



Testimony of

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The Older Faces of Poverty in One Rural American County.

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Chairman Nelson, Senator Collins, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the older people we serve, their families and their communities, I thank each of you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Dixie Shaw and I ask that you please address me as Dixie: I will feel more comfortable and will be able to convey to the best of my experiences and observations about the true needs of those we work with, and live with, in our communities in rural Northern Maine. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation for this opportunity allowing me to be the voice of those we serve and to thank Senator Collins for all the work she has done on behalf of the people of Maine.

I am a native born and raised in Aroostook County. I work with and live in a community with many elderly folks. My parents are living and struggling with some of the same issues as many other senior citizens in our County our State and I am quite sure our Country. I have worked for Catholic Charities Maine for 27 years. Aroostook County is the largest County east of the Mississippi and is actually larger than the States of Rhode Island and Connecticut together, with just over 70,000 people spread across roughly 6,671 square miles. Yes, it probably is true what they say about us, that we have more moose than people, however, sometimes I think the moose eat better than some of our elderly and struggling families, since they certainly are thriving and are a common site throughout our State. I might take this opportunity to mention we work with Hunters for the Hungry in Maine and so far this year we have had 8 moose donated to our food bank through this wonderful program.

Some of the concerns that I see for the elderly are: 1. Cost of affordable fuel; 2. Food insecurity; and 3. Reliable, convenient and affordable transportation. These are certainly not

the only issues and challenges that elderly folks in rural areas face but they are certainly the ones that I hear about and see on a daily basis. I will take the time constraints of this opportunity to focus on the three areas I see and hear daily.

Catholic Charities Maine operates two food banks: one in the central northern town of Caribou, Senator Collins' hometown, and one in Southern Aroostook. We serve 25 food pantries from these two warehouses and each pantry serves its surrounding communities. This ensures that all areas of Aroostook County are served by one of the pantries that we supply food to each month.

We are a partner of Good Shepherd Food Bank and the Feeding America site in Maine. We also do local food collections and receive food and monetary donations on a regular basis from various service groups, schools, organizations, businesses and individuals. We have had advertising support for the past 12 years from our local television station, WAGMTV8 in Presque Isle, Maine, and The Aroostook Savings & Loan. This FREE media coverage has allowed us to spread awareness and receive support for our efforts to *Feed the County*.

We also partner with other organizations for other food opportunities such as the Aroostook County Action Program, to distribute the TEFAP commodity food items disbursed through USDA Emergency Food Assistance Program on a quarterly basis, as well as with Aroostook Area Agency on Aging, and the CSFP(Commodity Supplemental Food Program) that currently has 450 food packs which we distribute from our two warehouse locations and pantry network. We just heard the exciting news from Jason Hall, the Director of the USDA Emergency Food Assistance Program in Augusta, that Maine is receiving an increase in these numbers and we in

Aroostook County will receive an additional five packs a month to serve five more qualified seniors. Five people may not seem like a lot, but trust me, to those five people it certainly will.

We have approximately 90 seniors who come directly to our warehouse in Caribou each month to receive their food packs, while the other 360 food packs are sent to our surrounding partner pantries for convenient distribution. I often times will be available to help with this distribution, and this allows me to personally see the faces of these seniors and a chance to hear their stories. They hug us, they love us, they are so ever thankful for this food.

We start at 9 AM. People in cars and taxi cabs begin to line up much earlier for fear they may not get their food. We tell them repeatedly that we will not run out, that each of them will receive their allotment of food, but they seem to continue to worry that if they are not there on time, they will loose out on their food. This seems to be a common theme among the elderly, a constant fear of missing the bus, and in this case the food packs. They drive up to our door, do not need to get out, and then continue forward around the building. The food is passed to them by our staff and volunteers. This is best so they do not get hurt getting out of their vehicles, but also the safest for us, since when backing-up was involved, we were running for our lives quite often and lost many of those orange safety cones.

To see these vehicles lined up and the faces of these elderly people and hear how extremely grateful they are for this food, with an approximate value of \$50 per person, is heart warming, and disheartening, at the same time. It saddens me to think that we have older Americans lined up for food, who often times worked all their lives and provided for themselves, their

families, and often times their communities. I am happy we can offer this service to help at least some of the people who need a little extra help with food.

We distribute food to the 25 food pantries we work with once a month. Last year we served 24,196 people through this pantry network throughout the County. Numbers increase dramatically during the colder months.

This brings me to my number one concern at this time for our aging citizens, HEAT and the cost of HEAT!! Heating oil is the main source of heat for most elderly rural Mainers. The costs are staggering, and the need is great. Older people often times do not have the physical ability to handle alternative methods of heating that may be more cost effective such as wood or wood pellets. Wood and wood pellets require heavy lifting and constant maintenance of ash removal. Heating oil prices are running at about \$3.87 a gallon and LIHEAP funds are not only limited to the poorest qualified individuals, they can be difficult to apply for due to transportation and understanding of the process, as well as the uncertainty each year if and how much funding will come.

