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Testimony of Chris Hastedt, Maine Equal Justice in Support of LD 961, An Act to Provide Equity in Access to Applications for the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program

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Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Chris Hastedt and I am the Senior Policy Advisor at Maine Equal Justice. Maine Equal Justice is a nonprofit legal aid provider working with and for people with low income to increase economic security, opportunity and equity for Maine people. I am speaking today in support of LD 961, An Act to Provide Equity in Access to Applications for the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

In my testimony today, I will speak to why Maine Equal Justice supports this bill, and at the same time, will also encourage the committee to think about this bill in a larger context – as part of an even broader effort to modernize and improve our current safety net and work support programs. LD 961 would help move us in that direction, towards a safety net that is simple and easy to use, well-coordinated, human-centered, and efficient. In an age when Americans increasingly communicate, bank, read, shop and learn on the web, there is a reasonable expectation that public services should be available online as well. Nutrition benefits like school meals are no exception to this expectation.

What LD 961 Does

LD 961 requires the online application for free or reduced-price meals to be made available on the Department of Education's (DOE's) publicly accessible website, while also allowing public schools to make the application available on the school's website. It recognizes the importance of providing an online application in multiple languages. It requires all public schools to continue to distribute the paper applications (as required by federal law), and requires that the data submitted through the online applications not be visible to DOE.

Why Maine Equal Justice Supports LD 961

At Maine Equal Justice, we work closely with Mainers with low income who are struggling to make ends meet. We hear from clients regularly about the challenges they face trying to access

safety net and work support programs for themselves and their families from a delivery system that is siloed, antiquated, irrational, and inefficient. While these supports are an essential lifeline for many Mainers, they aren't reaching many of those who need them most. The same is true for school meals. Instead of transferring paper applications through many hands from classrooms to lunchboxes and back again, a well-designed online application can streamline and simplify the application process for busy families and administrators alike. Making this application process more accessible will yield higher participation rates in school meals programs and mean that more Maine children will have a nutritious meal to rely on.

LD 961 is an important step in the right direction

What LD 961 provides is the opportunity to take steps now in the direction of this broader goal. At a time when 30% of Mainers are reporting difficulty covering usual household expenses¹, it is critical that we are thinking about how we can better connect Mainers to the supports they need. While broad-based categorical eligibility enables low-income children in households that receive SNAP or TANF to be automatically eligible for free school meals (administered by DOE) without having to complete a separate application, there is further opportunity to improve coordination and accessibility. Currently, school meal applications are not uniformly available online throughout the state. This bill would improve access by creating a statewide online application in a centralized place, as well as improving access to the program for non-English speakers, which is a critical component of making safety net programs human centered and equitable.

Recommended amendment to improve equity and accessibility

20-A MRSA §6601-A is amended at lines 12 and 13 of LD 961 to read: “The department shall *endeavor* to provide the Internet-based application in various languages reflecting the student population of public schools in the State” (Emphasis added). In order to be consistent with federal law and guidance from the United States Department of Agriculture we ask you to substitute the following language in its place: “The internet-based application shall be available in an understandable and uniform format and, to the maximum extent practicable, in a language that parents and legal guardians can understand.” (42 USC §1758(b)). USDA guidance released in 2014 requires state agencies and schools that receive federal funding to ensure language is not a barrier to receiving school meal benefits. They are required to take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access for individuals with limited English proficiency to the information and services they provide. (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/meaningful-access-persons-lep-school-meal-guidance-and-gas>). This requirement is a higher standard than that implied by the word “endeavor” which simply means “to attempt”. Fortunately, we understand that the contractor that the Department currently uses to implement the existing requirement at §6601-A, has the capability to provide application information in multiple languages, thus this change should be easily accommodated.

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>

Conclusion

While COVID-19 has exposed the gaps and inadequacies in our safety net, it has also shown the benefits of enacting flexibilities that make it easier for people to get the support they need. We can use what we've learned to make our safety net programs work better for the people they serve both now and into the future. This bill would move us towards that goal, and have a meaningful impact on hunger in our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this bill.