

Chairman Bekkedahl and Members of the Committee,

My name is Heather Gades, and I am a titleholder at the local level within the Miss America Organization and a contestant for Miss North Dakota this coming June – however, my testimony does not necessarily reflect the views of either the Miss America Organization or the Miss North Dakota Organization. My current title is Miss Bonanzaville, and as a titleholder, we each select a service initiative that we want to support and work on during our year of service. Mine is Combatting Food Insecurity – One Box at a Time, a project that is the culmination of my six years of working on this issue. I have met with food pantries in the Fargo-Moorhead area – and volunteered at a few of them, helped create the first food pantry at North Dakota State University (NDSU) called Goods for the Herd and am currently on the advisory board, attended strategy and conversational meetings, and read books to school children that talk about food insecurity, how it can happen to anyone, and who we can go to for help.

We saw with COVID the numbers of unemployment, homelessness, and hunger rise significantly across our nation. In our state, 30.7% of our people have low access to a grocery store as of 2022 (Mind the Meal Gap, 2022). In urban areas, this means there is no large grocery store within one mile. In rural areas, it is within ten miles. This statistic alone reveals that our state has a phenomenon known as a “food desert” – which is an area that lacks consistent access to fresh produce, meat, and other healthy foods. 19 counties have 50% or more of their population that are considered to have low access to grocery stores. 20 counties are in the 25-49% range, and only the final 14 counties fall below the 25% line of low grocery

store access. Our 65+ age group are the ones most likely to have low access, making up 33.9% of the people that are considered low access (Mind the Meal Gap 2022 Report).

On top of having low access to grocery stores across the state, there are three counties in North Dakota wherein over 50% of their population is eligible for SNAP benefits because they make less than 200% of the federal poverty guidelines in 2020. In Rolette County – 79%, in Sioux County – 75%, and in Benson County – 63%. These three counties also had higher rates of food insecurity in the same time frame – which is an inconsistent or limited access to food in general, but especially to foods that are high in nutrients and minerals. In Rolette – 16% of the county is food insecure, in Sioux County – 14.8%, and in Benson County – 15.1% (Mind the Meal Gap Map). In 2017, the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 64% of people in North Dakota that were eligible for SNAP participated in the program. It is great that a majority of the people who need this program are using it, but they need places to use that funding. If they have to drive to Fargo, or Bismarck, or Williston to use that funding, we're asking people that already have low-income to travel to another city just to get food. This is not sustainable in the long run for most low-income families.

I urge this committee to give SB 2273 a Do Pass recommendation, so that the people of North Dakota can have better access to food in their hometowns. Not only will this help feed our communities, but it will help bolster local economies by keeping the SNAP funding in-house and keeping small town shoppers from having to make a day trip to Fargo for what they cannot get at home. For our rural North Dakotans, pass SB 2273.