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Written testimony opposed to SB 79
House Committee on Welfare Reform

Chair Averkamp, Ranking Member Ousley, and Members of the House Committee on Welfare Reform,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I am writing in opposition to SB 79, which would prohibit Kansans from using food assistance to purchase soft drinks and candy.

My name is Haley Kottler, I am a campaign director at Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. Kansas Appleseed is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to the belief that Kansans, working together, can build a state full of thriving, inclusive and just communities.

Kansas Appleseed has a long history of working to increase food security to all Kansans through SNAP food assistance as well as other public assistance programs. Simply put, we work with Kansans everyday that struggle to navigate our systems for benefits that are meant specifically for them.

Kansas Appleseed opposes SB 79, because it creates another barrier for Kansans trying to provide for their families. Instead of making life harder for Kansans, the Legislature has an opportunity to listen to Kansans and address their real needs so we all can thrive together.

This bill will have negatively affect everyday, hardworking Kansans as they go to the grocery stores and make difficult decisions about what they can and cannot afford for their families:

- 384,000 Kansans are food insecure, and every dollar counts at the grocery store for them.¹
- 154,000 Kansas children live in homes with a family income less than twice the federal poverty level.²
- 68% of Kansans who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program are in families with children.³
- 12% of households live below the federal poverty level. However, another 27% are households that do not earn enough to afford their basic needs such as housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and taxes.⁴ These are Kansans with jobs and families. That means 447,000 Kansas households are struggling to make ends meet and are making difficult decisions everyday on how to get by and provide for their family's needs.⁵ Of those 447,000 struggling households, only about 20% are receiving food assistance.⁶

¹ Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap, Kansas. 2022. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/overall/kansas>

² Annie E. Casey Foundation. KIDS Count Data Center.

<https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5048-children-in-low-income-working-families-by-age-group?loc=18&loct=2#detail/d/2/18/false/2048,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/34,35,36/11455,11456>

³ Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. 2023. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_kansas.pdf

⁴ United Way. ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed Kansas Report. 2023.

<https://www.unitedforalice.org/household-budgets/kansas>

⁵ This is the number of households below the federal poverty level and the number of struggling households combined based on the information found at: United Way. ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed Kansas Report. 2023.

<https://www.unitedforalice.org/household-budgets/kansas>

⁶ DCF. Public Assistance Report. 2023. https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Documents/CURRENT_PAR_SF2023.pdf

Put yourself in the shoes of these Kansans for a minute. Many of them have already gone through the difficult process of obtaining SNAP benefits, often as a last resort to feed their families. Then, after working long hours at a job that doesn't cover their bills, they go to the store to buy just enough food to get by for the next week. As they are going through the store, they are doing the mental and emotional labor of the constant balancing act of determining what they can afford, what their SNAP benefits will cover, and what they have time and capacity to prepare for meals.

These Kansans are making hard decisions, and what they decide might look different than what we assume. Their carts might not be full of nutrient-rich fresh produce and meats that need time to prepare and proper storage. Instead, it might have more convenient foods that can be quickly prepared or have long shelf-lives. They might buy foods that provide quick energy to get through their long days or as a small treat for their children. Yet, after making those tough choices, when they get to the checkout they have to go through the embarrassing moment of realizing they cannot purchase some of the items in their cart with the very benefits designed to help them do so. This is the reality of what this bill would do to Kansans.

This scenario is not an abstraction. Navigating SNAP benefits, balancing food budgets, and just trying to get by until the next paycheck is the reality of the close to 200,000 Kansans who use SNAP to supplement their food budgets.⁷ On average, each household on SNAP in Kansas receives just \$171 a month to assist them with grocery purchases.⁸ Meanwhile, the average cost of groceries a month for a family of four is close to \$1,000.⁹ This bill further restricts SNAP for these hardworking Kansans based solely on false, insulting, outdated, and harmful stereotypes about people struggling to make ends meet.

Rather than falling back on these stereotypes that have been disproven, let's consider what we actually know about the way families use SNAP. Research has shown that families using SNAP extend their budgets and benefits as far as they can with tactics like using coupons, sticking to strict shopping lists, comparing prices across multiple stores to find the best deal, shopping generic brands, and buying in bulk. Because of these strategies, research shows that any diet differences between those who receive SNAP and those who don't is modest at most. That includes, when purchasing soft drinks. In fact, many of the diet differences that do exist are because of the inadequacy in SNAP benefits and barriers that already exist for those who need it to supplement their food budgets.¹⁰ So, I ask why are we targeting the consumption of SNAP recipients? The basis for this bill is misguided stereotypes with an outcome of shaming or punishing hardworking Kansans who have sought assistance.

