

Wisconsin Council of Churches

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TO: Senate Committee on Public Benefits, Licensing, and State-
Federal Relations
FROM: Peter Bakken, Coordinator for Public Policy
Wisconsin Council of Churches
RE: Senate Bill 624, Photo Identification Cards for FoodShare Recipients

Thank you for taking my testimony on Senate Bill 624.

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 19 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. 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 for policies that will promote the good of the community and all its members.

We respect and share the aim of this bill to prevent waste, fraud and abuse in the FoodShare program. However, we have real concerns about its impact on those who turn to public assistance in time of need.

Senate Bill 624 is supposed to improve the stewardship of public funds while helping the truly needy. This is a praiseworthy goal. Unfortunately this bill will most likely have the opposite effect. Implementing this proposal would be very costly, while doing little if anything to reduce fraud. Further, it would undermine the very purpose of FoodShare (Wisconsin's name for SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) by increasing the obstacles faced by people who are simply trying feed their families.

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 just like a debit card. Prior to the introduction of EBT cards, participants used paper coupons, which gave rise to the now-obsolete term "Food Stamps." As a result, it was obvious when someone was using their public benefits in the checkout line. That contributed to a stigma that even now deters many eligible people, especially seniors, from applying for FoodShare. In contrast, the EBT card provides people with access to food without setting them apart, allowing them to obtain it with dignity, freedom of choice, and personal responsibility.

We pray and work together for the unity and renewal of the church and the healing and reconciliation of the world



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This bill unnecessarily – and expensively -- complicates the FoodShare program. Persons needing assistance would have to travel to a public benefits office to have their photo taken. This runs counter to the progress Wisconsin has made in streamlining the application process through its online, multi-program application system. It creates new hurdles for people who have challenges finding the time or the means to travel to an office during its service hours. Those most affected would include those who need assistance the most: seniors, people with disabilities, families with children, and low-income workers. People who need help will be discouraged or prevented from applying.

This bill also introduces an added burden for business. If FoodShare participants are required to show a photo ID at the checkout line, federal rules require that everyone else using a debit or credit card would have to do the same – an added burden for retailers and an inconvenience for customers that would only increase resentment of the FoodShare program and its participants.

If the requirement for everyone to show a photo ID is sidestepped, people in poverty will be singled out and stigmatized. Treating all people with dignity and respect, regardless of their economic status, is not just a federal requirement – it is a moral obligation. 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.

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. For these reasons, the Wisconsin Council of Churches opposes SB 624.

Thank you for considering our position on this bill.