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Kansas Food Bank

Second Harvest Community Food Bank

Opposition to House Bill 2141 – Welfare Reform Committee

Chairman Averkamp and members of the Committee:

This testimony is submitted on behalf of Harvesters—The Community Food Network, the Kansas Food Bank and Second Harvest Community Food Bank, which together serve the hungry and food insecure in all 105 counties in the state. Last year, our networks of charitable food pantries distributed more than 44 million pounds of food to those in need in Kansas, from our smallest rural communities to major metropolitan areas.

We oppose House Bill 2141 because it harms low-income food-insecure children and their families. There is no evidence that this provision will generate significantly more child support payments, but it will put the food security of vulnerable adults and children at risk and be expensive for taxpayers.

9.7 % of people in Kansas are food insecure. That’s more than 280,000 Kansans—nearly 1 in 10. And an even higher percentage of children are food insecure—14.6% of children, or 1 in 7 Kansas kids. While the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, known as Food Assistance in Kansas) is a federal program available to help low-income Kansans, only 70% of Kansans are receiving the benefits for which they are income eligible. This ranks Kansas 45th among the states in SNAP participation rates, at least in part because of the many unnecessary barriers to participation that Kansans already face. This bill would make those participation rates even lower and increase Kansas’ food insecurity rates.

The Child Support program already serves the majority of low-income families in Kansas. However, some parents are not able to provide current support or pay past-due support not because they are unwilling to provide for their children, but because they are poor. The very fact that these non-custodial parents are applying for SNAP/Food Assistance indicates that they are struggling to meet their own basic needs.

Parents with unstable, low-wage employment need flexibility. Most do not control the hours they work, and do not have benefits. One bout of the flu can mean they miss several days of work and may not have enough to cover that month’s child support payment. Or they may have a car repair that they have

to do in order to get to and keep their job. This bill would sanction parents for any month they are in arrears in their child support payment. That means they lose resources to purchase food as well, putting them even further behind.

And then there are the custodial parents. Our food banks provide information to our member agencies and their clients about the SNAP program, which may provide families with more significant and stable support than the charitable system can provide. We have SNAP outreach staff who can assist people who are filling out their SNAP applications. It is in that context that we have helped people fill out their SNAP applications only to have them get to the child support requirement and stop the application process.

There was the father who had primary custody of his two children, but didn't want to rock the boat with his children's mom, who had partial custody and helped out with in-kind support when she could, like buying clothes and school supplies. He couldn't risk the relationship and the limited support he already received. There was the grandma raising a grandchild who didn't want to create legal problems for her child (the parent), who she knew couldn't afford to pay child support. And there was the mom who knew that re-engaging her psychologically abusive ex would only lead to more abuse. And those are only the people we know about. We have no way of knowing how many people, filling out an online application at the library or a written one at their kitchen table after the kids have gone to bed, have chosen not to complete the SNAP application out of fear when learning about the child support requirements.

This is yet another bill that turns away federal funds for nutrition support while increasing administrative costs to the state and putting additional pressure on charitable food pantries that are already stretched thin. This bill does nothing to lessen food insecurity and, in fact, makes it worse.

SNAP benefits are funded 100% by the federal government so reducing the number of people on SNAP will not save the state of Kansas money. This bill would require that the state add almost constant cross-checking and administrative communication between SNAP and Child Support Enforcement both within the state and with other states, which would be a significant increase in administrative costs. Half of those administrative costs are borne by the state as part of a 50/50 match with the USDA.

In addition, this bill would require more charitable donations and volunteer hours to help the charitable sector provide food for our neighbors and their children who lose their SNAP benefits. And it will cost grocers as people lose their ability to purchase food with their SNAP benefits.

We agree that parents sharing financial and emotional responsibility for a child is in the best interests of the children and the parents. But if an individual does not have the money to meet their court-ordered obligation, how does taking their Food Assistance away help the situation? It simply puts them deeper in poverty and makes the hole they are in more difficult to get out of. How does that help their children? Threatening economically fragile families' access to food is counterproductive and will increase hunger and food insecurity in our state. Please vote no on HB 2141.