Thursday, May 23, 2019

Joint Committee on Health Care Financing
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Rooms 413-D & 236
Boston MA 02133

RE: S.678/H.1173, An Act improving public health through a common application for core food, health and safety-net programs

Dear Chairs Friedman and Benson, and Members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in response to S.678/H.1173, An Act improving public health through a common application for core food, health and safety-net programs

The Collaborative is a network of Massachusetts food system organizations, working to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. The Plan was developed for and accepted by the Massachusetts Food Policy Council, a 17-member entity comprising state agency, legislative, and industry representatives, established by the Legislature and Governor to develop recommendations, including legislative and regulatory changes, to promote sustainability and equity in the Commonwealth’s food system.

The Plan represents the views of thousands of residents and farms, as well as hundreds of organizations and businesses. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to food system policy, where issues of economic development, natural resources, equitable access to resources, and others are all taken into account when considering laws and regulations related to food. Our goal through this testimony is to emphasize the larger context into which the bills under consideration fit, urge the Committee to seek input from the communities directly impacted by its passage, and offer our assistance in coordinating that input.

The goals of S.678/H.1173 are directly addressed in an action item in the Plan:

Explore use of a common application portal for other federal and state benefit programs including the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Income Eligible Child Care; housing assistance benefits; and Cash Assistance benefits to ensure families seeking these benefits are offered simultaneous
applications for SNAP and health care programs. Encourage inter-agency referrals under existing programs as an interim measure until a new and improved system is in place. (http://mafoodsystem.org/plan/goal/rec/action/537/)

Developing and implementing this portal and integrating the application processes for programs would reduce significant barriers that prevent hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts residents from receiving benefits they are entitled to, benefits that could have a significant impact on these individuals’ health and well-being. This bill would also help increase efficiency for the agencies that operate these programs, eliminating duplicative processes of data collection and eligibility assessments. By connecting these application processes, this legislation would mean that the wide range of programs offered by the state to help our most vulnerable neighbors would be considered and offered in ways that best address the particular circumstances of each household, helping to ensure that each applicant receives the resources they need.

We appreciate the Committee taking up this issue, and urge you to consider it in the context of Massachusetts’ food system as a whole. The Plan, which provides that context, is available at http://mafoodsystem.org/plan/, and the Collaborative is available to provide additional information and connections to practitioners and advocates who can offer further details, at the pleasure of the Committee.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Winton Pitcoff
Director