



To: Senate Committee on Human Services

From: Anthony Castaneda

Date: Monday, February 5, 2024

RE: Support for Senate Bill 1585

Dear Chair Gelser Blouin and Vice Chair Robinson and members of the Committee,

My name is Anthony Castaneda, and I am providing testimony on behalf of SEIU Oregon in support of Senate Bill 1585 and to advocate for the expansion of SNAP benefits to include access to hot foods for vulnerable Oregonians. Senate Bill 1585 is a step in the right direction to ensure Oregon is tapping into all available resources to expand access to nutritious meals.

Oregon has a rich history of labor unions advocating for workers' rights, fair wages, and social justice, and programs that benefit all residents regardless of socio-economic background. The labor movement has been instrumental in shaping policies that uplift workers and their families. Over the years, unions like SEIU have played a significant role in advocating for economic justice, recognizing that fair wages alone are insufficient without addressing broader issues such as access to essential resources like food.

The current state of hunger in Oregon is deeply concerning. Before the pandemic, 1 in 11 Oregonians faced food insecurity, unsure of where their next meal would come from. Today, the number has risen to 1 in 5 people across rural, urban, and suburban communities, reflecting the ongoing economic fallout of rising costs of food and housing, and the end of pandemic-era increased SNAP benefits.

The latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau reveals that about 11% of Oregon households are food insecure, struggling to balance rent, prescription costs, and groceries. This translates to 186,000 households, or 463,000 people, in Oregon facing the challenge of securing enough food. Among SNAP recipients in Oregon, 17% are 60 or older, and 22% reported living with a disability. These vulnerable populations often face barriers such as the lack of kitchen facilities, means to prepare and cook meals, and physical limitations, making access to hot foods particularly crucial.

Expanding SNAP benefits to include hot foods is an essential step in addressing the immediate nutritional needs of vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness. The federal prohibition from the 1970s restricting the use of SNAP dollars to purchase prepared meals poses a significant institutional barrier, particularly for those facing unique challenges in accessing hot food.

Senate Bill 1585 establishes a workgroup to maximize resources and moves the state towards a pilot program. Creating a mechanism for SNAP recipients to use benefits for hot meals not only addresses the nutritional needs of vulnerable individuals but also has positive economic and societal impacts. It supports local businesses, particularly struggling restaurants, by increasing demand for their prepared food options. This creates a win-win scenario by benefiting both eligible SNAP recipients and the local economy.

In conclusion, I urge you to support Senate Bill 1585. This step aligns with our state's commitment to the economic and physical well-being of all Oregon residents. By addressing the immediate food needs of vulnerable populations, we contribute to more compassionate and resilient communities across Oregon.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Anthony Castaneda