

As the Trump administration enters its second year of running the federal government, it becomes clearer state legislatures and state executives will need to knit together a new American safety net to protect the most vulnerable people of the country. The president advanced tax breaks for the wealthy and corporations, while his budget chief, Mick Mulvaney, was cutting back funds for food for the nation's vulnerable and homebound seniors, claiming "*Meals on Wheels sounds great ...*" but that it's one of those "*programs that don't work.*"

Mulvaney was widely criticized for making that claim, given the mountain of evidence showing positive results from the program in combating hunger and reducing health care costs.

Later today, members of the Health and Human Services committee of the Maine House of Representatives will have before them a resolve (H.P. 483) to provide meals to homebound seniors and disabled persons.

Depending on their actions, part of that new safety net for Maine's most vulnerable could begin to take shape.



Maine State Representative Scott Hamann (D-South Portland and Cape Elizabeth).

While filed last year by Rep. Scott Hamann (D-South Portland and Cape Elizabeth), the measure was carried over to this year's session - ostensibly to keep some options open. Supporters sought an appropriation of \$500,000 in funding for meals for "*additional homebound individuals*" for whom Maine's office of aging and disability is charged to serve. The resolve would also establish a working group "*to research food access barriers, both regionally and statewide, and make recommendations about how to leverage resources to ensure regular, adequate nutrition for homebound individuals in the State and to forecast future demand and identify the appropriate level of funding in the future.*"

Meals on Wheels America states that 15% of Maine's senior residents - as many as 57,954 - are threatened by hunger.

More specific data released from a study done for Meals on Wheels, suggests that only one third of those residents get hot meals either delivered to their home, or by visiting centers where the food is served.

At a hearing in April of 2017, advocates for senior care testified to the committee, supporting Hamann's bill.

"State Program Reports reveal that 2,000 fewer Maine seniors received Meals on Wheels last year than in 2005 — that, despite our State's rapidly expanding at-risk elder population. Fewer daily contacts and waiting lists are common results," offered Lawrence Gross, the CEO of the Southern Maine Agency on Aging.

Gross continued, and referring to the potential federal cutbacks authored by federal budget director Mulvaney, stated, "*Ironically, as the Meals on Wheels program faces these looming financial threats, there is a mounting body of evidence that extensively documents the critical role Meals on Wheels plays as a preventative prescription to keep at-risk seniors out of more expensive healthcare settings and achieve better health care outcomes.*"

In other testimony, Brenda Gallant, of the non-profit Long-Term Care Ombudsman program,

provided an example supporting Gross's assertion that Meals on Wheels helps keep health costs down, stating:

"Home delivered meals provide significant benefits to individuals who are primarily homebound. Kali Thomas, a Brown University public health researcher found that home delivered meals provide health and psychological benefits to seniors beyond basic nutrition particularly for those who live alone. She found that home delivered meals can help seniors stay in their homes, saving the state money. Thomas also conducted a study for AARP. She found that for seniors living alone and receiving the meals had reduced feelings of isolation. Additionally, they also experienced fewer falls and hospitalizations."

Bob Caswell, a volunteer driver with the Meals on Wheels from Shawmut, Maine, brought to the forefront the importance of this program, clearly refuting Mulvaney's claims that Meals on Wheels is one of those "programs that don't work."

Here is what Mr. Caswell submitted for his statement:

"My name is Bob Caswell and I am a volunteer driver with the Meals on Wheels program for Spectrum Generations, the Central Maine Area Agency on Aging. I am providing my testimony in support of LD 692, Resolve, to Provide Meals to Homebound Individuals.

I come in at 6am to help the chef's, the kitchen staff and all of the other volunteers get ready for the day. We prepare, we pack and we organize food for all of our Meals on Wheels people. Once that's done and I have my meals loaded on my truck and I'm ready to go I start my Meals on Wheels route.

I love delivering Meals on Wheels, it is very rewarding. We have consumers that are in their 80's and 90's and are in their own homes. They would like to stay in their own homes so they don't have to give up their independence and go into a nursing home, no one wants that. Another part to delivering is it also providing a safety check for our consumers so they can do just that — stay safely in their own home. Some of the drivers have found people that have fallen or need some sort of help, we get them the help they need. I love helping people and being a Meals on Wheels driver I can do just that. It makes me feel 100% better knowing I am helping our senior population stay in their own homes and have the independence they so rightly deserve.

The consumers look forward to seeing me with their meals and I look forward to seeing them, chatting a bit to see how 'things are going and to see if they are doing well. It makes them feel better knowing I'll be stopping by about the same time of the day, they feel safer knowing someone will be checking on them and bringing them good food to eat to stay strong and healthy.

It works both ways and I love every minute of it. Couldn't ask for a better program.

I urge you to pass LD 692 and to support Maine's vulnerable adults.

The committee is gathered in a work session today. The Candle will report in the next few days on how hard they worked.

Here is the information on the time and location of the Work Session of the Committee:

The Committee on Health and Human Services.

Thursday, January 11, 2018

1:30 PM - The Cross Building, Room 209.