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Karen Siebert

Advocacy & Public Policy Advisor, Harvesters—The Community Food Network

Kansas Food Bank

Second Harvest Community Food Bank

Testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 79

Chairwoman Erickson 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 to serve the hungry and food insecure in all 105 counties in the state. Last year, our networks of charitable food pantries distributed more than 46 million pounds of food to those in need in Kansas, from our smallest rural communities to major metropolitan areas.

We oppose Senate Bill 79, which would require DCF to request a waiver to restrict the purchase of “candy” and “soft drinks” with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Food Assistance benefits.

We do not support restricting SNAP purchases. SNAP is our nation’s most effective response to hunger. The program provides vital nutrition assistance for families living with food insecurity, ensuring participants can shop in their local communities for the foods that best meet their needs. And SNAP works. Low-income SNAP recipients incur nearly 25% less in medical costs than their low-income neighbors not receiving SNAP. When people have more resources to purchase food, their health improves.

SNAP restrictions harm Kansas businesses. Not even a month after the state-level sales tax on food is fully eliminated, the Kansas legislature wants to put more roadblocks in front of Kansas grocery stores and small businesses.

Under the proposed waiver, Kansas businesses would not be able to accept SNAP benefits as payment for what many of us would consider healthy snack options, including protein bars for a quick lunch and trail mix and fruit snacks for the kids after school.

In this bill, the restrictions aren’t really placed on the consumer, but rather on the state’s cash registers, which can’t accept SNAP as payment for certain food items. It means that cashiers—some of whom are

just teenagers—are the ones having to navigate difficult and uncomfortable conversations about what consumers can or cannot purchase based on the Kansas tax code.

As we have seen from research related to the state sales tax on food, Kansas consumers are willing and many are able to cross state lines to make their food purchases. In Kansas, almost 35% of SNAP households live in a county bordering another state that doesn't restrict SNAP purchases. And while they're there, they won't just spend their SNAP benefits. People can and will use their SNAP dollars elsewhere, and they will also likely take their other shopping there as well.

Out-of-state visitors will also not be able to use their SNAP benefits on these items in Kansas businesses, though SNAP benefits are accepted for those items in every other state. The front-line workers at convenience and grocery stores will be the ones telling travelers and visitors that their benefits don't work in Kansas, likely in awkward exchanges at busy checkouts after payments have been attempted.

SNAP restrictions reduce efficiency. SNAP is one of the most efficient federal programs we have because it utilizes regular channels of commerce, increasing low-income households' purchasing power so they can buy the food they need directly from stores.

SNAP integrates economically marginalized households with almost no government administrative overhead resulting from food distribution. Every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates \$1.54 in economic activity supporting local Kansas businesses.

These proposed restrictions would undermine SNAP's efficiency by creating more bureaucracy—the cost and labor of which will be borne by the private sector and specifically by grocery stores, which already have one of the slimmest profit margins of any industry. By making SNAP administration more complex, you will only succeed in making the SNAP program inaccessible to small businesses and rural grocery stores and ensure the bulk of federal SNAP dollars are funneled to national chains like Walmart, Amazon and Dollar General, further chipping away at the viability of small-town, independent businesses.

Restrictions on SNAP don't improve health outcomes. For so many of our neighbors facing food insecurity, food choices are based on financial calculations. In Feeding America's *Elevating Voices Report*, 91% of respondents said that they agree that having regular access to healthy foods improves overall well-being. They know that it's important to eat healthy food. But 71% said that while they want to eat healthier, they can't afford to right now. It's not because they don't know they should eat healthier foods. They just can't afford to. SNAP restrictions don't address that fundamental economic problem.

And for low-income Kansans and Kansans on fixed incomes, it's only getting worse. The cost of food has risen 28% since 2019, well outpacing wage increases. While we all feel the pain of rising prices when we go to the grocery store, it's even more acute for low-income Kansans. People in the lowest income brackets spend nearly 1/3 of their income on food, while the top 20% of earners spend just 8% of their income on food. That is one of the reasons that the 2024 Map the Meal Gap report shows a 31% increase in food insecurity in Kansas from the previous year (from 291,430 to 383,910 people). This is not just about motivation or will power or education. It's about economics.

Please oppose SB 79. There are better policy options for promoting healthy eating patterns, both for SNAP recipients and for all Kansans.