

Kathryn Sargent
Locker Project
LD 2040

Senator Talbot-Ross, Representative Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Kathryn Sargent. I am the Executive Director at the Locker Project, which is based in South Portland.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 2040 A Pilot Program to Assess Food Insecurity in Maine. I'd like to thank Representative Pluecker for his commitment to Maine's initiative to end hunger.

The Locker Project is a nonprofit agency focused on ensuring that children in Greater Portland and their families have reliable access to nourishing food. Each year, we share more than half a million pounds of food in our community through partnerships with dozens of public schools and agencies that serve local families. More than 80 percent of the food we share is fresh produce, procured from Good Shepherd Food Bank and local farms or rescued from supermarkets. Our whole-family approach to child hunger provides fresh produce, meat, bread and healthy staples, covering the full range of essential nutrients; ensures that children become familiar with nutrient-dense foods early in life; includes items culturally important to New Mainers; stretches family food budgets, reducing stress and freeing up resources; and acknowledges parents as dietary role models who need healthy food, too.

In my role, I rely on food insecurity data to secure adequate financial resources to run our programs and to allocate limited food resources across competing priorities. First, I apply for more than 50 grants each year. Most require a comprehensive problem statement. For this, I rely on publicly available data on food insecurity in the state, county and communities we serve. The termination of the USDA Food Insecurity Survey creates a cavernous gap in the data available to understand national trends in food insecurity and to convey the need our programs address to the institutional funders and the other donors on whom we rely.

Second, I use food insecurity data to ensure that any growth or change in our operations results in effectively reaching children and families without the necessary resources to purchase enough nourishing food.

It should not be the case that Mainers rely on nonprofit agencies like the Locker Project for their basic needs, including food. But that is, in fact, the situation. Recent actions by the federal government—cutting SNAP, ending health care subsidies, enacting policies that increase food prices, the list goes on—have only intensified the reliance of low-income families on the charitable food system. It should also not be the case that agencies committed to directing the food available—whether through food banking or supermarket rescue—must rely entirely on soliciting private donations to cover the costs of operating. But that is also the current situation. Recent federal cuts to programs that supported hunger relief agency partnerships with local farms, for example, have shifted our reliance even further onto private donors.

We cannot hope to address widespread food insecurity without accurate data on who is at risk of going hungry in Maine and why. This bill will begin to create the mechanisms and partnerships needed for critical data to be collected, shared, analyzed and used effectively by agencies like the Locker Project as well as by policymakers.

Thank you for your time.

Kathryn Sargent
Executive Director
Locker Project