

Patrick J. Tolosky MD

Good afternoon members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

My name is Dr. Patrick Tolosky, and I am here to urge you to reject the proposal in Language Part VV of LD 210, which would repeal the unemployment hardship exception for state-funded SNAP and TANF benefits.

I am a licensed family medicine physician and preventive medicine fellow in Maine who has a particular interest in food and nutrition. Most of my prominent memorable interactions with patients during my medical career have not been about a rare diagnosis, or successfully treating pneumonia with antibiotics, but listening to the daily struggles of patients. I remember interacting with a single Mom recently, newly arrived from Angola, who was struggling to get enough food for her family. She was trying to blunt the impact on her children by prioritizing her children's nutrition, and often substituting cheap high calorie food in place of nutritious food like fruits and vegetables. She was doing her best but struggling against massive economic forces. It is frustrating to hear similar stories day after day when I have little power to change this, but know those children will suffer the medical harms of not having a healthy diet. We know in medicine that a majority of health outcomes are not related to the medicines we prescribe or the counseling we provide as doctors, but due to the underlying social determinants of health in people's lives like poverty, inadequate food access, unemployment and other such factors¹.

Food insecurity is a major challenge in Maine. Maine has the highest rates of food insecurity in all of New England, with some counties such as Piscataquis, Aroostook, and Washington counties approaching 17 percent food insecurity. This is over 150,000 individuals in the state. Additionally, over 50 percent of people facing food insecurity are above income limits for SNAP making it even more difficult to obtain nutritious food^{2,3}.

Maine's ending Hunger 2030 plan is ambitious, and something I am proud of as a resident of Maine. However, the Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030 illustrates the scale of hunger in our state⁴. It is concerning to think of family and children being hungry or malnourished, but this is not just a question of sympathy. The report cites Maine's financial burden of hunger related costs totalling \$709,000,000 from lost productivity, increased need for special education services, and preventable health conditions among other drivers. The reactive manner we currently employ to treat the results of hunger and malnourishment ends up being more costly rather than a prevention based approach. Malnutrition is correlated to a plethora of diseases ranging from diabetes and obesity to cardiovascular disease, maternal birth complications, delays in early childhood development and mental health disorders^{5,6}. Furthermore, food insecurity hits our immigrant families harder, with over 50 percent of African immigrant families experiencing food insecurity⁴. These communities have so much to offer our state and nation, just like the newly arriving immigrants from Ireland and Poland did in the 1900's who are my direct ancestors. But we have to help empower them to be their healthiest selves in order to maximize their potential.

In summary, I urge you to reject the proposal in Language Part VV of LD 210, which would repeal the unemployment hardship exception for state-funded SNAP and TANF benefits. I encourage you to support creating an equitable future for all Maine families, particularly our immigrant communities who have so much to offer especially when they are at their healthiest.

Respectfully,
Patrick Tolosky, MD

References:

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