



# Preble Street

*Turning Hunger and Homelessness into Opportunity and Hope*

May 19<sup>th</sup>, 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 1679: An Act to Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals.

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<sup>1</sup>. That is over 47,000 children unable to get enough healthy food on a day-to-day basis.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated issues of homelessness, housing insecurity, and food insecurity for individuals and families. In our programs, we've seen a stark increase of people accessing emergency shelter, prepared meals, and food from our food pantry. Preble Street served one million meals in 2020- a massive increase from the yearly average of 625,000 meals served in years prior. Every day, Preble Street volunteers deliver hundreds of prepared meals to people staying in motels in the Greater Portland area. During the pandemic and through General Assistance, these motels have served as emergency shelter for hundreds of individuals and families. During a visit to one of the motels, I arrived just as a school bus was pulling up outside of the building. As I watched, nearly half of the children exited the bus, met their parent or guardian who was waiting for them, or went directly into the motel. I spoke to a woman who told me that she and her two young children have been staying in one of the motels for almost the entirety of the pandemic. For over 365 days, this mom has utilized the daily prepared meals to feed herself and her growing children, but that isn't enough.

Mark R. Swann  
 Executive Director

This is the reality for so many children in Maine- enduring the stress and trauma of homelessness at such a young age and knowing that access to healthy food is not always guaranteed. The current policy for school meals, where some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for those students that rely on school meals for their basic needs, and a barrier for those students who are not eligible but are still experiencing food insecurity.

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. With the knowledge that Black children, Indigenous children, and children of color face higher rates of hunger and food insecurity in Maine, this legislation is needed to further racial equity in our state.

As I write to you today, there are children wondering where their next meal will come from. To place such a burden on a child is the inexcusable reality that we currently live in. However, there is an opportunity to change this reality, and LD 1679 could create a pathway for all Maine children to thrive and succeed. Maine has the opportunity to lead the way in the fight against hunger and food insecurity by supporting this legislation which would ensure that children have full access to healthy meals at school. For this reason, Preble Street asks you to vote in support of LD 1679 and prioritize the well-being of some of the most vulnerable members of our communities. Thank you for your time.