

January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry:

My name is Jim Devine and I’m an advocate with Homeless Voices for Justice, a grassroots organization that works for social change with, and on behalf of, people experiencing homelessness. We seek to empower people struggling with homelessness and poverty whose perspectives are often excluded from the development of policies and programs that impact their social and economic well-being. We are writing to support the passage of LD 174.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Maine was overdue in addressing the sustainability and equitability of its food systems. As the pandemic continues its surge, we believe that it is past time to prioritize these issues with a robust solution like [the one offered by the Advisory Group](#). We know that [“Hunger is now on the rise by as much as 25 percent. 215,000 Mainers are facing hunger, including 60,000 children ... we are on track to distribute 31 million meals this year – yet this is only 75 percent of the 40 million meals we project are needed.”](#) The development of the capacity needed to address food insecurity in the state cannot be done regionally and requires a comprehensive solution that not only addresses immediate needs but root causes. Mainers have already shown an incredible appetite to positively change our food systems as demonstrated by the recent passage of the constitutional amendment guarantees a [“right to food”](#).

Hunger and food access are key components of housing insecurity and the Advisory Group’s recommendations highlight housing as a key strategic axis to address hunger. We know there is not a one-size-fits-all solution that can just address at-risk Mainers but bills like this one speak to not just the logistics of food but to the unequal and inequitable systems that impact people in need, especially children and vulnerable adults. We agree with the Advisory Group’s recommendations that an overhaul of how we study, speak about, and fund food systems across the state are needed to improve access for the entire state. Ensuring comprehensive state support will make a dramatic impact on the day-to-day life of unhoused Mainers. The Advisory Group has defined clear needs and targets which we believe must be acted on immediately to minimize the impact of growing homelessness and housing insecurity in Maine. [Nationally, Build Back Better has made food insecurity a top priority](#), and in Maine LD 221 has highlighted the [state’s commitment to addressing food insecurity](#) for school children.

Many things can lead to someone experiencing hunger, such as homelessness, a lack of livable wages, economic insecurity, and more. In Homeless Voices for Justice, we advocate on behalf of people who may not know where their next meal is coming from, whether it be for themselves or their families. In a state where there is more than enough food to feed people, no one should be going hungry. For this reason, we ask that you urgently pass LD 174. Thank you for your time.