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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

IN SUPPORT OF LD 174

An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Ending Hunger by 2030 Advisory Group

January 18, 2022

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the committee, my name is Craig Lapine, and I am a Special Assistant to the Commissioner at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF). I am speaking on behalf of the Department in favor of LD 174, An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Ending Hunger by 2030 Advisory Group. We thank Rep. Pluecker for sponsoring this bill.

This bill has its origins in the 129th Legislature and LD 1159, “Resolve to End Hunger in Maine by 2030.” That resolve committed Maine to end hunger by 2030, and it charged DACF with developing the strategic plan that would lead us to that goal.

The plan was created throughout multiple phases, and in total more than 200 people, including those with lived experience of hunger and food insecurity, who offered their best thinking on what drives hunger in Maine, and what actions—by government, but also nonprofits, private-sector businesses, educational institutions, and individuals—would once and for all uproot poverty and the corrosive effects of food insecurity. From taking a “root causes” approach, what we learned is contained in the document you have now received: “Everyone at the Table: Maine’s Plan to End Hunger by 2030.” A professionally designed and laid-out plan which is easier to navigate is forthcoming. We hoped to have it sooner, but it turns out everything takes a little longer in a pandemic.

What was brought home to me throughout this process is the staggering level of human suffering lurking in Maine’s hunger statistics. When we note, as the plan does, that one-in-eight Mainers and one-in-five Maine children are hungry or at risk for hunger, what that means is that each day thousands of children in every school district in the state come to class too hungry to learn. Thousands of workers are too economically insecure to thrive, and thousands of Maine people are contending with entirely preventable ill-health. It means that every time we go to a grocery store or a school event, each of us—whether we recognize or not—is interacting with people who are struggling. We are proud Maine committed to end hunger, as we acknowledge that it impacts virtually every community in our state.

It also bears repeating that hunger’s human toll has an economic impact Maine can ill afford. Each year we incur \$709 million in hunger-related costs from lost productivity, increased need

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for special education services, elevated healthcare costs, and more. That's on top of the \$370 million expressly dedicated to feeding people. We believe it would take far less than that \$1 billion we spend now to end hunger versus just treating it. And we'd open a wellspring of human and economic potential.

As "Everyone at the Table" was developed by taking a "root cause" approach, the collection of goals and strategies therein are interdisciplinary in nature, and many don't have to do directly with food. Something else to note as you dig into the plan's goals and strategies is that much of what it proposes is not new work, but rather a coordination and strengthening among ongoing efforts. For example, the plan calls for ending hunger work to align with efforts around the State's ten-year economic development plan, DOT's statewide strategic transit plan, the goals of the Children's Cabinet, and more.

For that reason, we believe that ongoing coordination of the implementation of this plan should be embedded in an agency designed for interdepartmental and cross-cutting collaborations, and the Governor's Office of Policy, Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) is well positioned to be that agency if funds were to be made available for implementation.

With that said, DACF anticipates staying highly engaged with this initiative, and in particular, working in concert with GOPIF to meet the goals of this plan that are food-related, such as is articulated in Goal B, Strategy 4 to *improve nutrition security by supporting and sustaining a diverse, local, and robust food supply system in Maine*, as well as to continue to manage *the Maine Ending Hunger (VISTA) Corps to spur and coordinate the regional implementation of Ending Hunger 2030 initiatives and strategies*, as described in Goal A, Strategy 2.

We are confident that GOPIF is the appropriate office to implement coordination of this important work. Thank you for this opportunity to describe the efforts that have delivered a plan to end hunger in Maine by 2030. I'm happy to answer any questions now or at the work session.