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Greek Orthodox Church
Mennonite Church USA
Moravian Church
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Roman Catholic:
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Diocese of Green Bay
Diocese of LaCrosse

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

Benedictine Women
of Madison
Church Women United
Interfaith Conference of
Greater Milwaukee
Leadership Conference of
Women Religious Region 9
Madison-area Urban Ministry

Rev. Scott D. Anderson,
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April 30, 2015

TO: Assembly Committee on Public Benefit Reform
FROM: Peter Bakken, Coordinator for Public Policy
Wisconsin Council of Churches
RE: Opposition to Assembly Bill 177, limiting the foods that may
be purchased under FoodShare

Thank you for taking my testimony in opposition to Assembly Bill 177.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC) is a community of Christian denominations that covenant to pray and work together for the unity and renewal of the church and the healing and reconciliation of the world. The Council encompasses 18 denominations with approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members.

The issue of hunger has been at the forefront of the Council's efforts to promote social and economic justice for Wisconsin's most vulnerable residents. Food is one of the most basic human needs, yet there are many in our communities who do not have enough to eat, or worry about where their next meal is coming from.

We believe that caring for the poor and feeding the hungry is a basic moral and religious responsibility. Our members are working alongside others in their community to end hunger – not only in food pantries, soup kitchens, and community gardens, but also by advocating as citizens for policies that will promote the good of the community and all its members.

We therefore respect and share the aim of this bill to provide nutritious food to persons in need, and prevent waste, fraud and abuse in the FoodShare program. However, we have real concerns about its implications for those who turn to public assistance in time of need.

All too often, people in need of nutritional assistance are treated as if they were fundamentally different from the rest of us – as if they were far more deeply flawed, much more prone to break the law or behave unethically. Unfairly, people experiencing poverty or joblessness are held to a higher moral standard than other people, more rigorously scrutinized, and given less dignity and respect. Yet, while their economic circumstances may be limited, they are still our fellow human beings, our neighbors, and often our family members, friends or fellow worshippers.

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One of the reasons that FoodShare is such a valuable program is that it allows people who receive it to shop for food like everyone else. They are able to use their EBT card at grocery stores (rather than the paper coupons which gave rise to the obsolete term, "food stamps" and helped to create the stigma that prevents many eligible people, especially seniors, from applying). It not only provides people with access to food, but also allows them to obtain it with dignity, freedom of choice, and personal responsibility.

This proposal creates a new set of complicated rules for buying food that applies to a particular class of persons only because they need help to meet their basic nutritional needs. Grocery shopping on a tight budget is challenging enough, especially if you are in a "food desert" or trying to accommodate special dietary needs or cultural traditions. To have to do so while keeping track of what percentage comes from a narrow list of allowable foods and what percentage does not, is to impose an unnecessary and unreasonable additional burden.

(WIC foods – which serve as the basis for the permitted foods in this proposal – are targeted to a specific population with particular nutritional needs: namely, pregnant and nursing women, infants, and very young children. Its design and purpose are not the same as those of FoodShare. That, presumably, is why they are two different and distinct programs.)

People who are dealing with poverty and food insecurity already face major challenges of getting to grocery stores, of meeting household needs on a limited budget; of planning and preparing meals. They must do so while meeting the demands of schooling, jobs or job seeking, and childcare. They have to deal with the stigma, humiliation and social isolation that our society imposes on persons in poverty. We should not make their lives even more difficult.

FoodShare recipients should be treated as responsible adults who, given nutritional education, and access to affordable, healthy food, can make their own decisions without someone – whether the person next in line or a state agency – looking over their shoulders.

reduce
We all want to reduce fraud, waste and abuse in public assistance programs. But we need to have a sense of balance, proportion, and compassionate understanding of the lives of the people impacted by these policies in order to make wise decisions about how to address those problems.

Probably all of us could improve the nutritional quality of our diets. For those of us who face the additional challenge of limited access and limited means, we should be promoting policies that make nutritious food more available and affordable.

Thank you for considering our views.