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STATE OF MAINE
DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
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04333-0111

RANDALL A. LIBERTY
COMMISSIONER

TESTIMONY OF

**KRISTA OKERHOLM, DIRECTOR OF CULINARY & FOOD SUSTAINABILITY
MAINE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS**

April 1, 2025

Neither for nor against:

LD 1141, An Act to Increase the Procurement of Maine Foods by State-funded Institutions

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, I am Krista Okerholm, Director of Culinary & Food Sustainability at the Maine Department of Corrections (DOC) providing testimony today neither for nor against LD 1141, An Act to Increase the Procurement of Maine Foods by State-funded Institutions.

It may come as a surprise to some that the Department of Corrections has an interest in the proposal before you today. However, that surprise will quickly fade when you learn that DOC is one of the biggest purchasers of food among state agencies. The reason for this is simple, we have over 1900 people in our custody, for whom we are responsible for providing three meals per day. Those unfamiliar with our department may also be surprised to hear that we go through great effort to ensure that we provide high quality meals to those in our custody and that part of that is by purchasing food from local producers whenever we can.

While our department will leave the broader discussion of the procurement process and oversight authority outlined in this proposal to representatives from the Department of Administrative and Financial Services and Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, we do feel that it might be helpful to provide information on what our current procurement practices look like at the Department of Corrections and explain why purchasing from local producers is so important to us.

The department has been in a several years long effort improve the quality of food in our system and, as it turns out, that effort has simultaneously reduced the costs of providing that food. Our department takes a multipronged approach to food. We cook using produce grown through our organic gardening program (donating anything we can't consume to local food pantries and composting anything that can't be donated), we utilize scratch cooking methods with raw ingredients procured at a discount from community partners, we reduce dumping costs by composting food waste (which then becomes fertilizer for our gardens), and we take advantage of opportunity buys – a practice that allows us to procure high quality food at a significant discount while also supporting local Maine businesses and families.

These innovations have earned our team national recognition from organizations like Impact Justice and The Vera Institute, as well as positive coverage in the Portland Press Herald, and even the New York Times. The story of how these changes came about and the impact they've had was also told in the recent documentary, Seeds of Change, which the Legislature held a screening of last winter. One of our key team members in this project, Mark McBrine, spearheaded the initiatives covered in that film. This earned him national recognition in 2022, when he was awarded food services operator of the year by the Association of Correctional Food Service Affiliates. Providing high quality food is not just the right thing to do, it also supports positive outcomes. A good meal supports a sense of dignity and self worth and we've witnessed first hand how that can change a person's journey through our system. These innovations have lead to safer



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facilities, increased interest in treatment and programming among residents, and ultimately a lower likelihood of recidivism.

I share this to provide a baseline for what I mean when I say that the ability to buy food from local producers is fundamental to how we procure food at the Department of Corrections. This approach is made possible by the close partnerships our team has built with local producers and our close partnership with the procurement team at the DAFS. Members of this committee may be aware that there was some level of concern in recent months about our ability to continue purchasing food from local producers. Our team at DOC has worked closely with the procurement team at DAFS to address those concerns and ensure that we have appropriate and efficient processes in place to continue our practice of buying from and supporting local food producers. A brief outline of what purchasing currently looks like is provided below.

As a baseline, the Department of Corrections is subject to the generally applicable master purchasing agreements for the state. We are able to purchase food off contract by filling out a purchase justification form when the purchase falls into one of the following categories:

- The item is at least 20% less expensive than available from the provider under the master agreement (this category is available due to off-contract purchasing provisions within certain master agreements);
- The item or its equivalent is not available from the provider under the master agreement; or
- The item is out of stock from the provider under the master agreement.

The ability to purchase food that is at least 20% less expensive than what is available from the provider under the master agreement is what our team uses most often when we buy from local producers, as this is what enables the aforementioned opportunity buys for discounted product. There are many times when a local producer cannot sell through all of their product before it expires, and in those circumstances DOC is often able to obtain that product at a significant discount. This helps the department because we can use high volumes of food product before it expires and it allows us to get high quality food at a cheap price. This helps the local producer because it allows them to avoid a situation where they might otherwise face a total loss on the product that could not sell. Part of what we worked on with DAFS is how to ensure we could act swiftly when these opportunities arise, as the window for making these purchases is often narrow.

Additionally, in the case of some local producers, we can also purchase products that may not otherwise be commercially viable and would have to be discarded. One example is our purchasing of “run of the mill” flour from Maine Grains. This is perfectly good flour that cannot otherwise be sold commercially due to being a mix of different grains resulting from the milling process. We purchase this flour at a price more competitive than what would be available to the mass market and we utilize it for our scratch baking programs in our facilities. Once again, we get a high quality product into our system, we save money, and we support a local business in doing so. This is just one of the many partnerships our team has worked so hard to cultivate.

There are many more examples of similar relationships our team has built with local producers and our team supports any effort to make sure that we can keep those relationships alive. Having ties to the local community provides enrichment to the people we serve. We are able to offer a more nutritious product from farms that residents and staff know, providing a direct line and connection to the community. We have even had residents go and work at many of the farms we partner with, and have helped those farms stay in business through multiple generations.



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We hope the information we've provided today helps provide context for why procuring food from local producers is so important to the Department of Corrections. For these reasons, the department respectfully presents this testimony neither for nor against this proposal.

This concludes my testimony.

I am happy to answer any questions.

Krista Okerholm
Director of Culinary & Food Sustainability
Maine Department of Corrections