

## **Testimony of Kelly Payson-Roopchand of Somerville before the 131 Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

Good afternoon members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

My name is Kelly Payson-Roopchand, I am a resident of Somerville, and I am here today as both a farmer and a market organizer to express my support of LD 5688 - An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.

My family and I own and operate Pumpkin Vine Family Farm, a goat dairy in Somerville, and we sell 100% of our goat cheese, yogurt, and delicious smoothies at farmers markets throughout the state.

Farmers Market are a critical piece of local food security, as we were reminded during COVID, when our lines suddenly swelled with shoppers unwilling to enter grocery stores, or unable to find basic food items due to supply chain issues.

Farmers markets are celebrated for providing the freshest, most nutritious food to local communities – but they are also criticized as being accessible only to the upper & middle class, those folks who can afford the higher price point of food that is produced by hand.

The Maine Harvest Bucks program has changed that, by making fresh local food affordable for all.

Over the past 7 years, our farm has sold at 7 farmers markets, only 4 of which offer MHB. Our very first farmers market, right here in Augusta, has one of the most successful MHB programs in the state.

The difference between those markets that offer MHB and those that don't are strikingly obvious in their customer composition. In those markets that don't offer MHB, a whole segment of the community is missing.

I miss the elderly customers, who unwrap their EBT card from a small bundle of cash, carefully budgeting for just one quart of our delicious probiotic yogurt, in order to support their digestive health and immune system. If there isn't a line, (and sometimes when there is : ) they share with me stories of their past, and their concerns about the future.

I miss the new mothers who come surrounded by a bevy of children, pushing a stroller overflowing with produce. Many have been sent by their pediatricians to try goat's milk for their babies, who have trouble digesting cow's milk products.

I miss the immigrants who are still learning English, who try to figure out what exactly I am selling, and suddenly smile when I point to a photo of a goat, reassured when I hand them a familiar feta or goat cheese.

Is this the world we want, where only some families are able to enjoy the fruits of the land?

That is not why I became a farmer...  
and that is why I support the Maine Harvest Bucks program, because I have seen the difference it makes.

I have seen those babies grow into children who run from table to table, eager for our fresh food, happily munching on raw vegetables.

I have seen nervous new mothers, reluctant to show their EBT card, become proud shoppers, confident that they are valued customers in our market.

I have seen the children of immigrant families quickly become fluent in English, helping their parents navigate our market, new Americans participating in time-honored traditions of exchange, making us a truly global community.

I have developed deep friendships with the elderly folks who come as much for the conversation as the food. Just this morning I had a message on my phone from a long-time EBT shopper and friend, checking to see if I would have her favorite cheese at market tomorrow, before she spent the money on gas to drive in. She's not just concerned about her well-being; she's concerned about our farm's well-being, and calls us when she reads about an opportunity – or a challenge - in Maine agriculture.

With the current decrease in federal funding, I have joined the fundraising committee for three of our markets. I will do whatever is necessary to support this critical program, but it has required a lot of time for meetings, filling out applications, and making appeals.

At this time of year, our farm has a barn full of pregnant goats, that are due to start kidding in a few weeks, and honestly, it is stressful to be out pounding the streets when I need to be preparing to welcome an avalanche of baby goats and a flood of fresh milk. So far, the fundraising teams have only secured about \$1500 in funding, which means we have almost \$10,000 more to raise...

I don't want to have to choose between caring for my animals and caring for my friends and neighbors, so I am asking for your leadership to secure \$600,000 for funding for the Maine Harvest Bucks program, on an annual basis.

You have an opportunity to make a difference in so many lives...Please don't miss it.