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LD 2093

Dear members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry,

I would like to submit my deep and sincere support for LD 2093, an Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food. As you all know, food insecurity in Maine is an ongoing crisis that affects almost ten percent of our state's population, including one in six children. Families, children, and older adults are particularly at risk, and the 2023 cuts to federal SNAP funding at the end of the COVID-19 emergency sent unprecedented numbers of Mainers to their local food pantries. The strain is evident in all parts of our food system and the crisis is putting our state's health and wellness at risk. In addition to supporting our state's network of emergency food access sites, it is imperative that we augment support to increase the resilience and accessibility of our food system, in order to address the root causes of food insecurity. A strong, local food system, where healthy and delicious food produced by Maine farmers and food producers is available year-round, is an engine of sustainable economic growth that reduces poverty and protects our state's food supply from the vicissitudes of climate change and global strife is key to both reducing food insecurity and its unwelcome effects and preventing future spikes in food insecurity. This bill, by making local food accessible to more Mainers, is an integral part of a strategic solution to ending hunger, strengthening our economy and communities, and supporting local farmers.

Here's a story that to me, illustrates the power of this bill. At the Skowhegan Farmers' Market this summer, thanks to nutrition incentive programs such as those funded by this bill, I have seen the strength of farmers' markets to act as community centers and engines of local economies first-hand. Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets ran a postcard campaign, mailing postcards that could be redeemed for \$15 worth of fruits and vegetables at the farmers' market, and I stood at the gates of the square, next to the former jail that now houses Maine Grains, handing out Maine Harvest Bucks to people carrying the yellow post-cards. I took down some information from each person. When the market was over, I counted exactly 100 checks on the sheet on my clipboard. In just four hours, 100 people who received SNAP had visited the market and left with fruits and veggies from local farms. Many had visited the market for the first time that day. There was a musician singing covers and playing the guitar, lines across the parking lot for cukes and green beans from nearby organic farms, a representative from the state WIC agency supporting shoppers in using their WIC benefits, the smell of baked goods made from heritage whole grains, kids shouting and playing, and lots and lots of smiling faces. Skowhegan is a really special place, but I think the transformation that occurs in the square behind the old jail represents a model for inclusive, joyful, sustainable economic revitalization that has the power to truly nourish communities. LD 2093 has the power to fund more stories like that.