

Rebekah Lane
St. George

Testimony of Rebekah Lane, Lived Experience Advocate

In Support of LD 1679 An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Rebekah Lane. I am a resident of St. George and a Lived Experience Advocate

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD:1679 An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

As a single parent and recipient of SNAP benefits, I automatically qualified for the Free and Reduced Lunch program for both of my children. I utilized this program for 5 years, bypassing the lengthy application, I simply gave my SNAP number, signed my name and returned the paperwork each year to requalify. Little did I know during that time that the program would become not just needed, but vital for my children. Just over two years ago I suddenly became sick. I went from a full time college student, involved parent, substitute teacher, and leader of the PTA, to suddenly sleeping 20+ hours a day, unable to hold my head up for more than 10-15 minutes. I conserved every bit of energy to use while my children were home, to keep them safe. I went from cooking a meal from scratch almost every night to teaching my children how to cook ramen, hot pockets, or easy mac. Slowly walking my five year old daughter and ten year old son through how to use the microwave, dragging myself the 15 feet from the couch to the kitchen to transfer the hot food to a plate before finding myself again profoundly fatigued, to the point of constant pain. Not only were these foods that they could prepare themselves lacking nutrition, they were more expensive than the meal ingredients I usually purchased. The strawberries, apples, sugar snap peas, carrots, cucumbers, and raspberries my children adored were gone from our house. I wasn't feeding my children any longer, I was filling their bellies with empty calories to get them to their next meal at school. As some of you may know, a parent/guardian can apply for the Free and Reduced meal program at any time throughout the school year.. While this is helpful to those who find their income changing suddenly, I strongly believe I wouldn't have been able to navigate the process of filling out the full application given my health at the time I became sick. My children would have accumulated a very large bill eating both breakfast and lunch five days a week for the months on end that I was sick. The idea of how this would have affected my children, especially my oldest, was, and still is, terrifying to think about. During my time as a substitute at the same school my children attended, I watched older children choose not to eat instead of adding to a food bill they knew was accumulating. Often the kids would open the letters meant for their parents, letters that gave a dollar amount of what was owed for the meals already eaten, and feel fear at the prospect of adding to the financial burden. My son, Erik, would have been one of those children. He would have worried silently about what him eating would cost me and our household. He would have given up a basic necessity, food, out of fear, solely due to cost. As parents, we like to think we shield our children from these realities, but kids are aware far beyond our expectations.

My experience with the nutrition programs extend beyond the St. George School, a school that doesn't qualify for the Community Eligibility Provision. I worked as an education technician in school that qualified for that program and none of the students knew who "qualified" financially for free lunch, far more students participated in the hot lunch program on a daily basis, with no fear or anxiety of how their family would pay for them to eat. No child should fear eating because of the financial burden of that food, universal meals for all children will help eliminate that fear.

Thank you for taking your time to consider this bill and the possibility it has to eliminate the burden of fear of eating from children in our state. I am happy to answer any questions you have.

Rebekah Lane