

Testimony Prepared for the
Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee

February 13, 2025

By: Lynn Flieth, RSR Human Service Zone Director

RE: SB 2228 – Relating to an appropriation for rural grocery store sustainability

Chair Luick, and members of the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee, my name is Lynn Flieth. I'm the Director for the RSR Human Service Zone, which includes the counties of Ransom, Sargent and Richland. In addition, I'm a member of the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 2228.

Human Service Zones provide critical services for North Dakota communities. We administer economic assistance programs. We also deliver child welfare services, including child protection, foster care, and in-home case management, as well as receive referrals for Children In Need of Services (or CHINS).

In recent years, our rural communities have struggled 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, 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 criteria,² which means that only 26% of our small towns have grocery stores. This problem is creating “food deserts,” which are areas with limited access to affordable, nutritious food.

Nobody who lives in a food desert is unimpacted, but the challenges are heightened for those with low incomes, and for those who have unreliable transportation. Last school year approximately, 37,000 North Dakota students qualified for free and reduced meals. Food insecurity rates in the state increased from just under 5% in 2020 to 8.5% in 2022.

Although Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefits assist families in need with grocery expenses, living in a rural area presents its own challenges. Having to travel 40 to 50 miles one

¹ <https://www.ndliving.com/node/544>

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

way to get groceries makes it much more difficult to overcome food insecurity. In addition to travel time, the cost of transportation adds up quickly. As anyone who lives in North Dakota can attest, the weather can also make travel incredibly dangerous or impossible in the winter. The consequence of these challenges is that families who live paycheck to paycheck have to make daily decisions about housing, heat, and food.

The hidden impact of these issues is that facing frequent barriers to having your basic needs met — or being unable to meet those needs at all — has serious physical and mental health consequences. Food scarcity leads to higher rates of depression and anxiety; and chronic, long-term stress can impact cholesterol, blood pressure, and heart function.

Providing incentive and support to rural grocers is strongly encouraged by the North Dakota Association of Human Service Zone directors, and I urge a do pass on SB 2228. Thank you for your consideration.

I stand for questions from the committee.