

April 11, 2016

Dear Governor Walker,

As FoodShare participants are losing food aid at higher than projected rates, we urge you to request a waiver from the U.S. Department of Agriculture from harmful FoodShare time limits and protect vulnerable Wisconsinites in areas that are lagging behind in economic recovery. Currently, up to 20 Wisconsin counties and 10 cities are eligible for a waiver from Time Limited Benefits in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Wisconsin should request this waiver.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), referred to as FoodShare in Wisconsin, assists low-income adults, children, and seniors in Wisconsin with funds to purchase groceries. In order to receive FoodShare benefits for more than three months within a three year time period, non-exempt able bodied adults without dependent children must work at least 20 hours per week, a requirement instituted under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. During the recent recession, elevated unemployment rates made many areas across Wisconsin eligible for a time limit waiver.

Prior to the economy fully recovering in all parts of the state, time limits for FoodShare were imposed statewide as of April 1, 2015. Those recipients who cannot find work on their own can maintain their benefits by participating in the state's FoodShare Employment and Training Program (FSET), which is outsourced to private agencies contracted regionally throughout the state. Failure to meet an employment program's mandates means individuals are eligible for only three months of FoodShare Time Limited Benefits out of every 36-month period.

In April through December of 2015, 62,458 individuals, or 7.7% of the total FoodShare recipients, were referred to FSET to meet the program mandates. During just the first six months of the disenrollment period, 30,453 people lost their benefits because they did not meet these mandates, including some who participated in FSET and were unable to gain sufficient employment as a result. This disenrollment is occurring much faster than originally projected - in 2013, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau projected a statewide disenrollment of 31,349 over the course of the entire first year of imposing time limits.ⁱ

Unfortunately, mandating work does not create jobs. For those living in areas of high unemployment, the situation was already dismal. As a state, we must not take away food aid for failure to find a job in areas of our state where economic recovery is still hoped for rather than assured. Securing a job remains a significant challenge for many in Wisconsin, and unemployment continues to be high in particular parts of the state. Areas with persistently high unemployment are clustered in the rural northern portions of the state, while urban areas with high unemployment are located in the southeastern portion of the state. These parts of the state qualify as "Labor Surplus Areas" where there are significantly fewer jobs available than people looking for work. Disparities in our state are pronounced: while the unemployment rate in the majority of our state's counties falls below that of the nation as a whole, several counties have unemployment rates above 9%. Thus, considering Wisconsin's unemployment situation as a whole does not adequately capture the unique challenges faced by job seekers in different geographical locations across our state.

In addition, the FoodShare program is not only instrumental in improving food security for low income individuals and families, but it also increases spending in local economies as recipients purchase food within the community they live. The decline in FoodShare enrollment due to the reimplementation of Time Limited Benefits amounts to a monthly loss of approximately \$3,244,271 in federal money spent at grocery stores in communities across Wisconsin.ⁱⁱ

Finally, failure to seek a Time Limited Benefits waiver for qualifying areas in this state creates increased demand for emergency soup kitchens and food pantries, placing an unmanageable burden on local charitable resources to provide food. Mandatory FSET participation will continue to push people into deeper dependency as they become reliant upon charity for the basic need of food. Furthermore, forcing individuals to utilize charitable resources robs them of the dignity of going to the grocery store to select food that meets their nutritional needs and cultural preferences.

For all of these reasons, the undersigned organizations respectfully request that Wisconsin seek a waiver for eligible parts of our state and stop imposing three month time limits on receiving food aid in those areas.

Sincerely,

Hunger Task Force
Community Advocates Public Policy Institute
Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin
Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health
Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups
WISDOM
Wisconsin Education Association Council
Wisconsin Council of Churches
Citizen Action of Wisconsin
9to5 Wisconsin
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families
Mental Health America of Wisconsin
Wisconsin Catholic Conference
Good Samaritan COGIC
Ebenezer COGIC
The Sharing Center
Friedens Food Pantry
St. Veronica's Food Pantry
La Causa
Amani Community Food Pantry
Family Life Center
Tosa Community Food Pantry
Daystar
The Gathering
The Cathedral Center
Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH)
Wisconsin Community Action Program Association (WISCAP)
Feeding Wisconsin
Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources, Inc. (GWAAR)
Jeremiah Missionary Baptist Church Food Pantry

ⁱ [Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Joint Committee on Finance, Paper #335](#): "FoodShare Work Requirements and Employment and Training Funding (DHS – Medical Assistance and FoodShare – Administration)," May 23, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Based on an average benefit amount per person in July through December 2015 ([Wisconsin Department of Health Services](#))