



**Testimony of Don Harden on Behalf of
The Maine Council on Aging
To Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human
Services**

**In Favor of LD 485 - An Act To Continue Funding
for Home-delivered Meals for Homebound Seniors
and To Address Growing Demand**

Submitted in Person on March 17, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Don Harden and I'm the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors of the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA). The MCOA is a broad, multidisciplinary network of more than 100 organizations, businesses and older community members working to ensure we can all live healthy, engaged and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age at home and in community settings. I am testifying in favor of LD 485.

We witnessed so many heroic and inspiring acts over the last year by so many Mainers. However, there can be no doubt that the actions of Maine's area agencies on aging (AAAs) to more than double the production and delivery of meals to older residents sheltering in place during the pandemic is one of the brightest spots. Thankfully, the federal government stepped up during this time, ensuring that Maine had temporary funding to support this effort, as well as providing broad flexibility in who could be served.

As Dr. Nirav Shah has said so often during the pandemic, "When you go looking for things, you find them." For the first time, we went actively looking for older people who needed to receive home delivered meals during the pandemic, and we found them. What we didn't expect was that nearly two-thirds of the new Meals on Wheels recipients who signed up during the pandemic would actually qualify for the program into the future. While it is good that older home-bound people who need meals are getting them, this increased permanent demand, coupled with an already underfunded program, means we must find additional funding if we are going to continue to support the current demand for this cost-effective program that yields big returns.

Meals on Wheels (MOW) is a targeted intervention that is only available to people 60 years of age or older, who are homebound and unable to leave their house without assistance, unable to prepare a meal and have no one available to prepare a meal. When funds are available, the program also serves disabled adults under 60 who meet the other requirements.

People who meet this criteria don't have family who can shop and cook for them. They aren't able to prepare food on their own, even if food is provided from a food pantry. While neighbors

and community members might be able to provide a meal from time-to-time or even weekly, people who qualify for MOW need daily, nutritious meals in order to survive. While the federal government does not permit the program to be means-tested, most MOW recipients are very low income people who could not otherwise afford to pay for such a service.

The annual per-person cost for this program is stunningly low, about \$750, and yields a correspondingly impressive return on investment. This single intervention of home delivered meals has been demonstrated to aid in wound healing, decrease loneliness, reduce avoidable hospital readmissions, and delay entry into facility-based care for more than two years.

For four years, the MCOA has been asking the Legislature for additional funding for the MOW program, because, each year, we've seen increasing demand, growing waitlists, and no corresponding increase in funding. Two years ago, the legislature approved one-time funding of \$1.5 million (\$750,000 per year) to address the waitlist at that time. That funding did the trick...almost. By the start of 2020, and before the pandemic hit, a new waitlist had started to grow again, even with this additional funding. That funding ends on June 30th. Thus, even if the pandemic had not occurred, we would be standing here today asking you to continue the one-time appropriation of \$750,000 per year into the structural biennial budget.

However, now we're standing before you to say we must double this amount in order to meet the newly discovered increased and permanent demand we've found during the pandemic. We must do this because we cannot tell thousands of older home-bound people who are currently getting home delivered meals, and who qualify for them, that they will no longer be receiving them.

We know this is a confusing time. New temporary funding has just been approved to support home delivered meals as part of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). We do not know how much funding will flow to Maine and how long that funding will last. But here's what we do know:

- The \$1.5 million appropriated to reduce a waitlist 2 years ago ends June 30th;
- There was a waitlist growing before the pandemic;
- Thousands more older people now qualify and are receiving MOW;
- Even with CARES Act funding, which must be spent by September 30th, some AAAs have started waitlists again;
- Funding made available through ARPA will be temporary and will not meet the on-going and growing demands for this program through this biennium

We urge you to take action despite this confusion and our challenging budget process. We cannot wait until we run out of money and have to start eliminating people from the program to resolve the problem; this scenario puts thousands of older Mainers at risk, particularly if the timing doesn't adhere to a legislative session. For these reasons, we urge you to take action now.

Thank you.