Our heating season begins in October for most, however, it is not uncommon to see smoke rising from a chimney year round in older folk's homes. I had a grandfather who wore a union suit year round. Many of our seniors and others cannot keep up with the high costs of oil heat. We do not have access to cheaper options like natural gas. Our electricity rates are higher than most. There has been a big push to look at alternative options for electricity, such as wind power, and several companies have constructed or will construct wind mills atop some of our beloved mountains. The benefits of that power have not helped the people within their view.

The power has actually been sold out of State and has no positive affect on local power costs, and has not benefitted the people who sacrifice the landscape. So electricity costs are high, and many folks young and old resort to electric heaters and other expensive and often times dangerous options to stay warm. I have a friend who works with the elderly and told me of a client that she saw who had pulled the vent off her clothes dryer and was heating with the hot air coming from the back of the dryer to keep the chill off her home. Some people use their electric stove burners and ovens to get by when they are out of oil. I also was informed by a friend who works for Aroostook Area Agency of Aging who oversees a congregate kitchen and hears the stories of seniors tell while they enjoy a meal in the company of others. Some of the seniors have learned to take a clay plant pot and put a candle in it to generate some inexpensive heat. Most, if not all, of these alternatives to heating oil are, as you can quite clearly see, very, very dangerous.

It is sad to see and hear the stories of elderly Americans with blankets draped around their shoulders and a cup of hot tea in their hands to stay warm. Many of these folks are alone, while their young and other family members may have moved off to other more populated areas, and States, to spread their wings or make their fortunes. The elderly parents are often still here, living in the homestead and not letting anyone know how bad it is.

The second issue I would like to address is hunger. We work to do what we can each day to ensure that people have enough to eat and pass out a minimum of 40,000 lbs of food each month. We operate three thrift stores with the sole purpose of raising funds to help us feed people. As costs have continued to rise and demands have increased, we have looked at all the

creative ways we can to ensure we can get the food we need to continue to sustain our program efforts to feed the County. In addition to the three thrift stores, we also recycle used clothing and have enlisted the help of schoolchildren who have joined our efforts by collecting clothes in their schools, as well as local service groups and businesses who have offered to help. We sold over 300,000 lbs of used clothing and shoes last year and raised over \$72,000 to help us feed people in our County. We also scrap and recycle metal and generated over \$5,000 last year from that effort. We do our best to look at creative ways to operate and to fund our efforts locally and without the help of the State or Federal Government.

We started a small farming operation last year with funding from the Walmart Foundation. We acquired donated farm land, purchased equipment, and partnered with a local micro-processing company to grow our own local, organic vegetables that we harvested with the help of students from the local Loring Job Corps. Our first crop consisted of a harvest of 8,870 lbs of fresh rutabagas, beets, and squash. The bulk of the crop was placed in a climate controlled warehouse and later graded, washed, in some cases sliced and diced and either vacuum packed or fresh packed in packages that are user friendly for old and arthritic hands. We plan to triple this yield by this fall.

What we see is a disproportionate number of elderly in need of food. When they have limited financial resources, any set back or unexpected expense can throw everything off. Again many elderly people have no immediate family around. Many are women and have outlived a spouse, and they were the “housewife”, raised the children, and do not have retirements of their own. Even the more well-off elderly can often times be one set-back from the luxury of

buying groceries. I shudder when I say “luxury of buying groceries,” but again it is the one, and often times the only, place they can control their costs. They do with out. The poorer elderly usually qualify for some assistance but often times assistance does not cover their need, and some actually will not ask for help. Those who are over income guidelines for any kind of assistance might be fine this month and next month have an unexpected expense that without warning may put them in dire need.

What I see and what I hear is people who have no other place to cut back on costs other than their food. They cannot be without some sort of heat which is extremely costly no matter what measures they take to save, even resorting to their own ingenuity to try to survive the cold. The high electricity cost often times caused by these alternative choices will come in, and you will be expected to pay it, or eventually they will shut off your lights. They should not, but sometimes do, cut back on their medications; in fact, my own mother had reduced her blood pressure medications to half the prescribed dose to save on costs. She later had a massive stroke and to this day is barely able to speak or walk. Did she save money?? Did we as a country cut costs?? I certainly think not. It will cost more now for her health deficits than it would have EVER cost to ensure she had proper medications. Oh, and just for the record, she was one of those over income folks who didn’t qualify for services when that occurred.

Meals on Wheels was a service provided by Aroostook Area Agency on Aging that provided hot meals five days a week to 490 elderly and shut-in folks in Aroostook County. The program had drastic cuts a couple of years ago and had to make some very devastating changes to continue the program. They now have frozen meals which are much cheaper than the hot meals they

once provided, and they deliver them once a week, which is a huge cost savings to a program no longer able to provide the service of hot daily meals. However, the loss to the program, and the people of Aroostook County who relied on this service, is greater than just a hot meal five days a week. They no longer have the daily visit/check-in of the person delivering the meal, and the family member/caretaker who may have had the freedom to go to a job knowing their loved one had someone to come bring them a hot meal and a warm friendly face to check on them at mid day. When the program was delivering hot meals 5 days a week, the workers were finding people who had fallen, or were in some sort of distress. One worker delivering a hot meal could not find the lady he was making the delivery too. The protocol for the meal delivery drivers is they must see the recipient of the meal and have eye contact, or at least hear their voice to make sure the senior is not indisposed at the time of delivery. When he found her, she had wandered outside and had fallen in the snow. Now, that is not a situation that could go on unattended very long and she would have perished. Another time, a meal delivery person went to a home and the senior who lived alone had fallen between the toilet and the tub and could not get out. Had this happened when meals were being delivered once a week this outcome could have been much worse. Meals on Wheels is obviously MORE than a meal.

