



Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential

Neither for nor against LD 2212 An Act Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, I'm Anna Korsen, Deputy Director with Full Plates Full Potential, a statewide non-profit working to address childhood food insecurity in Maine by maximizing access to federally funded USDA nutrition programs like SNAP and school meals. I also serve as the co-chair of the Ending Hunger in Maine Advisory Committee and Full Plates is a contracted SNAP Outreach organization with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). My testimony today is not reflective of the views of the Department, nor am I here representing them. I am here today representing both Full Plates and Hunger Free Maine, a coalition formed to advocate for policies identified in Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger. Our coalition includes:

- Maine Center for Economic Policy
- Maine Children's Alliance,
- Maine Council on Aging,
- Maine Equal Justice,
- Maine Federation of Farmers Markets
- Maine Network of Community Food Councils, and
- Preble Street.

Today I am testifying neither for nor against LD 2212 An Act Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027.

This past November we asked Maine people to share with us the impact that the federal cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will have, and this is what we heard:

Kelly, who runs a pantry in Dover-Foxcroft, said: "We are receiving calls from homebound older adults who are unable to reach food pantries and are in need of food if they do not receive SNAP. One grandmother was in tears, she is raising her grandson and not sure how she will have food in November and how she will feed her grandson."

Theresa from Waterville shared: *“My family depends on the snap benefits every month to just get part of the month with food, food pantries only are able to provide for a couple weeks and that's if they have enough to provide for 2 weeks. We don't own a vehicle so we aren't able to go to more than one food bank and then the SNAP benefits are our only source of food. We live from month to month.”*

The facts are clear that SNAP matters to Maine because too many Mainers can't afford their basic needs. Sometimes the statistics and figures cloud the real human impact of how budgetary priorities can change the trajectory of people's lives. Hunger is a policy choice, a choice that leaves people without enough income each month to afford their basic needs. When a household's income isn't enough to cover housing and healthcare AND food, people go hungry. We witnessed the fear and chaos created in Maine households and communities last November at the prospect of lost SNAP benefits and we saw that Maine's state budget had no straightforward mechanism to replace the \$29 million in federal benefits that feed Mainers every month. We also saw the generosity of individuals and the valiant efforts of our emergency food system, but the strain on food pantries was impossible to ignore. **Charity can't replace SNAP** or other programs that help people afford their basic needs. **The historic cuts of HR.1 mean that Maine, like other states, is now facing a similar crisis. We are about to lose \$6M to administer SNAP and we are at risk of losing up to \$50M each year to fund SNAP benefits for low-income Mainers.**

In a time when food insecurity is on the rise¹, living costs are unaffordable, and the economy is volatile, **Mainers need programs like SNAP to make ends meet for their families.** Maine's rural communities rely on SNAP as an economic stabilizer. This proposed budget represents some key investments in Maine's SNAP program that we strongly support as they will help to strengthen and sustain the program and lower the cost to the state. **However, this budget does not include funding for the state to provide benefits directly to SNAP recipients, a mechanism to ensure access to emergency funding, or a way to raise revenue to fund SNAP benefits in the future. We strongly urge the inclusion of those provisions, and have included recommendations below.**

Maine's Payment Error Rate (PER) as of Oct 1, 2027, will determine the percentage of SNAP benefits Maine will be required to fund. A PER above 6% will mean Maine is responsible for funding a portion of benefits. Maine's current PER is above 10%, in-line with the national average, and if that isn't lowered before Oct 1, 2027, Maine's lawmakers will be responsible for funding approximately \$54 million in SNAP benefits each year. **The crisis from November is not over.**

¹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2023/overall/maine>



Lowering the PER while implementing significant changes to SNAP rules, like increased work reporting requirements, with reduced federal administrative funding, is a historic challenge facing Maine DHHS. Some under and overpayments that contribute to the PER are unavoidable. The bulk come from incomplete or delayed income information and errors by staff trying to make determinations in a complex program, with limited time and information. Investments in adequate staffing, improved communication and engagement with SNAP participants, along with modern technology that streamlines income reporting are key to support DHHS in their efforts to provide accurate payments to everyone. Through our network of SNAP Outreach providers, SNAP recipients report the need for clear, timely, and accessible language and tools on complicated eligibility and work reporting guidelines. When people call and have to wait for 2-5 hours on the phone to get a question answered or report a change in their life circumstances, it's clear that there is a need for investment to expand DHHS's capacity.

Thankfully, this budget reflects some key investments that will help to lower the state's PER, such as reinstating the 'Heat and Eat' automatic deduction for households receiving a LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) benefit, using state funds. HR.1 made this exemption allowable only for households with individuals over 60 years old or with a disability, meaning that everyone else receiving LIHEAP now has to report heating or cooling expenses directly to DHHS in order to claim the Full Standard Utility Allowance (FSUA) deduction and receive an accurate benefit amount. By reinstating the automatic deduction, DHHS can reduce common errors that come from underreporting or accidentally misreporting utility costs which has an effect on Maine's PER. This budget also proposes funding for critical technology upgrades and the addition of 40 eligibility specialists that will help to reduce errors, lower call wait times, and improve data accuracy. We enthusiastically support these provisions and urge the legislature to fund them.

However, this budget does not include funding to fill the gap in the event that the federal government again withholds SNAP benefits or imposes other restrictions, nor does it include the ongoing share of benefits that Maine needs to raise or set aside for the future. Currently under state statute, the Governor can only distribute up to \$400,000 from the Rainy Day Fund during a state of emergency to support food banks and other emergency food providers. Section F-1 of the budget would increase that amount to \$4 million in the event of an emergency. While we support this initiative, and shoring up the charitable food network is critical in times of increased food insecurity, food pantries should be the last line of defense and cannot fill the gap left behind when SNAP is taken away. Furthermore, while food pantries do their best to serve their communities, they are often volunteer run and open just a few days or hours a week, making them difficult for many people to access. To that end, and in keeping with this testimony, we strongly recommend increasing the limit for emergency funding and expanding the language to also include the allowance for direct grocery benefits to Mainers that rely on SNAP, as that is the most effective way to ensure people can feed themselves and their families. Including funding for SNAP benefits would also address the negative economic ripple effects of the loss of SNAP that impact small businesses like grocery stores and farms. Each \$1 in SNAP spending



generates \$1.54 in local economic activity² To be clear, this is not a new budget allocation, but instead a policy change that will give the state the power to act in the face of federal cuts.

Maine is facing the loss of federal dollars and unprecedented new costs, **but there are opportunities to raise progressive revenue and allow for the use of emergency funds to support investments in important programs like SNAP.** We strongly urge AFA and HHS members to protect SNAP's future by investing in the SNAP program now and providing a mechanism to fund the benefits every year that the federal government has abdicated their responsibilities to states and their residents facing hunger. You have fair revenue options that can increase affordability, decrease hunger, and protect Maine's food system by ensuring wealthy individuals and corporations pay their fair share in Maine.

Maine is leading the nation in feeding kids at school due to our School Meals for all Policy, and we applaud the continued commitment by the legislature and administration for that important investment. However, school meals are just one piece of the puzzle and more must be done to ensure all Maine people have consistent, reliable access to food. Our state constitution protects the right to food for all of us and Maine has committed to ending hunger by 2030. The Legislature must be prepared to meet the basic needs of Mainers who bear the greatest burden of the harmful federal changes and ensure people don't go hungry on our watch.

Thank you for your time and commitment to food security for all Maine people. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

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² <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2019/july/quantifying-the-impact-of-snap-benefits-on-the-u-s-economy-and-jobs>