

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
“Nourishing our Golden Years: How Proper and Adequate Nutrition Promote Healthy Aging and Positive Outcomes”
July 12, 2017

Good morning. We all know the importance of nutritious food to our health and well-being. Yet, as many as one out of every two older Americans is at risk for malnutrition.

The number of older Americans who are food insecure, or uncertain of their ability to acquire nutritious foods, is troubling. In 2014, more than 10 million Americans age 65 or older experienced food insecurity. This represents 16 percent of all older Americans.

In Maine, one out of six seniors lives with the threat of hunger. With the arrival of America’s baby boomers into older age, the number of seniors who are food insecure will increase.

Seniors in Maine and across the nation are increasingly finding themselves choosing between buying nutritious food and paying essential bills. Donna, a 76-year-old woman from Steuben, Maine, reports having to make this tradeoff. She has a farm, grows her own vegetables, and raises her own meat. Yet, she still struggles to make ends meet. Donna said, “I never thought I would have to ask anyone for any help. At 76, you should be retired or you should be able to take care of yourself.” Donna turns to her local food bank for staples such as lettuce, dried beans, and rice to help her get by during Maine’s long winters.

Federal programs that help to keep such food banks stocked and meals delivered to seniors play a critical role. These programs work. They reduce food insecurity and improve health outcomes. They are also cost-effective. For the cost of a single day in a hospital, Meals on Wheels is able to feed a senior for an entire year.

We’ll hear today about how the University of New England is coordinating SNAP-Ed in my state. This is a federal program that helps families and older Americans learn how to shop, cook, and eat healthy meals on a budget.

Private partners are also playing an important role. Four years ago in Maine’s most northern county, a local family donated land and a company donated seeds to begin what would grow into a program called Farm for Maine to provide vegetables to those most in need. Farm for Maine partnered with Catholic Charities and has produced hundreds of thousands of pounds of nutritious food for those in need in Aroostook County, my home county I would point out.

With changing demographics, it will take all hands on deck to stay afloat. Today, 15 percent of Americans are ages 65 and older. By 2060, this proportion will grow to one quarter of our population. At the same time, markers of poor nutrition among seniors are on the rise.

While the traditional image of a malnourished senior has been a frail and underweight older American, we will learn today that overweight, rather than just underweight, and obese seniors can also suffer from severe malnutrition.

More than one third of American adults are obese, and this trend is reflected in our seniors. If current trends continue, the obesity rate would raise to 44 percent by 2030. With the convergence of aging and poor nutrition, we are challenged to meet a public health threat of unknown proportions.

We will learn today about the ways in which industry stakeholders, from grocery stores to health systems, are partnering with academia and community organizations to respond to food insecurity and to change the trajectory that worries us all.

One solution puts into practice a piece of sage advice heeded by the father of medicine. Hippocrates said, “Let food be thy medicine and medicine thy food.”

Hippocrates gave that advice more than two millennia ago. Today, we will learn from modern research how food can indeed serve as medicine, and vice versa.

We are beginning to discover solutions that work. Research has found that appropriate nutrition in seniors promotes better health outcomes from reducing falls and diabetes to improving mobility and cardiovascular function. Translating this research can help to alter the forecasted tides of malnutrition for the one out two seniors at serious risk, while improving daily life for all older Americans.