



Preble Street

Turning Hunger and Homelessness into Opportunity and Hope

April 26th, 2021

Florence House

Huston Commons

Logan Place

Anti-Trafficking Services

Veterans Housing Services

Rapid Re-Housing

Emergency Food Programs

Teen Center

Joe Kreisler Teen Shelter

First Place

Street Outreach Collaborative

Advocacy

Maine Hunger Initiative

Health Services

MMC-Preble Street

Learning Collaborative

Good morning Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Izzy Ostrowski, and I'm the Maine Hunger Initiative Social Change Advocate at Preble Street, a human services anti-poverty agency with over a dozen programs and services provided across the state. Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 961: An Act To Provide Equity in Access to Applications for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

The Preble Street Maine Hunger Initiative addresses critical food needs by developing and advocating for solutions to hunger. This includes supporting increased access to USDA Federal Nutrition Programs such as School Breakfast and Lunch in order to reduce childhood hunger in our state. Maine is currently facing a hunger crisis and has a significantly higher rate of hunger than the national average. A report titled "[The State of Poverty in Maine, 2021](#)"* stated that 1 in 8 adults, including 1 in 5 children, experience food insecurity yearly in Maine. That is over 47,000 children unable to get enough healthy food on a day-to-day basis.

This bill is critical in that it would create a statewide school meal benefit online application available on the Department of Education's (DOE's) website. Ensuring that all families have access to an online application and prioritizing accessibility further strengthens the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and the efforts to make sure all Maine students are well nourished and ready to learn. We know hungry children can find it hard to focus and perform in the classroom and research shows that eating school meals improve not only a student's diet but also their behavior and achievement. In addition to helping meet children's immediate needs, the school meal program yields important long-term benefits. Nourishing meals at school help children avoid the risk of chronic health and developmental difficulties, which can have lasting negative consequences.

Providing an online school meal benefit application for families is a much-needed step in increasing accessibility. It is also critical that online applications are provided in multiple languages to ensure that immigrant families and undocumented families are able to receive benefits. With the knowledge that Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color experience higher rates of food insecurity and hunger in Maine, it is essential that providing an online application be done equitably and with intent.

An online application saves time, streamlines program operations, and strengthens program integrity. It also provides for better access, less confusion, more privacy, more accurate results, and better integration with existing systems for data matching. By making the application process more streamlined and accessible, parents are more likely to fill out the application in a timely manner, saving school staff the effort of chasing down forms later. This is currently a large concern considering that, earlier this school year, 17,000

applications were not returned by previously eligible students. A well-designed online application helps school districts increase participation in school meal programs and simplifies the application process for food service staff and families alike.

This is a straightforward, achievable goal for our state and will help reduce hunger in Maine schools. For this reason, Preble Street asks you to vote in favor of LD 961 and help support Maine children's health and academic success by making it easier for families to apply for school meal benefits. Thank you for your time.

*[“The State of Poverty in Maine, 2021”](https://maineequaljustice.org/site/assets/files/2284/stateofpovertyinmaine8_5x11_1-4-21.pdf) Prepared by Maine Equal Justice https://maineequaljustice.org/site/assets/files/2284/stateofpovertyinmaine8_5x11_1-4-21.pdf

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