



**Testimony of Ashley Edmondson, Let's Go!, a program of MaineHealth
In Support of LD 961**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Ashley Edmondson. I am a resident of Portland and a Program Manager with Let's Go!, a statewide obesity prevention initiative. Let's Go! works with schools and school nutrition programs across our state to promote healthy eating and physical activity, using evidence-based strategies to impact environmental and policy change.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 961. I want to thank Representative Millett and the bill cosponsors for their commitment to children's health.

As a busy working mother of two young children, I know how complicated it can be to find resources necessary for a family to stay happy and healthy. Being able to access an important resource like a school meal benefit application electronically would make applying faster and easier for many Maine families. I personally find it challenging to find time to get to the post office or my children's school to drop off paperwork and would much prefer submitting on my own time whether it's 10pm at night or 5 am in the morning.

As a public health professional, working for Let's Go!, I recognize the importance of school meals and the health benefits they provide for children across Maine. The USDA requires paper school meal applications to be distributed to families, however they are often not completed or returned to schools for a variety of reasons. As a result, Let's Go! and other partner organizations get requests from school districts across the state for help in outreach to families to encourage them to return school meal applications. This is a challenge year after year, as currently, each school district has their own system of distributing and collecting school meal benefit applications; some only use paper, while others have their own unique online process. Creating a statewide online option would increase the application return rate and expand access to school meals. This online option would also make it easier for community organizations to share resources with Maine families, ensuring all children have access to school meals and Maine school districts receive much needed federal funding. In this digital age when nearly everything is done online, including this testimony/public comment, something as important to a child's health and wellbeing, as a school meal should be easily accessible.

In closing, I urge the committee to take this important step for Maine students and families. Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Ashley Edmondson, Program Manager, Let's Go!