

Testimony in Support of LD 421

February 25, 2019

Senator Gratwick, Representative Hymanson, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Ronald Jarrett, and I am the Director of Public Policy & Advocacy at United Way of Greater Portland (UWGP). I am here today, on behalf of UWGP, to testify in support of LD 421, “Resolve, To Amend the State Plan Regarding the Processing of Vouchers under the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children by Farmers' Markets.”

Thrive2027 is our community’s commitment to make Cumberland County stronger for everyone who calls it home. Spearheaded by UWGP, more than 225 business, non-profit, public, and community organizations have endorsed three 10-year goals that promise measurable and meaningful change in Greater Portland. These three goals are:

- Goal 1: More children have a strong start in school so that they are reading at grade level by the end of third grade. By 2027, we aim to have 70% of children reading at grade level by the end of third grade; currently, only 56% of Cumberland County children read proficiently at the end of third grade.
- Goal 2: More people have the education and employment opportunities they need to be able to live and work in Greater Portland. By 2027, we aim to have 70% of households paying less than 30% of their income on housing; currently, only 15% of low-income households in Cumberland County pay less than 30% of their income on housing.
- Goal 3: More of our neighbors live longer, healthier lives. By 2027, we are aiming for a 10% reduction in preventable premature deaths.

Access to healthy food during the first five years of life plays a critical role in ensuring all three goals are achieved. An August 2018 report titled, “Food Fuels Learning: A Portland Public Schools Food Security Needs Assessment,” stated on page 16 the following:

“Hunger makes it difficult to concentrate, learn, and behave well in the school environment. Food insecure students have been found to receive lower grades and report higher absences, leading to increased likelihood of negative repercussions, including poor academic outcomes (Alaimo, K., Olson, C. M., & Frongillo, E. A., 2001; Faught, E. L., Williams, P. L., Willows, N. D., Asbridge, M., & Veugelers, P. J., 2017). Alaimo et al. (2001) found that food insecure students were several times more likely to be suspended or to repeat a grade than their food secure peers. Lack of academic success can result in fewer opportunities, perpetuating food insecurity and poverty in succeeding generations (Faught et al., 2017). Food insecurity also influences children’s psychosocial development. Many of the students experiencing food insecurity have more behavioral and emotional issues than their peers, including trouble making friends and maintaining self-control in classrooms, and were much more likely to have consulted a psychologist (Alaimo et al., 2001; Faught et al., 2017; Kimbro & Denney, 2015). These difficulties further affect the children’s academic performance.”ⁱ

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a federal assistance program of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for healthcare and nutrition of low-income pregnant women,

breastfeeding women, and children under the age of five. Young children accessing healthy food through WIC experience improved dietary outcomes, including increased average intakes of iron, vitamin C, thiamin, niacin, vitamin B6, and increased overall nutrient density of the diet.ⁱⁱ As of October 2018, there are 14,233 Maine infants, toddlers, and Kindergarteners receiving WICⁱⁱⁱ.

LD 421 seeks to ensure that the nearly 4,000 Maine mothers currently participating in WIC,^{iv} have an easier time securing fresh fruits and vegetables for their young children. As one parent described to me, "...few things are more frustrating than getting to the Farmers' Market and the one WIC Farmer is out of produce. Even though there are other farmers there with produce, you can't use your WIC coupon with them..." Passage of LD 421 is the first step in fixing this problem.

The passage of LD 421 and the federal government's approval of the subsequent waiver proposal will ensure that struggling parents are not blocked from using their WIC coupon to purchase fresh produce from all available farmers because the Farmers' Market itself will handle the WIC transaction directly, much like how SNAP payments are currently handled. Caitlin Jordan, manager of both South Portland and Scarborough Farmers' Markets, shared with me that, "...the passing of this bill is a great step to allow WIC to be treated like SNAP..."

Not only will children benefit, but farmers will too. By authorizing Farmers' Markets to accept WIC coupons on their behalf, smaller farms and farms run by folks experiencing cultural and/or language challenges, will be free to focus on growing healthy food and spend less time dealing with training and administrative tasks.^v Passage of this bill and receipt of a federal waiver would allow Maine to join the other 35 WIC participating states and territories that list Farmers' Markets as vendors in addition to individual farmers and farm stands.^{vi}

For these reasons, we respectfully encourage you to support expanding healthy food options for our most vulnerable young children and their mothers.

Thank you for your leadership and service.

ⁱ <http://www.cfoodsecurity.org/portland-public-schools-food-security-task-force.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/about-wic-how-wic-helps#Improved%20Diet%20and%20Diet-Related%20Outcomes>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>

^{iv} <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>

^v <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/health-equity/wic/farmer/index.shtml>

^{vi} <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/fmnp/FMNP-FY-2017-Profile.pdf>