



Testimony in Support of House Bill 2673

**Committee on Welfare Reform
Kansas House of Representatives**

February 13, 2024

Roy Lenardson
On behalf of
Opportunity Solutions Project

Chair Awerkamp, and members of the Kansas House Committee on Welfare Reform:

My name is Roy Lenardson, and I represent Opportunity Solutions Project (OSP). OSP is a non-profit, non-partisan advocacy organization dedicated to advancing policies that reduce barriers to work, protect state benefits for the truly needy, and ensure that the government is accountable to taxpayers and citizens.

I am glad to speak in support of House Bill 2673. This bill mandates that the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), responsible for administering the state food stamp program, seek a waiver from the federal agency overseeing the program—the Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The purpose of this waiver is to exclude candy and soft drinks from the list of items eligible for purchase using food stamp benefits.

The food stamp program's proper name is the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). While you might expect a program titled the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program would primarily assist needy families in purchasing nutritious food products like fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy, the reality is quite different. According to USDA, the number one product purchased with food stamps is soft drinks, accounting for nearly \$360 million or more than five percent of all food stamp expenditures.¹ Sweetened beverages, prepared desserts, and salty snacks were all among the top 10 commodities purchased with food stamps.² It's unclear how many of those sweetened beverages are high-caffeine drinks like Monster energy drinks. What is nutritious about Coca-Cola, Mountain Dew, Cheetos, and Twinkies? And how are sugary drinks and candy helping solve the issue of "food insecurity"? Food stamp benefits should buy milk, not Mountain Dew.

Kansas currently has a 35.7 percent obesity rate among adults, which is higher than the national average.³ While Kansas is above the national average, the United States in general is facing a ravaging epidemic of obesity and weight-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes. The health issues related to obesity can be managed and even prevented by simply reducing the consumption of sugar. Studies have revealed that adults with lower incomes are generally more likely to face obesity. To this point, one study from Harvard's School of Public Health found a direct link revealing that obesity rates are 30 percent higher among individuals enrolled in food stamps as opposed to those who are not enrolled in the program.⁴ It is also worth noting that obesity affects children from minority households at a disproportionately higher rate, as obesity prevalence was 26.2 percent among Hispanic children, 24.8 percent among Black children, and only 16.6 percent among white children.⁵ It is clear that something needs to be done here. Low-income Americans dependent on food stamps spending their food stamp benefits to purchase junk food and soft drinks only exacerbates the widespread obesity and weight-related health issues.

While the obesity epidemic plagues many individuals and families, it also has a weighty impact on your state budget. Medicaid and other state funded health programs have increased dramatically in cost, with significant spending across the board on obesity-related health issues. According to the

Obesity Action Coalition, health care costs are 34 percent higher among those struggling with obesity.⁶ One study from Brookings several years ago estimates that 6.5 percent of all Medicaid spending in Kansas is related to obesity-related costs, totaling hundreds of millions in additional costs.⁷

Kansas, like other states, can attempt to break the tragic food stamp-obesity cycle that is ravaging the nation. The Kansas Legislature can do so by requiring DCF to attempt to seek annual permission from FNS to prohibit the purchase of candy and soft drinks using food stamps. In 2017, Maine's food stamp agency submitted a similar waiver to FNS in an attempt to ban the purchase of soft drinks and candy with food stamp benefits, but FNS denied the approval of this waiver.⁸⁻⁹ Other similar requests, such as former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg's request to FNS, which would have prohibited New York City residents from being able to use food stamps to buy other sugary drinks, have been rejected over the years. There are very few limits to what can be purchased with food stamps.

However, there is a very strong precedent for making benefits programs align more with the stated goals of nutrition. For example, the WIC program limits participants—moms with young kids—to only purchase food products that are proven to be more nutritious. The list of food products WIC enrollees can purchase with benefits includes infant cereal, baby foods, iron-fortified adult cereal, fruits and vegetables, Vitamin C-rich fruit or vegetable juice, eggs, milk, cheese, yogurt, peanut butter, and dried and whole wheat bread.¹⁰ Notably, WIC benefits cannot purchase soda or candy.¹¹

To further the point of making food stamp benefits align with the stated goal of nutrition, the version of the 1964 Food Stamp Act that passed the United States House of Representatives—the legislation that formally established the food stamp program—would have prohibited the purchase of soft drinks with benefits.¹² This provision was unfortunately not included in the final version of the act signed by President Johnson.

