



February 14, 2024

To: Chairperson Hansen and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee
From: Katie Nungesser, Policy Coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska

RE: Oppose LB 1381, Provide work requirements for recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

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Our state economic policies should support families in trying to build a better future, and ensuring children's basic needs are met. Voices for Children opposes LB 1381 as a costly, ineffective, and harmful approach to addressing SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits and work requirements. The proposed legislation would create unnecessary barriers to food access without addressing the root causes of unemployment.

There is no credible evidence suggesting that receiving SNAP benefits discourages unemployed adults from seeking employment. Instead, this bill risks stripping essential SNAP benefits from some of the most vulnerable Nebraskans, including children, perpetuating a cycle of hardship without tangible benefits to our state.

Under LB 1381, if the children in a household are six years of age or older, and their parents are unable to meet the proposed work requirements, their household would no longer receive SNAP assistance. With one child in ten already experiencing food insecurity in Nebraska, this bill poses an imminent threat to the nutritional well-being of vulnerable kids.

We are particularly concerned for the children and youth residing in Thurston County on the Winnebago and Omaha Reservations. This bill would prevent the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services from utilizing any waivers for work requirements. Current law provides state agencies with discretionary exemptions, recognizing the unique challenges faced by individuals in specific regions. Nebraska currently uses such exemptions for residents in Thurston County or on the Winnebago or Omaha Reservation due to "a lack of sufficient jobs," as outlined in the Division of Children and Family Services SNAP Options Report of December 2023.¹

Native Americans living in Thurston County face higher than average unemployment rates, attributed in part to the rural location and the economic disadvantages of the reservations. The 2020 Census data reveals alarming statistics, with a median income in Macy for a family barely surpassing \$19,000. Shockingly, 49% of the population falls below the poverty line, a figure that escalates for households with children. Nearly half of the population is comprised of young people under 18.

Similarly, the census report indicates that 62% of Winnebago households include children, with 43.5% of the total population under the age of 18. The median income for households with children is just over \$21,000 per year. With 48.6% of the population living below the poverty line, and a staggering 55.6% of all children living below the poverty line.²

¹ "SNAP Options Report ." Nebraska Legislature, Nebraska Division of Children and Family Services, 1 Dec. 2023, nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/108/PDF/Agencies/Health_and_Human_Services__Department_of/111_20240108-170109.pdf.
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² 2020 US Census, United States Census Bureau, 1 Nov. 2022, www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-main.html.

We urge you to consider the devastating impact this bill could have on kids in Thurston County and in other economically disadvantaged areas. Maintaining the Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) ability to make informed decisions on waivers is imperative. Waivers have proven to be a vital tool for our state agency, ensuring Nebraskans have equitable access to SNAP.

It is important to note that every state in the U.S., except for one, has utilized waivers at some point, often for Native American reservations. States are required to provide detailed evidence of high unemployment rates in the area, adhering to rigorous standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Waivers represent a proactive strategy for our state to address unique challenges and ensure that our citizens, regardless of their geographical location, have the support they need to feed their families.

I spent over a decade as part of the on the ground SNAP outreach across Nebraska. The current online application and over the phone interview process are already a challenge for struggling individuals. In my experience, DHHS has also tended to err on the side of all adults being able to maintain employment, even if they truly can't, leaving many Nebraskans incorrectly labeled and without their needed food benefits. The process is already hard to navigate for applicants in crisis and many don't know how to fight to get their case corrected. A saving grace has been the exemption for families with children. This bill would put up more barriers for those truly in need of these benefits, and now would include households with children age six and older.

Not a single Nebraska child should go to bed hungry or wake up uncertain where they will get their next meal. SNAP plays a vital role in addressing family food insecurity, and limiting access with additional work requirements for parents would lead to more hungry children, not fewer.

For all these reasons, we strongly urge you not to move forward with LB 1381. We ask you to trust the current work requirements in place and Nebraska DHHS to operate the exemption process as it exists.

Sincerely,

Katie Nungesser