Food needs for the elderly are not just a matter of getting food stamps or other financial matters to get food, or just dropping in once a week with some frozen pop and inexpensive meals. The financial picture this week or month may not be the case tomorrow. In rural areas you must travel to get food and some homes are many miles from the nearest grocery store. Which brings me to my next area of concern for aging people in rural areas, and that is transportation.

Transportation needs vary. The elderly often times have multiple doctor appointments that may be local, or require lengthy trips to see specialists. Many seniors have been independent all their lives and suddenly, due to physical ailments or eye sight failure, can no longer drive safely. When this happens, they either voluntarily surrender their driving privileges, or can no longer have a valid driver's license. At this point, even short distances to a grocery store or box store may be impossible if it were not for public transportation. We had a wonderful service that took those who could not drive throughout the County. However, the Regional Transportation Busses, which were known as Aroostook Regional Transportation, or us local folks called them the ARTS busses, were recently put out to bid, and an OUT OF STATE (!!)

Company out-bid the local company, and now we have a great mess. I am sure it has become cheaper to operate, hence the local company was out-bid, but the horror stories I have seen and heard are plentiful. When the previous local company provided the service, we would see the busses coming and going throughout the day. They would make several stops at our thrift stores and allow the many elderly folks the opportunity to browse around. When they were ready to leave, we would call the bus to come get them and in a few minutes the bus would pick them up and probably drop them off at the local mall or the drugstore or the hairdresser, allowing their passengers the freedom, independence and opportunity to socialize. Now, with the cuts in services, when someone is ready for the bus, often times when we call no one answers the phone for long periods of time and the wait for the bus can be extremely long, which leaves the senior standing and waiting. We do what we can to make them comfortable by offering them chairs to sit in, but many won't sit. In fact, many are so afraid they might miss the bus that they stand outside in the cold or heat -- yes, it can get hot in Maine in the summer

-- until the bus comes. I was told by one of my coworkers that her elderly grandmother used to ride the bus, and was able to make local errands and return home in a timely manner. This is important since she is diabetic and needs to get home to ensure she gets her medications on time. She is now afraid to take the chance on this new transportation system, for fear she will not get home in time for her meds. The alternative here is to rely on limited family who usually are working, and/or to just stay home as much as possible. Home alone is not just a movie.

A customer told me a story, that since the out of State company took over the bus service, that someone in Mars Hill needed a ride to the doctor in Bangor, about a three-hour drive. This new company sent a taxi cab from Farmington; a good four hours away from Mars Hill, to pick up the person to take him back down the road three hours to the appointment. I think someone needs to study some maps of Maine!! Since this change in the locally overseen bus service to this out of state company, many people have given up, adding to frustration and isolation.

I know there are more issues that affect our elderly, however these are the three that I see so clearly on a daily basis. Our aging Americans are people who worked hard, who lived in a different world than we do now. They are proud, and like to be independent. They have seen changes that have challenged them and amazed them, and confused them, and frustrated them. We the people who can change things for the better owe it to them to understand this and to do what we can to make it easier for the elderly in this country. They treated their elders with respect, and they learned what they could from them. It seems that they have come upon a time that respect of the elderly and appreciation for what they have to offer is

hard to find. I hope that we as a country can show them the respect and the appreciation they have earned.

I would ask that you do all you can to help ensure that the elderly and the poor in this country have affordable heat and assistance for heating options that will allow them to be comfortable and safe in their homes. I also hope that programs like Meals on Wheels would be seen as the opportunity it can be to not only bring a warm meal but a warm smile to a shut in who is unable to cook for themselves or get out to get adequate food. I also hope that CSFP and TEFAP programs will be increased during these most difficult times for people just needing basic food. I ask that you appreciate the need for sensible transportation in rural areas that is locally run and understands the true needs and the geography of the area it serves, and the Isolation that not having access to convenient transportation in rural areas can create. If your home is warm and cozy, your belly is full and someone came by to check on you today, and you had an opportunity to perhaps stop by one of our thrift stores and browse around for a bit, it might just make the final years of your life a little less difficult and a whole lot more enjoyable.

In closing, my father said a couple of things to me many years ago that I think have helped me focus on the needs of the hungry and be sensitive to the needs of the elderly.

1. "If you go outside with a cookie, share it with whoever is out there."
2. "That young man does not know what it is like to be an 88 year old man."

Thank you

Dixie Shaw