

Sherie Blumenthal
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To whom it may concern,

My name is Sherie Blumenthal and I am a Community Programs Manager with the St. Mary's Nutrition Center in Lewiston, Maine, home to the largest food pantry in the region, the St. Mary's Food Pantry. I have lived and worked in Lewiston, for 16 years today. I am both relieved and inspired to have received and reviewed the "Impacted Community Recommendations & Review On the Interim Report for Ending Hunger in Maine" as they so clearly capture and mirror the everyday realities we see at the Nutrition Center of our neighbors living with food insecurity and hunger. For far too long stereotypes and misconceptions of the causes of hunger have guided policy and programs attempting to alleviate the issue. The truth of the causes and the solutions to address it can be found plainly in this document. The overwhelming majority of people who use our services are already engaged in some type of employment, often one or more jobs. However, amidst a landscape of stagnating wages, rising costs and now COVID along with the lack of basic services that developed nations around the world have such as universal child care, health care and affordable education, people cannot begin to afford basic expenses; expenses they have little control over. Therefore they turn to one of the only places they can cut corners or do without and that is food. Those among our most vulnerable community members include people living with disability, those new to the country, and black, indigenous, people of color (bipoc) where the already oppressive landscape feels even more impossible to navigate due to a lack of services designed for people's needs and a system of racism and bias woven into all fabrics of our dominant culture. Although still one of the whitest states in the country, with a very high rate of poverty and food insecurity among white identified people, the rate of hunger is much higher in BIPOC communities. Our City and many across Maine deal with specific and debilitating issues such as poor quality, unsafe housing that include risks for lead poisoning; Lewiston has one of the highest rates of lead poisoning in the state. In 2019 our food pantry transformed itself into a model that functions more like a store where guests can "shop" the food they need on a weekly basis. This was a response to the recognition that we needed to be able to provide a modicum of "food stability" for people because everything else in their life was so unstable. But food pantries like ours should not be a solution. We were designed to provide emergency relief but have since had to transform because other systems that should be supporting families and individuals have failed. There is little to nothing that individuals and family units can do to alleviate the burden from all these flawed structures to create food stability and greater security. Thus, it is the structures that need to be re-envisioned, deconstructed and rebuilt. Starting with the foundational values that allow unchecked amounts of wealth to sit with a very few people while others work with a wage that does not create a basic livelihood. The recommendations being put forth by the Advisory Group are some of the first to truly look at the root causes of hunger and provide tangible solutions. I implore you to adopt them and start us down one of the surest paths to actually alleviating hunger.