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Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
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Dear Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Michele Polacsek. I am a resident of Portland, Professor of Public Health and Director of the Center for Excellence in Public Health at the University of New England.

I am providing written testimony in support of **LD 691, "An Act To Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity."**

In addition to the qualifications presented above, I am the Principal Investigator of Maine's SNAP-Ed program, the program which provides nutrition education to help those using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) make healthy food choices. I am also an active member of the American Public Health Association's Food and Nutrition Section as well as a member of the Maine Public Health Association. I hold master's and doctoral degrees in public health from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I have worked in the area of chronic disease prevention for over 20 years and specifically in the area of obesity prevention since about 2000. I have been principal investigator on multiple obesity-related research studies and in the past decade have become very interested in studying the promotion of healthy choices including fruits and vegetables for low income and SNAP eligible populations in the retail setting. I am familiar with this population's needs, the barriers this population experiences to healthy eating, and the evidence that exists for successful promotion of healthy foods for low income populations like Maine's SNAP participants.

Although the goal of SNAP is to reduce hunger and improve nutritional health, data suggest that enrollment in SNAP is associated with obesity and metabolic health risks (1,2) This "obesity paradox" is partly explained by poor dietary quality, particularly from the consumption of refined grains, processed meats, sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) and insufficient amounts of F&V (1,2).

In the US, populations experiencing low income report barriers to healthy eating. The most often cited barrier is the high cost of fresh produce (3). Other barriers include lack of skills and time to prepare home cooked meals. These types of barriers have been consistently reported over time

and substantially increased during the COVID-19 - pandemic (4,5). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that nutrition-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity substantially increase risk of morbidity and mortality from COVID-19—compounding the substantially greater health risks already experienced by low income Mainers compared to the rest of the population (6).

Using financial incentives, such as those proposed by LD 691, is a powerful strategy effective for motivating healthful behavior change (7). Price changes, such as decreasing the cost of healthy foods or increasing the cost of unhealthy foods, have been successful at promoting positive behavior change. For example, farmer’s market pricing incentives have been shown to positively impact the purchase of fresh produce among low-income SNAP users (8). And, our own research demonstrates substantial increases of F&V purchases with double dollar F&V pricing incentives in local Maine supermarkets (9,10). Incentivizing healthy behavior is something everyone can agree to and can play an important role in promoting health and can ensure that Maine populations experience benefits that others across our country have experienced from similar programs.

We all know the tremendous cost our health care system incurs because of chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity—not to mention loss of productivity and costs to business in this state. We are the most obese state in the Northeast. I encourage you to pass this bill to help set us on the path to healthier eating and lowering low income Mainers risk for chronic disease while supporting the local economy.

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Sincerely, 

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