



Testimony prepared for the House Finance and Taxation Committee
SB 2228 – Related to Rural Grocery Stores
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Chair Headland, and members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee, my name is Kim Jacobson. I serve as the Director of Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone which includes Traill and Steele Counties and as President of the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of SB 2228.

Human Service Zones provide critical services for North Dakota communities. This includes economic assistance programs that support low-income individuals with basic needs such as food, home heating, child care, and medical assistance. Every day, we work with people trying to navigate the complexities of meeting their basic needs with very limited resources. This often includes making very difficult decisions about how to ration their limited income to cover food, medication, housing, and child care expenses.

In recent years, our rural communities have been adversely impacted with the closure of local businesses, including grocery stores. In 2021, North Dakota Living reported that our state “experienced a 20% decline in the number of rural grocery stores”¹ in the five years leading up to 2019. In addition, they also reported that our state has just 98 grocery stores serving “towns with fewer than 2,100 people.” About 378 towns in North Dakota meet that population criteria². Therefore, 26% of our small towns have grocery stores. This problem is creating “food deserts,” which are areas with limited access to affordable, nutritious food.

Lack of access to a rural grocery store impacts all that live in that community. However, the impact for low-income and elderly individuals is even more profound. Unreliable transportation and limited public transportation services make the impact of food deserts even more significant. Food insecurity rates in the state increased from just under 5% in 2020

¹ <https://www.ndliving.com/node/544>

² https://www.northdakota-demographics.com/cities_by_population

to 8.5% in 2022. With today's rapidly increasing food prices, the food insecurity rate is understandably growing.

Although Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefits assist families in need with grocery expenses, living in a rural area presents its own challenges. Traveling 40-50 miles one-way to purchase groceries makes it much more difficult to overcome food insecurity. In addition to travel time, the cost of transportation places burden on our rural community citizens. As anyone who lives in North Dakota can attest, the weather can also make travel incredibly dangerous or impossible in the winter.

Additionally, SNAP is a 100% federally funded program, which falls under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and is part of the Farm Bill. At the time of my writing this, Congress is considering a budget resolution that would, if passed as-is, cut \$230 billion from federal agricultural programs. This would almost certainly impact SNAP. Here are three key figures¹ that help contextualize the local impacts if these cuts were to occur:

- SNAP helped feed 1 in 16 North Dakotans in 2024.
- 8.6% of North Dakota households had inadequate access to food due to financial limitations in 2023.
- Between 2015 and 2019, "SNAP lifted 14,000 people above the poverty line in North Dakota, including 7,000 children."

Senate Bill 2228 cannot offset the impact of funding cuts to SNAP — but by helping to address one of the causes of food insecurity in our state, it does offer an opportunity to be more prepared if cuts do happen. Either way, making food easier to access may reduce statewide food insecurity rates.

Lastly, food insecurity has hidden impacts on North Dakotans. When a person's needs are partially or wholly unmet, there are serious consequences for that person's physical and mental health. Food scarcity leads to higher rates of depression and anxiety; and chronic, long-term stress can impact cholesterol, blood pressure, and heart function; and malnutrition directly leads to a variety of physical health conditions. Senate Bill 2228 is a key step toward addressing those concerns for North Dakotans and improving the overall quality of life in our state.

The North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association is in favor of assisting communities that do not have a grocery store and taking steps to reduce food deserts in our state. We urge a "do pass" on SB 2228. Thank you for your consideration.

³ https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_north_dakota.pdf