

LEGAL ACTION OF WISCONSIN

Providing free legal services to low-income Wisconsin clients since 1968 • Proporcionando servicios legales gratuitos a clientes de bajos ingresos en Wisconsin desde 1968

TO: Senate Committee on Economic and Workforce Development
FROM: Abby Bar-Lev Wiley, Legislative Director, Legal Action of Wisconsin
RE: Impact of SB 902/AB 935 on Legal Action's Clients
DATE: February 9, 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on AB 935/SB 902. Legal Action of Wisconsin (LAW) is the largest non-profit law firm providing high-quality, free civil legal aid to low-income people in 39 of Wisconsin's southern counties. Our broad reach and expertise means that we see what poverty looks like over a wide swath of the state, from urban and rural areas, from farmworkers to construction workers. One of our priority areas focuses on helping clients secure and maintain the government benefits necessary to meet their most basic needs including food, shelter, health, and income. Legal Action has serious concerns about how AB 935/SB 902 would impact our low-income clients.

AB 935/SB 902 Would Harm Legal Action's Clients and Make it Harder to Rejoin the Workforce

AB 935/SB 902 would require DHS to immediately reinstate the work requirement and employment and training program that have been waived during the pandemic, as well as immediately implement the FSET, or drug testing, requirement for eligibility in FoodShare. People are still getting sick with Covid. They are experiencing job losses or cuts or missed days due to Covid, or taking care of family members who are sick with Covid or quarantining due to exposures. This bill would make it harder for our clients who are barely hanging on by a thread to access benefits they need to be able to afford food and avoid going hungry. The goal of FoodShare Wisconsin is to help stop hunger and to improve nutrition and health by helping people in poverty get the food they need. By making it harder for people to receive Foodshare benefits, AB 935/SB 902 directly contradict the purpose of the program.

Not only would this bill be bad for people with low incomes, it would hurt the economy. When people go hungry, it makes it harder to be able to find and obtain work. In a study by Feeding America, 67% of people who were hungry had to choose between food and transportation, and 57% had to choose between food and housing.¹ In Wisconsin, most people rely on their cars or buses to get to job interviews, but losing FoodShare benefits would mean not being able to afford bus fare or car payments for many low-income people. And housing instability can spiral someone deeper into poverty with an increasing need for reliance on public benefits. Requiring DHS to implement FSET immediately and reinstate the work requirement and employment and training program, people who need FoodShare to avoid hunger will find themselves kicked off of the program, despite their best efforts to comply. As a result, there will be a greater reliance on public benefits as individuals struggle with the impacts of hunger.

¹ Feeding America, *Compromises and Coping Strategies* (2014), <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger>.

Administrative Office

633 West Wisconsin Avenue
Suite 2000
Milwaukee, WI 53203

Office 855.947.2529
Fax 414.662.4080

www.legalaction.org

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AB 935/SB 902 is Legislative Overreach that Hinders DHS From Doing its Job Properly

This bill represents legislative overreach into an arena where the DHS is best suited. The Department of Health Services is staffed by experts with deep experience in how to best implement programs that serve Wisconsinites in need and promote the economy. The Secretary-designee of DHS previously directed the Population Health Institute at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, the Deputy Secretary was previously regional President of the North Region of Ascension Wisconsin, and the Assistant Deputy Secretary has an expertise in policy advocacy and health care. The decision around implementation of requirements impacting public benefits must be made carefully and deliberately, and would best be left to DHS. When the legislature overreaches, Legal Action's clients are the ones who suffer.

While low-income people are still struggling with the economic impacts of the pandemic, AB 935/SB 902 would pull yet another rug out from under their feet.

Thank you for your consideration.

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