

Members of the Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee,

I am submitting testimony in support of LD 568, “An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.” I am a board member and vendor at the Houlton Community Market and have been involved in the market since it began in 2009. In 2016, with grant funding through the Maine Federation of Farmers Markets (MFFM), Houlton Community Market began accepting SNAP benefits and participating in a corresponding grant program that offered vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables, known as Maine Harvest Bucks (MHB). Since then, the market has expanded its customer base within the community and both programs grow each year. For a general comparison, in 2019 Houlton Community Market had \$2,557 in SNAP sales and \$2,279 MHB vouchers redeemed. 2022 saw \$6,049 in SNAP sales and \$4,465 vouchers redeemed. This valuable program not only provides fresh and local produce to those members of our community who are in need but also supports the market gardeners and bakers at the market, strengthening the market as a whole. MFFM has been supportive of this program in Houlton and has been creative in finding ways to assist the market in paying for a staffed information booth, which provides a central location for any customer to go to for information or card processing. Houlton Community Market also combines nutrition education activities that are targeted to children, establishing a connection between farmers markets and fresh produce from an early age. More importantly, going to a farmers market tends to be a family affair and relationships are built between vendor and customer - whether that is a senior, young parent or child.

Past surveys at Houlton Community Market have indicated SNAP shoppers who would not be able to purchase at the farmers market, or would have to reduce those purchases, without SNAP and MHB programs. As a vendor who is at the Houlton Community Market each Saturday during the summer and fall months, I’ve gotten to know many of our SNAP customers and know that each of their stories are different. Many families who began coming to market using their SNAP benefits are now in a position that they are no longer in the program while others, many of them seniors, rely on the program each year. I cannot stress how valuable the SNAP and MHB programs are to Houlton Community Market and the Southern Aroostook community, and it is my hope that the committee will recommend continuous funding. In a time of division over so many issues, this is a program that really brings a community together with one thing in common: spending a Saturday morning shopping at the local farmers market.

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