



March 22, 2023

Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine testimony to the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs in support of LD 921, An Act to Allow the Local Foods Fund for Public Schools to be Used for Processed and Value-Added Maine Food Products

To Chairperson Rafferty, Chairperson Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Rebekah Lane and I am the Community Organizer for Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine. I am here today to express our support, and ask for your support, of LD 921, An Act to Allow the Local Foods Fund for Public Schools to be Used for Processed and Value-Added Maine Food Products.

The mission of Good Shepherd Food Bank is to eliminate hunger in Maine by improving access to nutritious food for people in need, building strong community partnerships, and mobilizing the public in the fight to end hunger. Good Shepherd Food Bank works in partnership with nearly 600 organizations to help distribute food to community members in need. Our network of partner agencies includes food pantries, meal sites, senior centers, school programs, and healthcare facilities. In our work centering equity, we are increasingly working with communities of color to address food security in a culturally responsive way.

We believe there is a solution to the problem of hunger in Maine. Working in partnership with the state legislature we can and will help reduce the impact of hunger in our state and make Maine a stronger, better place to work and live.

Improving the Local Foods Fund by allowing it to be utilized for processed and value added Maine food products will support both the local economy and student access to local nutritious foods. The first expansion of the Local Produce Fund to the Local Foods fund saw over a threefold increase in utilization by school districts, there are still only one-third of Maine school districts utilizing the fund.

Exposure to local foods and products is shown to not only increase willingness among children to try new foods, but it also increases the preference for fruit and vegetables, especially among students who currently have the lowest intake prior to the exposure. With access to local food showing a 33% or more increase in students eating fruits and vegetables.

As a child, the longest lunch lines I ever experienced were on days where the word "Maine" was included before an item on the menu. My time as an educator, and as a parent, have allowed me to witness that same reaction to local food again and again over the last 20 years. While one could say it is only the novelty of local food causing the increased interest, I have been lucky to see first-hand how that interest doesn't wain even when local food is an option daily.

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For the students, that interest doesn't end with the processing of those local items, in fact I would say it increases. Knowing that the bread they are eating is from wheat grown in their community, milled in their community, and baked in their community not only increases interest in eating the bread, but also awareness of the process of how food is made in general. Salsa no longer comes from a jar in the grocery store, but from tomatoes, onions, and cilantro they have watched grow.

Children, and adults alike, don't gravitate to local food for the novelty, but because it tastes better and makes their bodies feel better thanks to increased nutritional value. That value doesn't go away when the fish is breaded or the tomatoes heated and crushed into marinara. Changing the definition of processed food that can be accepted for reimbursement through the fund increases the nutritional and food security for children, and opens the institutional market for many of Maine's small business producers.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.

Sincerely,

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