It is highly likely that in the first year of this bill being enacted, Kansas—like the other states that have sought similar waivers from FNS—will not receive approval of the waiver. However, resubmitting this waiver annually will send a direct message to FNS that Kansas is serious about combatting obesity and genuinely providing nutritional assistance in the state food stamp program. This is opposed to the current model where Pepsi, Frito-Lay, Coca-Cola, and Little Debbie rake in massive profits from taxpayer-funded food stamp benefits that are primarily used to purchase soft drinks and junk food.

Coke and Pepsi alone spent \$12 million lobbying to block food stamp changes under the Trump administration.¹³ They also partnered up with other junk food groups to funnel money to welfare expansion groups that advocated for more money for the food stamp program overall. These expansion efforts have worked—the next farm bill that funds the food stamp program is expected to cost \$1.5 trillion over the next ten years.¹⁴

Even though Washington, D.C. may lack the common sense to restrict a nutrition program to nutritious items, the Kansas Legislature can show they are listening to hard-working taxpayers who are fed up with paying for energy drinks and candy bars. A poll presented by the Huffington Post revealed that an overwhelming majority of voters in both parties support banning food stamp recipients from using their benefits to buy soft drinks.¹⁵

By passing this bill, Kansas will continue to be a national leader in the food stamp space and continue to shape the narrative about how welfare programs should operate. Submitting this waiver annually will spark a much-needed nationwide conversation about how food stamps are inflating the obesity crisis and what can be done to stop it.

Thank you for bringing this important issue forward, and for giving me the opportunity to comment.

¹ Food and Nutrition Services, "Foods Typically Purchased by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Households," United States Department of Agriculture (2016), <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/foods-typically-purchased-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap-households/>.

² Ibid.

³ "Adult Obesity Prevalence Maps," Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/prevalence-maps.html/>.

⁴ "SNAP and Obesity: The Facts and Fictions of SNAP Nutrition," SNAP to Health!, <https://www.snaptohealth.org/snap/snap-and-obesity-the-facts-and-fictions-of-snap-nutrition/>.

⁵ "Childhood Obesity Facts," Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html/>.

⁶ "Kansas Obesity Fact Sheet," The Obesity Action Coalition (2024), <https://www.obesityaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Kansas-2.pdf/>.

⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/obesity-costs-evident-at-the-state-level/>

⁸ Mary Mayhew, "Re: A New Approach for the SNAP-Ed Program, and Renewal of Soda and Candy Restriction Waiver," Maine Department of Health and Human Services (2017), <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/documents/FNS-Waiver-Request-2-17.pdf/>.

⁹ Lindsey Mills, "Governor's latest attempt to ban soda and candy from SNAP denied," News CENTER MAINE (2018), <https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/local/governors-latest-attempt-to-ban-the-purchase-of-soda-and-candy-with-food-stamps-denied/97-510961543/>.

¹⁰ Food and Nutrition Service, "WIC Fact Sheet," United States Department of Agriculture (2023), [WIC Fact Sheet | Food and Nutrition Service \(usda.gov\)](https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/fact-sheet/)

¹¹ 7 CFR 246.10

¹² Food and Nutrition Service, "A Short History of SNAP," United States Department of Agriculture (2023), <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap/>.

¹³ Robert Paarlberg and Dariush Mozaffarian et al., "KEEPING SODA IN SNAP: Understanding the Other Iron Triangle," PubMed Central (2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8797053/>.

¹⁴ Sam Adolphsen, "'Rich Men North Of Richmond' Takes Aim At The Junk Food Lobby," Association of Mature American Citizens (2023), <https://amac.us/newsline/society/rich-men-north-of-richmond-takes-aim-at-the-junk-food-lobby/>.

¹⁵ Joseph Erbenraut and Arthur Delaney, "Most Americans Don't Want People To Buy Soda And Candy With Food Stamps," Huffington Post (2017), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/food-stamp-opinion-poll-soda-candy_n_5900c207e4b0026db1dd6b48#:~:text=Poll%20respondents%20expressed%20a%20similar,Democrats%20agreed%20with%20soda%20restrictions/.