



Testimony in Support of S.678/H.1173, An Act Improving Public Health Through a Common Application for Core Food, Health and Safety-net Programs (Sen. DiDomenico & Rep. Livingston)

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S.678/H.1173, An Act Improving Public Health Through a Common Application for Core Food, Health and Safety-net Programs. My name is Erin McAleer and I am the President of Project Bread.

Project Bread is a statewide anti-hunger organization committed to preventing and ending hunger in Massachusetts by providing access to affordable, healthy food for the 1 in 10 individuals – and 1 in 8 children – facing food insecurity in our state today. Food is the most basic of human needs, and research has shown time and time again the long-term negative outcomes associated with lack of access to this basic need – people experiencing food insecurity will get sick more often, are more likely to be hospitalized, and have higher rates of obesity, depression, and chronic illness.

I think it is important to speak to why there is hunger in our state. The underlying reason why people struggle to put healthy food on the table is that, despite economic growth in our nation and state, wages simply have not kept pace with the high cost of living, and Massachusetts is an especially expensive state to live. Someone working full-time making minimum wage cannot afford a two bedroom in any community in our state, from Cape Cod to Western Mass. The costs of rent, childcare, heat, and health care are higher than average in our state. And most people don't have enough savings to cover an unexpected expense of \$500. So when life brings an unexpected change or challenge, as life always does – a divorce, a lost job, a health care crisis – the bills add up and people struggle to put food on the table.

But access to food is a basic need that we have the means to meet, and we should. At Project Bread, we know that until everyone has reliable access to healthy and affordable food, we will never level the playing field and efforts to address other inequities will be in vain. Someone who is lacking the most basic of human needs is not in a condition to learn, live, and thrive.

In order to address hunger in our state, Project Bread provides reliable access to healthy and affordable food. We prioritize the federal nutrition programs which are scalable and federally reimbursed, yet also underutilized. We provide direct services, which I will share more about today, but we know that direct services can only reach so many people. So, at Project Bread, we also advocate for policy solutions and systems change that break down barriers. The legislation before you today is an example of an important policy solution – one that has the ability to benefit more than 700,000 individuals currently in need of food resources.

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The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal nutrition program, and the most effective anti-hunger program in the nation. While our state has made great progress in getting more people enrolled over the past 15 years, there is more work to be done. At Project Bread, through our FoodSource Hotline, we screen callers for SNAP eligibility and provide information and referrals to community food resources to callers across Massachusetts. We are grateful for the Legislature's support of this important program. Additionally, Project Bread employs SNAP enrollment coordinators who work directly in community health centers to meet with food-insecure families and individuals, and provide the information, assistance, and advocacy they need to enroll in SNAP.

Project Bread has a strong partnership with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and together, we are focused on addressing the "SNAP Gap." This refers to residents who are currently receiving MassHealth and are likely SNAP eligible, but not receiving SNAP benefits. Our efforts target clients who were previously known to DTA, which means that at some point in the past they had applied for and/or received SNAP benefits.

Our participation in DTA's SNAP Gap outreach program and our broader SNAP outreach work give us a unique perspective on the most effective ways to reach and support low-income individuals and families facing food insecurity. It also provides insight into the challenges faced by this population in navigating the application process, particularly when individuals are interacting with multiple programs and, therefore, multiple application processes. We know that for too many individuals, the complicated application process can be onerous, even prohibitive, and can lead to lower levels of enrollment.

Take for example Ms. V, a senior recently supported by our SNAP enrollment coordinator at Family Health Center of Worcester. Ms. V had just relocated to Worcester from Puerto Rico to be near her daughter as she was finding it more difficult to live on her own. Her daughter had no previous experience with the application processes for MassHealth or SNAP, but she was learning that in order for her mother to thrive in her new home, she would have to get her connected to a variety of assistance options available to her. Time and again, her daughter had to take time off of work to go to multiple places to navigate multiple application processes, costing her income and delaying her mother's enrollment. These consequences could have been avoided if she had the ability to fill out one application for her mother's MassHealth and SNAP.

The same enrollment coordinator recently worked with Mr. S, who was injured in a fall that resulted in a brain injury and a significant amount of time away from work. To offset this loss of income, Mr. S sought to apply for a variety of assistance programs, including SNAP, that would allow him to continue to live in his home and provide for his family. His brain injury made navigating several application processes very difficult. His symptoms made it challenging to spend the amount of time necessary to complete all of the materials multiple times. A streamlined system that requires one common application would ensure that an individual already struggling with significant health challenges would not face additional complications, potentially jeopardizing one's ability to access the supports needed.

The stories of Ms. V and Mr. S are not uncommon. There are hundreds of thousands of people all over the Commonwealth who are navigating a complicated system while doing everything they can to provide for themselves and their families. As one of the organizations working every day to close the SNAP Gap, we know that requiring multiple applications at once or trying to reach back out to individuals to complete the second or third in a series of similar applications is not an effective process, and it is leaving people behind. We also know that efforts to later reach individuals who are enrolled in MassHealth and are likely also eligible for SNAP but not currently enrolled is treating the symptom instead of going after the source. Allowing for a common application and a streamlined submission of documentation means that individuals can receive the right support at the right time, ultimately reducing food insecurity, lowering rates of poverty, and increasing the overall health of our communities.

I urge you to break down barriers that restrict people from accessing food, the most basic of human needs. Please report *An Act Improving Public Health Through a Common Application for Core Food, Health and Safety-net Programs* favorably out of committee. Project Bread is grateful to the Legislature for your strong partnership in our work to prevent and end hunger in Massachusetts.

I also encourage any individual struggling with food insecurity to contact our FoodSource Hotline—800-645-8333—to begin an application for SNAP and to be connected to nearby community food resources.

