

Maine Voices: Hungry Mainers need help from Washington to feed their families

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For the past seven years I have spent most of my days working on a Brunswick farm. By which I mean to say, I am a very lucky and blessed man. In addition to the personal joy and satisfaction I get from my work at the farm, I can barely fathom the idea of having to worry about where my – or my family’s – next meal is coming from. Great, fresh food is right out the front door.

But like I said. I am both very lucky and very blessed.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Newlin is a co-founder and co-director of Growing to Give, co-operator of Scatter Good Farm, and a climate change activist.

In 2019, Maine had a population just above 1.3 million people. While small in comparison to many other states, that’s still a lot of mouths to feed at least three times a day, 12 months a year. For the past two years, the organization ([Growing to Give](#)) that operates at the farm, has grown and donated more than 15,000 pounds of fresh food to pantries and other food access sites in our area. Our current expansion project will enable us to increase that to at least 20,000 pounds annually. Broadly speaking, that translates into about 15,000 meals donated per year.

This work is making a real difference in the lives of lots of people, and I’m proud of the work done by Growing to Give and its food access partners. However, I doubt this approach will ever be a long-term solution to our nation’s systemic food access problem, and it certainly isn’t a scalable solution in the short-term.

Since March, COVID-19 and its attendant suffering, coupled with the economic hardship we are currently knee-deep in, have made thousands of Mainers more food insecure. And that situation is sure to get much worse soon – without further action by the federal government.

Clearly, we are far from ordinary times. Everyone I know and work with knows this. Our

gleaning partners – volunteers who do most of our harvesting and deliveries – know this. The operators of the food pantries know this. Perhaps first and foremost, those who are out of work due to an aggressive unrelenting pandemic know this. Does Sen. Mitch McConnell? Does Sen. Susan Collins?

At this point, it doesn't seem so.

Maine, like most states right now, is running up massive budget shortfalls because COVID-19 has dramatically reduced the collection of income and sales tax, states' bedrock revenue streams. All state programs are hurting and will be for some time. But programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can't afford to be ignored. Ignoring them will lead to an explosion of food insecurity, with many more hungry Maine families up and down the state. These programs need a federal backstop and guarantee. Thus far, they are not getting it.

Hunger, and the ability to feed yourself and your family or not, must not be used as political weapons. Some things must still be above partisanship. The House of Representatives has already passed a COVID-19 bill that includes funding for SNAP and other vital state and local government functions. This was months ago.

We need Sen. Collins to push the Republican majority to increase SNAP benefits in the next COVID bill. This is not a time to let perfect be the enemy of the legislative good. This is a time to feed Americans in need.

If Growing to Give could feed everyone in Maine, we would. But we can't. We need Washington to act now. Before it's too late.

—Special to the Press Herald

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