



January 26, 2022

Karen Siebert

Advocacy & Public Policy Advisor

Harvesters—The Community Food Network & Association of Kansas Food Banks

Testimony for House Bill 2215—Committee on Corrections and Juvenile Justice

Chairman Owens and members of the Committee:

This testimony is submitted on behalf of Harvesters—The Community Food Network, the Kansas Food Bank and Second Harvest Community Food Bank, which comprise the Association of Kansas Food Banks. Together, our food banks serve the food insecure in all 105 counties in the state. Last year, our networks of charitable food pantries distributed nearly 51 million pounds of food to those in need in Kansas, from our smallest rural communities to major metropolitan areas.

We support House Bill 2215 that would remove the prohibition on individuals convicted of a felony drug offense from receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, or as they are known in Kansas, Food Assistance.

Current Kansas law withholds from those with more than one felony drug conviction the help they may need as they try to reintegrate into society. It is already a struggle for people with low incomes and felony convictions to find employment, housing and healthcare. Denying them food assistance simply increases the risk that they will return to illicit activities to meet their basic needs.

We have seen the havoc that the opioid crisis in particular has wreaked on families and communities throughout our state. We don't believe those individuals struggling with addiction deserve to be punished for the rest of their lives. Current law singles out this one type of crime as worse than any other—worse than armed robbery, assault or even homicide. Is that what Kansans really believe?

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Harvesters would send its SNAP outreach staff into the prisons to work with individuals preparing for their release. We would assist those people who were potentially eligible for SNAP with their applications so they could be ready to submit their applications on the day of their release. Our staff estimates that 30-40% of the people they met with were disqualified from applying for SNAP because of felony drug convictions. The continued punishment of people with drug convictions was painful to see, especially as they embarked on the uncertain journey of reintegration.

And this bill makes fiscal sense. Because SNAP is funded entirely through the federal government, there will be no additional cost to the state. It will help ex-offenders meet their basic needs and help take some of the pressure off of the charitable sector.

We support policies like HB2215 that encourage social and economic reintegration. This bill is an important way we can support ex-offenders' transition back into their communities to achieve the rehabilitation we all hope for. Access to food can help sustain recovery from addiction, promote public safety and reduce recidivism. We hope you will support this bill that combines compassion with sound public policy.