

Testimony of the
Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations

In Support of LD 174
An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Ending Hunger by 2030 Advisory Group

Tuesday, January 18, 2022

Good morning, Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Whitney Parrish, and I am the acting executive director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations (“Permanent Commission”). I am honored to offer testimony in support of LD 174, “An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Ending Hunger by 2030 Advisory Group.”

The Permanent Commission is an independent entity with a mission to examine the racial disparities across Maine, and to work toward improving the status and outcomes for currently and historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous, and tribal populations. Further, the Permanent Commission is empowered by state law to advise and consult all three branches of government.

We extend deep gratitude to Representative Pluecker for introducing this bill, to Senator Hickman for introducing the legislation that initiated this process, and to everyone who participated in the Advisory Group’s preparation of this report. I speak for the full Commission when I say I long for Commissioner dee Clarke to be here in my stead. Our beloved Commissioner dee Clarke was a vitally instrumental part of that process before her passing. We acknowledge the importance of her powerful, inimitable voice—a voice that worked tirelessly to ensure that people who have struggled with hunger are not just at the table, but leading efforts like this to end it.

This bill will implement the recommendations in “Everyone at the Table: Maine’s Plan to End Hunger by 2030.” The report was generated by bringing together people from all over Maine: some working to end hunger and poverty, some having lived through the experiences of hunger and poverty, and some living and surviving those experiences today—in fact, in speaking to the true strength of the report and recommendations, many individuals who contributed straddle these areas of experience and expertise. At the Permanent Commission, we believe true expertise lies in direct experience.

The Permanent Commission wholeheartedly supports the report’s focus on hunger and poverty as a structural issue, rather than a result of individual choices. No individual choice could ever outweigh the gravity of structural inequities and root causes that drive issues of hunger, poverty, racism, and other factors that harm and diminish quality of life for individuals, families, and communities. As well, racism in itself is a driver. As others here have said, low wages, unemployment, education, health care, and so many other factors are all root causes that

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exacerbate hunger, and we cannot ignore that disproportionate impact on some groups as we seek to find solutions for all. Health and food justice *is*, in fact, racial justice. There is a collective responsibility to ending hunger and addressing underlying root causes that hurt us all, and we must change the narrative around hunger in order to end it. We believe the work done by the End Hunger by 2030 work group begins to do just this.

Whether we're Black, white, brown, Indigenous or newcomer, every Mainer deserves healthy food and the full opportunity to succeed. If the effort to end hunger in Maine succeeds, we can help everyone, including families in rural Maine, who are less likely to have enough to eat; and Indigenous and African American and Black families who struggle with food insecurity *at least* double the rate of their white counterparts. Together, we can rewrite the rules to make Maine a place where, whatever your zip code, the color of your skin, or the contents of your wallet, we could know that our families will be ok, that we will have food on our tables and nutrition to help us, and our communities, thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this vital issue. We respectfully urge you to support LD 174. I am happy to answer questions from the committee, or provide additional information if desired.