



Rebekah Gaston
Childhood Hunger Initiative Director
Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
Before the Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare
In Opposition to Senate Bill 372

February 1, 2016

Chairperson Pilcher-Cook and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today regarding Kansas Appleseed's reasons for opposing SB 372. As a nonprofit, nonpartisan anti-poverty organization, Kansas Appleseed is committed to advocating for policies that protect vulnerable and excluded Kansans. A significant portion of our advocacy work focuses on ensuring every child in Kansas has a safe, secure childhood and a hopeful future, including - at a minimum - consistent access to sufficient amounts of nutritionally adequate foods.

Our Childhood Hunger Initiative began because Kansas is falling far short of meeting our kids' most basic food-related needs. One in five Kansas kids is food insecure, without consistent access to nutritious food. Unfortunately, Kansas families and communities do not take sufficient advantage of federal nutrition programs that are designed to help ensure children aren't going hungry. In comparisons of actual participants to eligible individuals, Kansas ranks 50th in the nation for Summer Food Service Program participation, 33rd for school breakfast participation, and 46th for participation in SNAP, which Kansas calls the food assistance program. As a state, we cannot accept that Kansas kids are going hungry. Food assistance helps provide the fuel children need to succeed in school and have a chance at a better future.

At Kansas Appleseed, we're working to identify the causes for low food assistance participation and change the policies which discourage and prevent eligible individuals from receiving food assistance benefits. Causes for low participation include lack of awareness by eligible individuals who don't know they qualify for food assistance or don't know how to apply, potential recipients' embarrassment about asking for help, and counterproductive DCF policies and practices which create numerous, burdensome obligations recipients must meet to obtain and maintain food assistance benefits.

The DCF policies proposed in SB 372, when added to an already lengthy list of tasks for recipients to complete, many put in place by 2015's HOPE Act, combine to create significant hurdles for recipients to overcome. To apply for benefits, a food assistance applicant must complete a 22-page questionnaire, have an interview with a DCF case worker, and provide significant documentation of identity, income and expenses. Compliance with child support enforcement requires recipients to complete another lengthy questionnaire and return it within a short timeframe. Recipients have an ongoing obligation to notify DCF and the child support enforcement contractor of address changes. If a recipient does not respond promptly to a letter from DCF or a contractor, even if they didn't receive it, they could be deemed non-compliant and benefits will be cut off, possibly for months or years. Kansas has outlawed categorical eligibility, so a TANF recipient with an income at or below 32 percent of the federal poverty guidelines

must complete a separate application to receive food assistance benefits, which are available to individuals with incomes at or below 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines; this is a duplication of effort not only for the recipient but also for DCF staff.

Kansas has recently created new categories of ineligible individuals, barring individuals with past drug convictions from receiving food assistance benefits, even when there's no reason to believe they're currently abusing illegal drugs. We've changed the calculation for households with undocumented immigrants, counting a family of 4 comprised of two U.S. citizen children and two undocumented parents with a \$20,000 income as a family of 2 children with a \$20,000 income for food assistance eligibility purposes, denying citizen children the benefits that similarly situated children in other families would receive.

Most policymakers and advocates agree that moving Kansans out of poverty is an important policy goal. However, the patchwork approach of the past few years – creating an ever-lengthening to-do list for recipients, cutting off benefits for extended periods of time for minor infractions, excluding new groups from eligibility entirely – is not going to reduce poverty in Kansas.

To really help individuals move toward self-sufficiency, we need to take a step back and examine at the entire process – from application to renewal to the transition off of benefits – to reduce unnecessary burdens and bring back the policies that ensure benefits are available to help struggling Kansans get back on their feet. When eligible individuals apply for benefits, they should be approved quickly so they and their children aren't going without food or losing their housing while they wait for approval. If an individual is approved for TANF, they should automatically be approved for food assistance as well. We should limit recipients' cooperation requirements to steps that are truly necessary to ensure eligibility or move a recipient toward self-sufficiency, so recipients aren't so busy working to maintain their benefits that they don't have time to find a job, get into treatment or participate in an employment training program.

If we don't protect the safety net, the individuals who need assistance will fall further into poverty, making it that much more difficult for them to climb out. When unexpected things like job loss, illness or accidents happen, it's helpful to get support from family or friends, but for those without that support, food assistance is an essential help to provide people with the fuel and nutrition they need.

This bill is mostly duplicating provisions that already exist in Federal law, so it would not place significant additional burdens on food assistance recipients. However, it is placing unduly harsh penalties on recipients who don't comply quickly enough with food assistance work requirements, cutting off crucial benefits for months at a time. Federal law allows states to reinstate benefits as of the date of compliance, which would be an effective way to ensure that individuals are completing work requirements without taking the food from their and their children's mouths (a counterproductive action that would leave the individual without the fuel they need to bring themselves into compliance and get the job or job training they need to move out of poverty).

Senate Bill 372 will not help Kansans move out of poverty. Kansas Appleseed respectfully asks that you oppose the bill.