

# **An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food**

Public Hearing Jan 22, 2024

Good Afternoon

My name is Theresa Oleksiw and I wear two hats this afternoon – one as a consultant to Farms for Food Equity, a nonprofit organization that supports local farms by helping them with funding and coordination to distribute fresh food to pantries and other food hubs. I also volunteer at the Freeport Food pantry, bringing many pounds of fresh produce from my backyard garden to my neighbors with less resources. Neighbors who are forced to go to a food pantry because they do not have enough money to buy food. The money they do earn through work and social security cannot stretch far enough to buy fresh food.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you concerning access to locally produced food for food insecure Maine residents. Most of the food insecure people I meet are at food pantries. There are thirty food pantries in Cumberland County. Farms for Food Equity conducted surveys this past fall and early winter at over half of these pantries and collected information from 221 neighbors who rely on food pantries for their food.

Ninety percent of the neighbors reported a strong desire to have more access to fresh locally produced food. Over half of those surveyed grow what they can in porch containers and window gardens. Another half wish they could purchase fresh produce at the local farmers market, but they do not have their own funds. Family funds, from working people, must be divided between rent/mortgage, heating and electric costs, transportation, and medical bills. Most neighbors I surveyed at the food pantries were well into and past their sixth decade of life. Most people who use food pantries are senior citizens. Senior citizens who know the benefits of fresh produce to their health and wellbeing.

I am a deep concern for my neighbors well being as I know many of them are older people who care a lot about their health and at the same time must stretch their social security checks (not much more than a thousand dollars a month) to pay all their household expenses. Providing an increase in SNAP benefits will enable our neighbors to buy fresh produce, at their local store or farmer's market.

I suggest you visit your local food pantry, if you have not been yet, and meet your neighbors with less resources than you. Ask them what they would buy if they had more resources to buy food. I can guarantee that all of them will respond, we want more fresh local produce.