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People Policy Solutions

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Testimony in Support of LD 2122, An Act to Prevent Negative Impacts from Federal Funding Changes to and Fund Eligibility Determinations and Outreach for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

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Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Alex Carter (she/her) and I am a Senior Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. We are also members of the Hunger Free Maine Coalition and the Governor's Ending Hunger Advisory Group, representing the interests of people with low income.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest and most effective tool we have to combat hunger in this country. Every month, SNAP helps nearly 163,000 Mainers with low income,¹ or over 11% of the population, purchase groceries and feed their families. Individuals in every county in Maine receive SNAP benefits and they include working adults, families with children, people with disabilities and older Mainers. As the cost of food and other necessities continues to climb, SNAP is a lifeline for many of our clients facing food insecurity.

The benefits of SNAP extend beyond the individual. It bolsters whole families, farmers and farmers markets, local grocers, and our state economy. Studies show SNAP is an "economic multiplier" supporting local economies, particularly in rural regions where a greater proportion of residents receive SNAP and a higher percentage of sales at local retailers come from EBT purchases.² Every dollar spent in SNAP benefits helps generate an estimated \$1.50 - \$1.80 in economic activity and for every meal a food bank can provide, SNAP provides nine, making it a more cost-efficient way of delivering food assistance.³

Yet, instead of investing in this proven-effective intervention and modernizing our systems, Congress and the Trump Administration passed the largest cuts to SNAP in the history of

¹ <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ofi/about-us/data-reports>

² <https://frac.org/blog/snaps-critical-role-in-rural-communities-and-the-consequences-of-cuts>

³ <https://feedingamericaaction.org/learn/issue-areas/snap/>

the program in last year's federal budget reconciliation bill, H.R. 1. This harmful legislation erected new barriers to assistance, and shifted costs to states, making it both harder to administer the program and harder to get and keep SNAP benefits. We also face new financial penalties for payment errors with reduced federal cost sharing and conflicting federal guidance, making the task of implementing these changes and reducing our SNAP Payment Error Rate (PER) even more challenging.

Trust in the program and its long-term stability has also been shaken by the Administration's continued threats to withhold SNAP benefit payments from states—most recently over data privacy and during the government shutdown this fall. During that time, we received hundreds of calls and messages from Mainers who were frightened about where their next meal would come from and how they would choose between buying food and paying their rent should their SNAP benefits lapse. We cannot allow the federal government to dictate Mainer's food security or to use food as a political bargaining chip.

LD 2122 seeks to respond to these federal cuts, provide continuity in the event of future interruptions, and modernize our state systems, thereby protecting access to food assistance and mitigating the penalties owed by the state. The bill targets error rates in two ways—through investments in technology to detect and correct errors and through supports for direct outreach to individuals to better communicate with SNAP recipients. Together with the proposed investments in staffing and system modernization in the Governor's supplemental budget, these supports will serve to address many of the root causes of over and underpayments. The bill also includes a state contingency fund to provide SNAP benefits to recipients if the Federal Government fails to provide SNAP payments to the state in the future. With so much uncertainty at the federal level and the foreshadowing of the most recent shutdown, it's imperative that we put plans in place now so we can ensure everyone in Maine receives the food assistance they need.

We urge you to support targeted investments that modernize the SNAP program and improve communication and continuity for Maine's 163,000 program participants.

Thank you,

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