Further, these restrictions increase administrative and personal burdens for ineffective results that do not support the health of Kansans. USDA research shows that restrictions on SNAP purchases have no impact on lower consumption of soft drinks or other restricted foods and drinks.¹¹ This bill does not improve health outcomes, but instead creates more administrative burdens for participants, retailers,

⁷ DCF. Public Assistance Report. 2023. https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Documents/CURRENT_PAR_SF2023.pdf

⁸ Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. 2023. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_kansas.pdf

⁹ USDA. Food and Nutrition Service. "Official USDA Thrifty Food Plan: U.S. Average." 2023.

https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Cost_Of_Food_Thrifty_Food_Plan_December_2023.pdf

¹⁰ Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). "SNAP Benefits Need to be made Adequate, Not Cut or Restricted." 2018.

<https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/snap-food-choice.pdf> and Schanzenbach, D. W. "Pros and cons of restricting SNAP

purchases." Brookings Institution. 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pros-and-cons-of-restricting-snap-purchases/>

¹¹ Tood, J. E. and Ver Ploeg, Michele. "Restricting sugar-sweetened beverages from SNAP purchases not likely to lower consumption." USDE Economic Research Service. 2015.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2015/march/restricting-sugar-sweetened-beverages-from-snap-purchases-not-likely-to-lower-consumption/>

and state agencies. For participants it creates more economic and emotional stress in their daily lives. Meanwhile, DCF will be faced with unknown amounts of additional monitoring and reporting tasks if the state is granted the waiver the bill requests. Finally, the actual enforcement of the waiver would fall upon local retailers.¹²

Kansas retailers and SNAP participants are already facing the burden and barriers of multiple other restrictions and administrative hurdles. For SNAP participants, after they have cleared the multiple barriers to signing up, they still cannot buy the foods that always fit their lives and time commitments. For example, some families might be short on time to prepare food because of long shift work. Still, they cannot use their benefits to help buy foods that are hot at the point of sale. These are foods that could be convenient for these families from time to time, but are restricted. Further, retailers have to monitor what they are selling to determine if they can take SNAP. Any retailer selling more than 50% of hot or pre-prepared foods is considered a restaurant and ineligible.¹³

Restrictions in this bill only further limit the autonomy of individuals to meet their household's specific financial, cultural, nutritional, and dietary needs based solely on their bank accounts. Still, there are countless barriers that influence the ability of SNAP participants to make the same choices as their counterparts unrelated to knowledge about healthy foods:

- 61% of SNAP participants reported the cost of healthy foods as a barrier to eating healthy.
- 30% of SNAP participants reported the time to prepare meals as a barrier to eating healthy.
- 14% reported not having a way to store fresh or cooked foods.
- 11% reported not having equipment to prepare healthy food.¹⁴

Understanding these barriers helps us understand the decisions Kansans are making at the store everyday. Instead of indicting, shaming, and controlling their decisions, we should be eliminating barriers and providing support that helps them make healthy decisions for their families.

The best way to improve the health of Kansans is to support SNAP to reflect the real needs of everyday, hardworking Kansans, instead of restricting it even more. A substantial body of research has shown that SNAP is linked to lower health care costs and improved health outcomes. This is because the surest way to ensure healthy outcomes is to reduce food insecurity, which increases the risk of adverse health outcomes.¹⁵ In fact, research also shows that having adequate SNAP benefits actually improves the diets of participants.¹⁶

It is time we focus on policy solutions that would actually improve the health of Kansans, rather than create unnecessary barriers with ineffective results. Policies that increase SNAP benefits to account for the rising costs of fruits and vegetables, increase access to SNAP, and build public-private partnerships to get healthy foods to SNAP participants are how Kansans can be healthy and thrive. Bills like this one undercut the health of Kansans and ignore their needs in favor of unfounded assumptions about

¹² Kansas Division of the Budget. Fiscal Note for HB 2673. 2024.

https://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2023_24/asures/documents/fisc_note_hb2673_00_0000.pdf

¹³ USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. "What Can SNAP Buy?" <https://fns.usda.gov/snap/eligible-food-items> and USDA. "Retailer Eligibility - Prepared Foods and Heated Foods."

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-eligibility-prepared-foods-and-heated-foods>

¹⁴ USDA. Food and Nutrition Service. "SNAP participants' barriers to healthy eating." 2022.

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/infographic-barriers-to-healthy-eating>

¹⁵ Carlson, S. and Llobrera, J. "SNAP is linked with improved health outcomes and lower health care costs." 2022.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-health-outcomes-and-lower-health-care-costs>

¹⁶ Schanzenbach, D. W. "Pros and cons of restricting SNAP purchases." Brookings Institution. 2017.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pros-and-cons-of-restricting-snap-purchases/>

Kansans who are making hard decisions everyday to try to do their best for their families. The same decisions other Kansans who aren't on SNAP make everyday without shame or judgment.

There is much to be done to ensure Kansans can live healthy and fulfilled lives. Too many hard-working Kansans are still struggling to put food on their tables, gas in their cars, and a roof over their heads. We should be addressing these real struggles and strengthening SNAP to improve healthy outcomes for Kansans on SNAP, not restricting what their benefits can buy and overcomplicating an already complicated program. I urge you to vote against SB 79, and consider policies that strengthen SNAP and therefore the ability of Kansans to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration, I look forward to continuing work with this committee to ensure all Kansans can thrive.

Haley Kottler