

Testimony of Max Bachvarova
February 24, 2025

To:

Senator Margaret Rotundo
Senator Henry Ingwersen
Representative Drew Gattine
Representative Michele Meyer
Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

LD 210, An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provision of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June, 30, 2025, June 30, 2026, and June 30, 2027.

Good afternoon, senators, representatives, and esteemed committee members. My name is Max Bachvarova; I am a resident of Portland, a farm worker in Topsham, and a year-round farmers market employee in the Brunswick-Topsham area. I appreciate the opportunity to stand before you today.

State-funded SNAP and TANF benefits are not only essential to the wellbeing of Mainers, including non-US-resident Mainers, they are essential to the wellbeing of Maine farmers and farmworkers.

It is imperative that we strive to end hunger in Maine for all who reside here. Maine has the highest average rate of food insecurity in New England with one in eight adults and one in five children facing hunger. In Maine, the rate of food insecurity in white households is 13%, in households of color is 28%, in Black households is 40%, and Maine's migrant farmworkers experience food insecurity at 37-64% (*The State of Racial Disparities*. Permanent Commission: Racial, Indigenous & Tribal Populations, 2024). While Maine immigrants provide tax funds through their wages within food service and agriculture, they are not able to access the same public benefits they help to provide.

Limitation of benefits will increase food and housing insecurity and risk the wellbeing of new Mainers. As many as one third of food insecure families do not qualify for federal or state funded benefits based on the income, resource, work, and citizenship requirements (Permanent Commission, 2024). Currently, state-funded SNAP and TANF allow people to receive benefits while looking for a job and while working, while federally funded SNAP and TANF expire once the "hardship exception" for unemployment is resolved. However, work authorization is not a promise of a job. Repealing the unemployment hardship exception for Maine state-funded SNAP and TANF benefits would act as a punitive measure for folks who seek employment and would reinforce white supremacist talking points that disparage unemployed immigrants. White supremacy should have no place in our state. And let us be clear: people have inherent value beyond their economic contributions.

The farming community in Maine also strongly supports SNAP. This past year, \$1 million flowed through the Maine Federation of Farmers Markets to farmers and vendors across Maine, of which \$866,604 came from SNAP and the Maine Harvest Bucks program. Maine Harvest Bucks are nutrition incentives that double SNAP benefits used at farmers markets in Maine. Between 2023 and 2024, SNAP transactions at farmers markets increased 5% and Maine Harvest Bucks increased by 80%. This year 44 farmers markets doubled SNAP benefits through the Maine Harvest Bucks program. We are deeply dedicated to increasing food accessibility to low-income Mainers, including our immigrant neighbors. And as a result, 91% of SNAP recipients shopping at farmers markets this year have reported that this support increases their feelings of security in accessing and affording the foods they want to eat (Annual Report. Maine Federation of Farmers Markets, 2025).

Repealing the unemployment hardship exception for state-funded SNAP and TANF benefits would be detrimental to the wellbeing of Mainers across the board. I urge you to reject the proposal in Language Part VV of LD210.

Thank you for your time,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Max Bachvarova". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Max Bachvarova