

Testimony for Public Hearing on Improving the Distribution of funds under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)  
Senate Majority Policy Committee  
June 14, 2016 9:00 a.m.

Good morning Senator Argall and Committee Members,

My name is Karen Woodings and I am the Advocacy Manager for the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank is an essential part of the charitable food system in PA. We serve 55,000 – 60,000 individuals each week throughout 27 counties covering nearly 18,000 square miles. Last fiscal year, the Food Bank distributed nearly 37 million pounds of food. Through May 2016, we have distributed over 43 million pounds and have yet to close out the year. We have concerns about the timing and process in potentially changing how SNAP benefits are distributed to recipients. It is imperative that the process reflect a shared commitment to maintaining the food safety net for the 1.8 million Pennsylvanians who are food insecure. The process, above all else, must do NO harm to food insecure Pennsylvanians.

In order to fully understand the ramifications of changing the schedule, we reached out to other states who have changed their SNAP disbursement schedule in recent years. We communicated with our colleagues in Georgia, Delaware, North Carolina, and Ohio. Each was asked how they implemented the changes and did changing the schedule, benefit as it was intended. As a result of these questions, two common themes emerged. Our main takeaways are that the timing is key to this process and both client and retailer education is essential.

As a regional food bank, we find that need increases in the summer months when children do not have access to the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. Food banks as well as pantries see an increase in need for charitable food. This is an even larger problem for Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. Several counties we serve do not have even one Summer Food Service Provider sponsor. Low income families have no access to those missing meals for their children. Several of the states implemented the changes during the summertime which compounded problems with staggering the disbursement of SNAP benefits.

The second theme was education. Grocers need to provide education to both recipients and staff in their stores well in advance of any change, as well as train cashiers how to explain these changes to SNAP recipients. Visual materials such as posters, bag stuffers, etc. in stores where there are high redemption rates will help. States did not have the funds to provide many mailed written notices. Coupon machines can be programmed to print a coupon notice with the swipe of an electronic benefit card. This education will have to be coordinated through an organization such as the PA Food Merchants Association and time will be needed to implement these educational messages.

Because some SNAP recipients could go from having their benefits at the beginning of the month to the second or third week, thoughtful timing is key. A split SNAP benefit could possibly address this concern. Recipients could receive 50% of their benefits loaded on their original day and the second half on their new day. Alternatively, an additional benefit could be loaded on the new day. Financial assistance, food assistance, and plenty of lead time should allow food banks and our charitable food system partners to build sufficient supplies to mitigate the increased demands on our networks. None of the states had a clear understanding of how long it took for SNAP recipients to adjust their household finances and impacts.

All of our colleagues reported back that the benefit was to the food retailer with few benefits to SNAP recipients. Many SNAP recipients were overwhelmed by the transition. The majority of the increase in need came from those who received benefits furthest into the month and away from when they received their other incomes. There were also negative consequences to the transition such as:

- An increase in cost for program administration;
- Recipients fell through the cracks and went hungry;
- The worst hit were rural areas where people carpool to the store;
- The recipients worst affected were the disabled and the elderly;
- Food theft increase;

- And in some communities, new food deserts were created.

As a result of our multi-state surveying, our recommendations include the following:

- Any transition needs to be a well-marketed, smooth plan for the SNAP recipients to have the least negative impact;
- Market the plan in a way that focuses on the benefits of the recipients and less focus on the stores benefits;
- Do not overhaul the entire system during the summer months;
- Prorate or add additional benefits during the transition;
- Implement a staggered issuance by limiting the transition to recertification period to minimize the impact on the charitable food system;
- And, any legislation should mandate a report back. This reporting should include: the number of people affected, who was affected by county, the number of complaints, and the number of hearings.

Thank you for the opportunity to attend and address some of our concerns to the committee. We look forward to contributing to this process in a meaningful way that ensures, first and foremost, we do no harm to those we serve.

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