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**Testimony in Support of LD 1584,
*An Act to Provide Funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program***

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Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Alex Carter, I use she/her pronouns, and I am a Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. One of my focus areas at MEJ is food security and I am therefore pleased to testify in support of LD 1584.

We applaud Representative Stover's responsiveness to the needs of her constituency by introducing this emergency bill. Many of us here today who work directly with clients and community members are hearing the same thing from across the state—we're hungry. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is of particular importance to our low-income clients as their first line of defense against hunger and one of the only systemic, and statewide interventions that addresses food insecurity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress increased SNAP benefits through what are known as 'Emergency Allotments' (EAs) in an effort to combat the economic impacts of the pandemic and a deepening hunger crisis. The EAs brought all SNAP recipients up to the maximum benefit level for their household size or provided an additional \$95 in monthly benefits for those with the lowest incomes who were already receiving the maximum amount.¹ This proved to be transformational for the low-income families we work with, many of whom noted this was the first time they could adequately meet their nutritional needs through the SNAP program.

A national study conducted by Northwestern University² estimated that, during the height of the pandemic, the EA payments reduced the likelihood that a household experienced food insufficiency (a measure of food hardship) by 9%, and another analysis from the Urban Institute

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/temporary-pandemic-snap-benefits-will-end-in-remaining-35-states-in-march>

² <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-report-snap-emergency-allotments-impact-27-january-2023.pdf>

showed that the EAs kept 4.2 million people out of poverty in the fourth quarter of 2021.³ These effects were even greater for Black and Hispanic households, helping to reduce entrenched racial disparities.

However, in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, Congress voted to terminate the extra SNAP payments after the final issuance in February 2023 for all states still participating. This resulted in a drastic \$19,186,574 reduction in total benefits to all Maine SNAP households between February 2023 and March 2023.⁴ Many people have returned to the pre-pandemic minimum benefit of \$23 a month for a household of 1 or 2 which is scarcely enough to supplement a single visit to the grocery store. This is what we mean by a hunger cliff.

While the federal Public Health Emergency is coming to a close, the underlying needs have not gone away. Nationally, food prices have reached historic highs and are predicted to increase by another 7.5% over the course of 2023.⁵ Many of our clients with low income are struggling to put food on the table between the high costs for other basic necessities such as rent, childcare, heating, and health care costs. In the absence of adequate SNAP benefits, the burden has now shifted to our charitable food system with some pantries reporting a 25-30% increase in demand since the end of the EAs along with frequently empty shelves. This is not only unsustainable, but charitable giving also limits people's access and choices to meet their nutritional needs while doing nothing to address the root causes of hunger.

LD 1584 would provide a meaningful, short-term boost in benefit levels to all those who currently meet SNAP eligibility requirements and utilize a step-down approach to reduce the extra payments more gradually—something that the federal EAs severely lacked. This would most importantly put more food on the plates of low-income people, but it would also provide a clear timeline for budgeting and planning—for families and service organizations alike—to better prepare for the need to seek supplemental food resources. It is also a signal to our Congressional delegation that we recognize the severity of hunger in our state and encourage Congress to take action in the upcoming Farm Bill Reauthorization to improve SNAP benefit adequacy. For all these reasons, we support LD 1584 and encourage you to vote ought to pass.

I would be happy to answer any questions and thank you for your attention.

³ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/effect-reevaluated-thrifty-food-plan-and-emergency-allotments-supplemental>

⁴ <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/March%20Geographic%20Distribution.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>