that has been training new cashiers for the summer months, the new system of Farm Fresh has been amazing. No explaining of the voucher system, no awkward conversations with customers who are just trying to understand the system. A strait forward blanket discount has been a breeze!”
- “Customers are very excited about being able to use their Farm Fresh Rewards on their local blueberry pre-orders.”
- “Cashiers report that explaining the Farm Fresh Rewards new system is very easy, and customers are excited.”