



Position Paper on AB 177 (Robert Brooks)
Restricting Food Choice in the FoodShare Program

AB 177 is a well-intentioned proposal. Proper nutrition is the key to good health and as hunger and food insecurity are essentially malnutrition problems due to the inability of people with low-incomes to access enough adequate, nutritious food, the idea at the core of the bill – how do we help people with low-incomes eat more healthfully – should be lauded and promoted. However, in practice, the implementation of legislation would create a number of adverse, unintended consequences for people in the FoodShare program:

- Per calorie, healthy food is often more expensive than other options. By forcing FoodShare recipients to spend 67% of their benefits on a specific set of items, they would lose the ability to shop around and purchase those same items at the lowest cost to them and essentially lose control of maximizing the purchasing power of their benefits.
- WIC is a nutritious food package designed for pregnant and post-partum mothers and their babies and young children. Even with the addition of beef, pork, chicken, fish, fresh produce, and fresh, frozen or canned white potatoes, the nutrition prescription would not fit the nutrition or caloric needs of a growing boy, adult, or of our older Wisconsinites enrolled in the program.
- The WIC food package is extremely specific. Since FoodShare recipients may live in food deserts that lack access to a full service market that stocks the approved WIC items, this bill may make it extremely difficult for participants to purchase the food they need, or make it extremely costly for them as they might have to drive long distances to get to these stores.
- By restricting FoodShare recipients' choice, the state would take away the ability of over 400,000 households to make the budget and food decisions that are right for them and their families, thus sending a message that this specific set of people living in Wisconsin are somehow unfit to make these basic household decisions.
- USDA studies have shown that FoodShare recipients' food purchasing patterns are like just like non-recipients. Everyone makes sub-optimal food choices from time to time, not just the people on FoodShare. It's just that people who have low incomes have less flexibility to NOT make poor food choices due to cost.

With the costs it would take to implement such a restriction, the state could fund a healthy eating incentive pilot. This type of positive intervention would incentivize good behavior, boost local economies, and actually address the key issue that prevents people on FoodShare from eating more healthfully – cost. In fact, USDA studies have shown that when incentivized, people on SNAP make better food buying decisions because they have more money. For example, early results from the USDA Healthy Incentives Pilot, which provided a credit of .30 cents for every FS dollar spent on fruits and veggies, showed that it increased fruit and veggie consumption by 25%.

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