



Preble Street

Turning Hunger and Homelessness into Opportunity and Hope

Florence House

Huston Commons

Logan Place

Anti-Trafficking Services

Veterans Housing Services

Food Programs

Teen Center

Joe Kreisler Teen Shelter

Resource Center

Advocacy

Maine Hunger Initiative

MMC-Preble Street

Learning Collaborative

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Good morning Senator Bellows, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Stephanie Bratnick and I am the Anti-Trafficking Services Director at Preble Street. I am here today to support LD 1251 An Act to Make Agricultural Workers and Other Workers Employees under the Wage and Hour Laws.

Preble Street is a human services agency founded on the principles of access for everyone and unconditional positive regard. Since 1975, Preble Street has served some of the most vulnerable people in Maine, working to turn hunger, homelessness, and poverty into opportunity and hope throughout the state.

Preble Street first became involved in anti-trafficking work over five years ago. Our Anti-Trafficking Services staff work to promote individual and systemic justice, provide intensive case management, basic needs, safety planning, mental health and substance use disorder counseling, and advocate for clients through the criminal justice process. We have served over 200 survivors of trafficking. We serve U.S. citizens and foreign nationals; all genders, all ages. We have trained over 3,000 individuals on understanding and working with survivors including victim services providers, medical professionals, and law enforcement agencies, all of whom are now better equipped to identify and work with survivors of human trafficking.

The risk of human trafficking increases when a population is poor, vulnerable, and unprotected. Due to the lack of state protection in Maine for agricultural workers, specifically the enforcement of wage and hour laws, agricultural and other laborers are left exposed to exploitative labor practices. Without the protections that LD 1251 provides, employers may choose to set their own wages or choose whether to pay workers by the hour or by the bushel/load. Without these protections, there have been reports of farmworkers being paid less than was promised or stipulated in their contract, as well as reports of employers making illegal deductions from workers' paychecks, such as fees for transportation, supplies, or recruitment fees. There have also been reports of farmworkers recruited for a specific type of work, but later, without explanation, brought to a different farm and forced to work there instead. Farmworkers may be intimidated to remain in employment through force, fraud, or coercion. If the worker is a foreign national, this coercion may look like threats against the worker's visa status or against their family. Workers may be forced through physical or sexual violence. Workers may also face significant obstacle to leave



due to the isolation of the farm, as the majority of Maine agriculture occurs in rural areas with little oversight and very limited access to public transportation.

These reports are all signs of labor trafficking. If agricultural workers were provided the same protections as other sectors, these signs of force, fraud, and coercion would significantly diminish and the likelihood of trafficking among farmworkers would also decrease.

The workers who grow our food undertake one of the most important jobs in our country and within our state. With over 8,000 million acres of farmland in Maine, the agriculture produced in our state is vital to our economy and growth. It is our responsibility to protect the workers who rake our blueberries, tend the fields of broccoli and potatoes, and pick our apples.

For Maine to continue its firm stand against human trafficking, the state must extend wage and hour laws to agricultural workers in order to ensure that those vulnerable to exploitation are protected and valued. That is why we are asking you to support LD 1251. Thank you.