



The Arc Wisconsin
P.O. Box 201
Stoughton, WI 53589

T 608.422.4250
Lisa Pugh, State Director
pugh@thearc.org
arcwi.org

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To: Representative Krug, Chair
Members, Assembly Committee on Public Benefit Reform

From: Lisa Pugh, Executive Director

RE: Assembly Bills 501; 530 - FoodShare

The Arc Wisconsin is a statewide organization that advocates for people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD). We have 15 Wisconsin chapters and are connected to a network of more than 650 chapters across the country. The Arc is the oldest and largest disability advocacy organization in the nation.

Assembly bills 501 and 530 would make changes to the FoodShare program that will have a significant impact on individuals with disabilities. Recent analysis by the Legislative Fiscal Bureau indicates 24 percent of program participants are elderly, blind, or disabled individuals. Forty percent of households receiving FoodShare benefits contain at least one individual that is, either elderly, blind, or has a disability.

Identifying ways to support good health for people with I/DD is essential. There are significant and concerning health disparities between people with I/DD and their peers without disabilities. "These include a lack of access to health care, an absence of healthy foods including fresh fruits and vegetables, and deficiencies in exercise and wellness activities. Research shows that 5% of adults with I/DD report overall poor health, a marked difference as compared to the 1% of adults without disabilities answering the same question. According to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adults with disabilities have a 57% higher rate of obesity than adults without disabilities and experience three times the risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancer as compared to the general population."¹

People with I/DD also do not have healthy eating habits - only 11 percent of people with I/DD report eating 5 or more servings of fruit or vegetables a day compared to 23 percent of the general population in our country. The reasons for this are quite complicated as we will explain further.

The Arc firmly believes that ignoring health disparities experienced by people with I/DD will not only exacerbate our inability to improve quality of life but also contribute to rising health care costs.

¹ The Arc HealthMeet Assessment Results: <http://www.thearc.org/file/Health-Assessment-Years-1-3-Technical-Report-FINAL.pdf>

However, with regard to AB 501 and AB 530 we advise caution: Limiting an individual's food choices can be extremely problematic. People with disabilities often already have diet restrictions that limit their food choices for medical reasons. They also face many barriers to living a healthy lifestyle and food choice is just one of them:

People with I/DD struggle with:

- access to transportation
- limited finances
- lack of education about healthy eating and food preparation.

People with I/DD are also often not completely in control of their food purchases, choices and preparation as they depend on support professionals for many of these tasks.

A higher percentage of people with disabilities have lower incomes and, therefore have difficulty affording more expensive foods. They are more likely to live in “food deserts” with limited access to the type of grocery stores that offer fresh, healthy foods at affordable prices. Because many people with disabilities do not drive and rely on public transportation, this creates additional expenses and barriers if stores are distant or not on bus lines. **For these reasons, we oppose the restrictions put in place through AB 530, believing they ultimately will be harmful to people with disabilities.**

Providing financial incentives for certain food purchases (as proposed through the AB 501 pilot), is a promising strategy, but may not result in sustainable change. If the Assembly goes the route of a pilot program in AB 501, The Arc Wisconsin strongly suggests adding an educational component.

The Arc's recent investment in health education for people with I/DD has included use of an evidence-based program - *HealthMatters* - that has proven results. The program uses hands-on instruction for people with disabilities in everything from healthy food choices, to grocery shopping, food preparation and exercise. **We have found that without these educational supports to change habits for people with disabilities, simply addressing the costs of food is not enough.**

Currently The Arc Wisconsin has three local chapters - The Arc of Greater Columbia County, The Arc of Racine and The Arc Fond du Lac - each implementing this curriculum with co-horts of 45 individuals with disabilities to improve their health and track their outcomes. The Arc Racine will graduate a class of transition age youth in a few weeks.

A research report authored by The Arc of the United States followed more than 1700 people with I/DD who completed this training. People lost weight, improved their BMI, lowered blood pressure and, most importantly, reported making lifestyle changes. Three out of four participants (76%) reported using the information they learned to make healthier lifestyle choices.

Achieving the outcomes the Legislature desires with reforms to the FoodShare program should involve a comprehensive, respectful and thoughtful approach for the people with disabilities who depend upon the program. A pilot project offers the ability to experiment and get it right. We urge you to consider the significant barriers these individuals face in accessing healthy foods and the support they may need to live a healthier, higher quality life.