

**To:** Members of the Appropriation and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees

**From:**

Jennifer Brown

**Re:** Additional Investment in Older Mainers Needed in Supplemental Budget

Hello,

My name is Jennifer Brown and I am the Nutrition Director for Spectrum Generations, Central Maine's Area Agency on Aging.

I am here to urge you to include additional funding for Area Agency on Aging services that help older Mainers age safely at home in the supplemental budget.

Maine's AAAs provide cost-effective services that help older adults remain safely at home. The AAA's services are a proven investment that reduce hospitalizations, ER visits, and nursing home placements, saving the state significant long-term care costs.

The budget is an opportunity to invest in programs with a strong return on investment and to lead the way in creating a state where we can all age well. An investment now will save millions in long-term care costs and fund programs proven to help older Mainers age where they want to—at home and in their communities.

The current supplemental budget includes no additional funding for these essential services. Thank you for last year's one-time investment. That money is hard at work providing services to a projected 9,000 older Mainers, including 500 additional Meals on Wheels recipients.

As Nutrition Director I see every day what happens when funding does not keep pace with need.

Last year's one-time supplemental funding allowed us to maintain the demand for Meals on Wheels and reach more older adults who were isolated, malnourished, and at high risk of hospitalization or nursing home placement. For many of those individuals, the daily meal is not just food—it is their primary source of nutrition, their safety check, and often their only human contact.

I think of one older woman on our route who had been surviving on crackers and canned soup because she could no longer stand long enough to cook. Before receiving Meals on Wheels, she had already fallen twice due to weakness and poor nutrition.

Within weeks of receiving consistent meals, she regained strength, stabilized her weight, and avoided another hospital visit. A \$10 meal helped prevent hospitalization that could have cost thousands.

But for every story like hers, there is another story we don't talk about enough.

Right now, we maintain a 286-person waitlist for Meals on Wheels, which grows every single day. I have quietly started referring to it as our "Killer Waitlist." That is not a dramatic phrase. It is a realistic one.

When funding is reduced and demand increases, we are forced to prioritize. Someone may be placed lower on the list not because they are safe, but because they live one town closer to a larger town, or because someone else is just slightly more medically fragile on paper. They are labeled "lower priority."

It may mean:

- An 82-year-old who has "enough" in the bank on paper but is already skipping meals to afford medication, will continue to go hungry.
- A widower who cannot safely cook but has not yet fallen will continue to go hungry.
- A woman with early frailty who lives just close enough to a grocery store to appear "less isolated" but hasn't had human interaction in years, will continue to go hungry.

But hunger does not feel lower priority.

Isolation does not feel lower priority.

Being 85, homebound, and choosing between food and heat does not feel lower priority.

What keeps me up at night is this: with flat or reduced funding, there is a very real probability that some of the older adults on our waitlist will never receive services. They will wait. They will decline. Some will be hospitalized. Some will enter nursing facilities sooner than necessary. And some will die waiting.

That is what a "Killer Waitlist" means.

These are not abstract budget lines. These are older Mainers who worked, paid taxes, raised families, and built the communities we now serve. The cost of a daily meal is minimal compared to the cost of a hospital stay or long-term care placement—but beyond cost, it is about dignity. As the oldest state in the nation, Maine has an opportunity to lead in designing a long-term care system that prioritizes prevention over crisis.

We should not be in a position where geography or timing determines whether someone eats.

**Closing:** As the oldest state in the nation, the legislature has an opportunity to lead the nation in how we can support and celebrate our state's older people. I urge you to include additional ongoing funding in the supplemental budget and make this smart, cost-effective investment in Maine's future.

Thank you for your consideration and for your service on behalf of older Mainers.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Brown