

Testimony of Lex Abbatello of Westbrook before the 132st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Dear members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry.

My name is Lex Abbatello, I am a resident of Westbrook, and I am here today as a Maine SNAP-Educator to express my support of LD 468 – An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food.

In my career I have worked as a SNAP-Educator and a WIC nutritionist in Kennebec County and am currently working as a SNAP-Educator/Coordinator in York county. In each of these roles, I have worked with local farmers' markets and the Maine Federation for Farmers' Markets to help ensure that my participants had access to the food being sold.

I ran kids clubs at the Waterville and Kittery markets, where children could participate in an activity about nutrition, farming, sustainability, or movement in exchange for a \$2 token to spend on fresh fruits and vegetables. Families were able to pair their kids club token(s) with Maine Harvest Bucks for additional savings and produce purchases.

With both WIC and SNAP-Ed, I partnered with the Maine Federation for Farmers' Markets to host postcard events and remind shoppers of their ability to combine their EBT and/or WIC benefits with Harvest Bucks to stretch their budget and purchase more nutritious foods.

My current office, located in Biddeford, has prided itself on a project that has allowed the acceptance of EBT at the Saco Farmers' Market. This success has brought shoppers to Saco's market who may not have been able to afford it otherwise, especially when EBT benefits are paired with programs like Harvest Bucks that give individuals extra buying opportunities to shop local and increase their food take-home.

These opportunities would not have been possible without funding to cover staff or volunteer time, the purchase of a card reader for EBT or other necessary equipment, and the continuation/maintenance of accessible food programs like Harvest Bucks.

I, and others in my offices and across the state, have worked hard to make farmers' markets accessible for low-income shoppers. The use of EBT and WIC benefits at local markets is a huge win, and the implementation of Maine Harvest Bucks has allowed EBT and WIC shoppers to stretch their benefits even further to support their health and the local economy.

I am happy to share with my cooking class participants that EBT acceptance and Maine Harvest Bucks exist at their local markets to show that they are both welcome there and able to shop for nutritious, locally grown food hassle-free.

I am in support of continuous funding at the \$1.2 million level per year to see these programs and opportunities continue to exist and flourish in communities across Maine.

Lex Abbatello
Coastal Healthy Communities Coalition
LD 468

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