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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST LD 1299

An Act To Permit Emergency Funding for Food Banks When a State of Emergency is Declared

April 22, 2021

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Nancy McBrady and I am the Bureau Director of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry (DACF). I'm speaking today in reference to LD 1299 "*An Act To Permit Emergency Funding for Food Banks When a State of Emergency is Declared.*"

Under this bill, the Governor would be able to distribute up to \$400,000 from the stabilization fund to nonprofit entities, including food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens, that provide or distribute food to low-income, indigent, or unemployed individuals or households without charge during a state of emergency.

DACF operates The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which supplies shelf-stable food to authorized food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens. TEFAP is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which supplies a steady source of food and basic administrative funding year-round. Our TEFAP program supplies approximately 250 food pantries and other sites with shelf-stable food staples at no charge.

We support the broad definition of possible fund recipients outlined in the bill, which includes food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens. These are the same sites that are served by the TEFAP program.

During the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic, the American food supply chain was disrupted, and the disruptions impacted the emergency food system as well. There was ample TEFAP food on hand in DACF's warehouses. However, with the existing delivery system, it was hard to rapidly ramp up the amount of food supplied to the pantries, and many had other unexpected needs emerging. Both the USDA and local philanthropists were very quick to respond. Based on what we heard from our food pantry partners, most were receiving sufficient food and funding by early summer, a response time which we would expect to remain consistent in any future emergency. The pantries and other



feeding sites had weathered two or more months of challenges before the new supplies and funding became available. This bill could help address that gap in a future emergency.

Based on our experience administering the TEFAP program over the last decade, and particularly during the ongoing pandemic, we have a few suggestions. First, it seems important to consider whether there will be parameters around how the funds are spent. Will they be limited to food and personnel or extended to cover other costs, including indirect costs? An agency such as MEMA or DACF could provide guidance and oversight.

Secondly, it will be important to consider how the funds will be allocated. We would advocate for ensuring that pantries and other sites of all sizes and in all geographic locations be eligible to access the funds in the event of a state-wide emergency.

Thirdly, we suggest that the State have the ability to advance rather than simply reimburse funds. Last fall and winter, DACF offered reimbursement grants to emergency food providers using CARES funding. In accordance with CARES guidelines, those funds could only be used to reimburse pantries for costs already incurred. We heard from multiple small pantries throughout the state that they did not have cash-on-hand to make needed purchases, so although we were able to distribute over \$620,000 in reimbursements in 2020, numerous pantries missed an opportunity to provide additional needed aid in their communities.

Lastly, we would suggest that there be a ready mechanism in place for monies from the stabilization fund to be repaid to the fund if circumstances allow, and stipulations to prevent “double dipping.” During the coronavirus pandemic, the need was particularly great in the initial weeks of the emergency, and then resources began to flow more freely. LD 1299 might be considered a stopgap funding source in such circumstances.

Maine’s network of food pantries and soup kitchens is vital to the health and well-being of its citizens year-round. Thank you for considering how to best support them during times of civil emergency.