



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TESTIMONY ON ASSEMBLY BILL 177: ALLOWABLE FOODS

Presented to the Assembly Committee on Public Benefit Reform

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On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I offer this testimony in opposition to Assembly Bill 177, which limits foods that may be purchased under FoodShare, the state's name for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Just last week, the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Rural Life, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul testified before the House Committee on Agriculture on SNAP. I cannot improve on how they began their testimony:

The Catholic community brings moral principles drawn from our faith tradition and everyday experience deeply rooted in communities throughout the country, in service to our hungry, poor and vulnerable brothers and sisters in need. By our own efforts and our advocacy on public policy priorities, we seek to help provide adequate nutrition for poor and hungry people.

At our parishes, Catholic Charities agencies, St. Vincent de Paul conferences, soup kitchens and in our schools, we see the faces of poor and hungry people every day. We feed those without work, children, pregnant women, and seniors living on a limited income. For many of them, the meal they receive from our ministries and charities is the most nutritious meal they receive that day. The Church teaches that food is a human right and that the "scandal of hunger" affects, not just a number or statistic, but a human person. Pope Francis reminds us that the right to food "Can only be ensured if we care about the actual subject, that is, the person who suffers the effects of hunger and malnutrition."

These Catholic leaders affirmed the value and effectiveness of SNAP, noting:

- SNAP helps lift up human life and dignity by helping feed the "least of these";
- 75 percent of SNAP households included a child, senior, or disabled member, and 83 percent had incomes below the federal poverty guideline;
- SNAP works well. It has one of the lowest error rates of any federal program. In 2013, it achieved its lowest overpayment error rate on record at 2.6 percent; and
- SNAP lifted approximately 4.8 million people out of poverty in 2013, including about 2.1 million children.

In responding to proposed reforms to SNAP, our Catholic leadership urged Congress to:

- Prevent cuts or reductions to SNAP.
- Avoid eroding benefits or promoting barriers to access. State flexibility to meet local needs should not lead to a loss or reduction of benefits, especially to children.
- Maintain the structure of SNAP so that it may continue to respond to people suffering as a result of economic hardship or other unforeseen crises.
- Review and repeal the current provisions penalizing low-income families headed by a parent with a past drug conviction.

Catholic Charities agency directors from across the country tell us that hunger is a major issue where they serve and that SNAP is critical to alleviating poverty more broadly in their communities. They identify hunger as an entry point for clients to access a broader array of services. They stress that if households do not have food and safe shelter it is almost impossible to address the other factors that are keeping them in crisis or generational poverty. SNAP is necessary for most clients to stabilize before they can move out of poverty.

Poverty is not a sign of moral deficiency. It is not proof that one lacks character or judgment. Being poor can happen to anyone of us – whether through illness, injury, natural disaster, or the loss of a job – to name just a few. Catholic teaching is unequivocal in its insistence that as followers of Christ we are to exercise a preferential option for the poor. All of our public policy and private charity efforts must be geared toward helping those in need attain a better future.

Wisconsin's FoodShare program must offer support to those facing difficulties, not judgment or presumption. We know that food deserts exist. Not all neighborhoods have access to a wide selection of foods. Assembly Bill 177 is likely to limit choices of affordable options in places where those in need already have too few options.

Further, as a 2007 USDA report (“Implications of Restricting the Use of Food Stamp Benefits”) suggests, SNAP participants will likely face increased stigma and possibly embarrassment as their food choices are scrutinized and at times rejected. This fear of public humiliation is real. It will keep some eligible individuals from participating in the program altogether. This, in turn, only deepens their poverty. Finally, compliance violations are likely to increase when foods are restricted. This will drive up the cost of the program and expand the list of punishable offences.

The USDA study went on to say “there are better alternatives for promoting healthier diets. One could, for example, consider incentives – rather than restrictions – to encourage the purchase of selected foods (fruits and vegetables or whole grains, for example) by food stamp participants.”

Let me offer one such alternative. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul Council of Madison runs the largest food pantry in Dane County. In 2014, it donated about \$1,300,000 worth of food to over 45,000 customers. The food pantry operates a “customer-choice model” of distribution that resembles a grocery store. Customers are able to choose the specific foods that meet their needs. The program reduces waste, promotes self-respect and personal initiative. It respects cultural diversity and honors the dignity of all who are served.

In addition, in order to encourage healthier eating habits, this St. Vincent de Paul Council food pantry relies on volunteers throughout the summer to grow fresh vegetables and legumes for distribution at the pantry. This is but one example of a positive innovation that can achieve many of the desired effects of AB 177, while avoiding stigma, added costs, and compliance problems.

The work of this food pantry and countless other initiatives demonstrate the different, and we think more respectful, approach to helping those living in poverty.

In its April 2015 annual “Wisconsin Poverty Report,” the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) observes that while employment rose in 2013, poverty increased, much of it among the working poor. However, the IRP also reports that the public benefit with “the greatest impact on reducing overall poverty in 2013” was the FoodShare program. This was particularly true of child poverty, which without FoodShare would have been 4 percentage points higher.

The IRP report reminds us all that we are living in a new economic reality. In this reality the majority of the new jobs created are in “low-wage occupations, many in part-time jobs, which do not by themselves achieve the objective of effectively pulling low-educated working adults and their children above the poverty line, even with the help of refundable tax credits and SNAP.”

Until the job prospects for these working adults improve, we cannot turn our backs on them or their children. We must not make access to food more difficult. Rather we should utilize all our ingenuity and good will toward positive changes so that everyone can lead dignified and healthy lives.

Because AB 177 raises serious concerns and because there are better ways to help those in need access good food, we ask that you not approve this bill.

Thank you.