



**Testimony of the Maine Public Health Association In Support of  
LD 691, An Act To Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity**

Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry  
Room 214, Cross State Office Building  
Thursday, March 25, 2021

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Rebecca Boulos. I am a resident of South Portland and executive director of the Maine Public Health Association. I am here to provide testimony in support of LD 691, “An Act To Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity.”

MPHA is the state’s oldest, largest, and most diverse association for public health professionals. We represent more than 500 individual members and 30 organizations across the state. The mission of MPHA is to improve and sustain the health and well-being of all people in Maine through health promotion, disease prevention, and the advancement of health equity. As a statewide nonprofit association, we advocate, act, and advise on critical public health challenges, aiming to improve the policies, systems, and environments that underlie health inequities – but which also have potential to improve health outcomes for all people in Maine. We are not tied to a national agenda, which means we are responsive to the needs of Maine’s communities and we take that responsibility seriously.

LD 691 would establish the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. This fund would provide incentives to federal food and nutrition assistance program participants for the purchase of locally grown fruits and vegetables and to support outreach for and administration of programs that offer nutrition incentives to participants of federal food and nutrition assistance programs. The fund will match contributions from private and public sources of up to \$50,000 annually.

Before working at MPHA, I was faculty at University of New England, where I served as co-Principal Investigator of two research studies, funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other private foundations, to conduct randomized-controlled trials (RCTs) testing the use of a 2-for-1 nutrition incentive intervention in a grocery retail setting. The studies allowed for the purchase of fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and vegetables (without added sugar or salt), and the 50% discount (“2-for-1”) would cover up to a maximum of \$10 off per transaction. Eligibility requirements were English language fluency, being aged  $\geq 18$  years, living with a child aged  $\leq 18$  years, and using the study store regularly as a primary food shopping location. Income was not an eligibility factor, although we did try to maximize recruitment of participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Our study results have been – and continue to be – published in peer-reviewed journals.<sup>1,2</sup> In our pilot study,<sup>1</sup> we found customers who were eligible for SNAP saw the greatest fruit and vegetable (F&V) spending increases. We found that discounts were redeemed among 53% of eligible purchases. Total weekly F&V spending increased in the intervention arm compared with control by \$1.83/week (95% confidence interval [CI],

\$0.29 to \$3.88). The largest increase was for fresh F&V (\$1.97/week; 95% CI, \$0.49 to \$3.44). **Secondary analyses revealed greater increases in F&V spending among SNAP-eligible participants (\$5.14/week; 95% CI, \$1.93 to \$8.34) than among non-SNAP eligible participants (\$3.88/week; 95% CI, \$1.67 to \$6.08).**

Similar findings were apparent in our larger study<sup>2</sup>: compared to participants in the control arm, incentivized shoppers – who were given the immediate 50 percent discount on qualifying F&V – increased weekly spending on those items by 27 percent; this change was for fresh produce. In subgroup analyses, we found a significant increase in mean weekly F&V spending among SNAP non-participants (mean: \$1.79; SE: \$0.71). Among SNAP participants, who spent less on F&V at baseline (weekly means: \$3.61 in the intervention group and \$2.60 in the control group), the incentive intervention was associated with a relative increase in spending on F&V (mean: \$1.95; SE: \$0.97).

Overall, our data show that financial incentives for F&V are an effective strategy for food assistance programs to increase healthful purchases and improve dietary intake in low-income families. Based on these study findings, and a growing body of literature in this area, we believe this bill will facilitate increases in healthful food purchases for low-income families in Maine and support local food systems. We respectfully request consideration of including processed F&V, given the extension in shelf-life (and Maine’s short growing season), and partnerships with grocery retailers in addition to nonprofit organizations serving participants in federal nutrition assistance programs.

Maine Public Health Association supports this legislation. I apologize for not being available to present this testimony in person but would be happy to answer any questions the Committee has about our research. Thank you for your consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> Polacsek M, Moran A, Thorndike AN, Boulos R, Franckle RL, Greene JC, et al. A supermarket double-dollar incentive program increases purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables among low-income families with children: The Healthy Double Study. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2018;50(3).

<sup>2</sup> Moran A, Thorndike A, Franckle R, Boulos R, Doran H, Fulay A, et al. Financial incentives increase purchases of fruit and vegetables among lower-income households with children. *Health Aff.* 2019;38(9).