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March 17, 2021

Testimony of Christine Hastedt, Maine Equal Justice in *support* of LD 727, Resolve, To Ensure the Health and Wellness of Older Residents of the State

Good afternoon Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Chris Hastedt and I am the Senior Policy Advisor at Maine Equal Justice. We are a civil legal services organization working with and for people with low income to improve the economic security and wellbeing of Maine people through policy change, education and legal representation. I am testifying today in support of LD 727 which would eliminate the SNAP asset test for families in which at least one member is 60 years of age or older.

As many of you know, SNAP, or the Food Supplement Program as it is called in Maine, is the nation's most important anti-hunger program, improving health outcomes and bolstering food security for the nation's most vulnerable populations. Last month, approximately 165,000 Mainers—one in eight—received nutrition assistance from the SNAP program, generating \$35Mⁱ in revenue for Maine's 1,400 participating retailersⁱⁱ.

This program is particularly vital in Maine as the most recent USDA study found that Maine has the highest rate of "very low security" in the nation. That means that households experience reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns because of limited dollars to buy food. And that is why this legislation is so important.

Here is just a quick history of this issue. This is actually a state option—there is no need for a federal waiver to eliminate the asset test for any or all SNAP participants as the bill suggests. As soon as this federal option became available Maine enacted a law eliminating the asset test for all households with minor children—that is the group for whom this option was first available in the late 1990's. Following that, as federal law allowed, the asset test was eliminated by *rule* for all remaining SNAP participants. Unfortunately, that rule was changed in 2016 to restore an asset test for everyone but families with children who were protected by statute. At that time the news media estimated that approximately 8,000 people would lose benefits as a result of

this change. I won't forget a conversation that I had at that time with a woman in her 70's who owned her own house and had a small amount of savings set aside for the new roof and other repairs that she knew would be needed to keep her home habitable. The security that that small amount of savings gave her, and her strong desire to keep her home habitable so she could stay there, cost her the additional food she needed each month.

Finally, I'd like to take a minute to put this issue in a national context. More than two-thirds of all states and territories—including all other New England states—have *no asset test at all* in their SNAP programs.ⁱⁱⁱ Changing this policy will not make Maine an outlier, in fact, it will bring us into the mainstream. It is also important to note that *none* of the states without an asset test single out certain groups for this option.^{iv} They do not apply an asset test to any SNAP participant regardless of age, disability or other demographic. In other words, these states eliminate the asset test across the board for all SNAP participants. That is what we ask you to amend this bill to do. As important as it is to make sure that older Mainers have access to adequate nutrition, it is also important to provide that same help to people with disabilities, laid off mill workers, people who work in low wage jobs and others in need. Hunger is hunger and it hurts whoever you are.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony supporting this legislation today. We strongly urge you to vote "ought to pass" with the amendment that we suggest on LD 727 to bring down Maine's high rate of food insecurity, and make sure all low-income Mainers have enough to eat.

ⁱ <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/Geographic%20Report%20for%20February.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cbpp.org/snap-is-an-important-public-private-partnership#Maine>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42054.pdf>

^{iv} *ibid*

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