



St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
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Serving God and God's people since 1946

February 6, 2024

Submitted via Legislative Testimony Submission Form

Re: **Support for SB 1585** Relating to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits

Dear Senate Committee on Human Services, and Ways and Means,

On behalf of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, I write in strong support of SB 1585 *"Relating to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits"*. SB 1585 will address food insecurity in Oregon's most vulnerable populations by identifying administrable opportunities to expand access to and availability of prepared and food choices for people who cannot prepare their own meals due to 1) age, 2) disability, or 3) lack of kitchen facility, for example by adopting USDA-allowed and federally-funded flexibilities in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that states can opt into.

SNAP is a federally-funded safety net program that helps more than 750,294 low-income Oregonians meet their food needs.¹

St. Timothy's Church Sees the Need for More SNAP Options in Curry County

St. Timothy's Episcopal Church is a congregation in the Episcopal Diocese in Western Oregon, and an active part of the community of Brookings-Harbor in beautiful Curry County. We border California and the Pacific Ocean on Oregon's south coast.

With the decline of traditional logging and fishing industries, Curry County's population skews older: 36.6% of the county population is age 65 and up² (compare to the rest of Oregon, where people age 65 and up is just 18.6% of the general population³).

Curry County is like many rural areas that have seen consolidation of grocery stores into fewer but larger supermarkets, creating a food desert effect that is exacerbated by lack of public transit for people who do not have means or ability to drive independently.⁴

Our area's economy has morphed into a primarily tourism-and-retirement market of housing and restaurants catering especially to visitors and new residents with wealth from other areas. The result is that insecurity in food and affordable housing in our community has become apparent. Scarcity and inflation of the core necessities of food and housing have community members in more need than ever before seen.

¹ Oregon Hunger Task Force, *Curry County Hunger Fact Sheet 2023*, accessed Feb. 6, 2024, available at <https://www.oregonhungertaskforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023CurryCountyFactSheet-1.pdf>

² U.S. Census Bureau, Quickfacts Curry County, Oregon, Population Estimates for July 1, 2023, accessed Feb. 6, 2024, available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/currycountyoregon/PST045223>

³ Korhonen, Veera *Population Share of Oregon 2021, by Age Group*, accessed Feb. 6, 2024, available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1022743/oregon-population-share-age-group/>

⁴ Morton, Lois W., Ella A. Bitto, Mary J. Oakland, and Mary Sand. 2005. Solving the Problems of Iowa Food Deserts: Food Insecurity and Civic Structure. *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 70(1): 94-112. *Excerpt available at:* <https://oregonexplorer.info/content/kinks-the-rural-food-system?topic=146&ptopic=140>

To address our needs as a community, St. Timothy's Soup Kitchen participates in the rotating Brookings-Harbor Community Kitchen ministry. We serve approximately 275+ hot lunches every week on our assigned days: alternating Saturdays, Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays. Originally, we welcomed mostly seniors who sought an opportunity to socialize and enjoyed a warm meal prepared for them, especially as aging and disability took their toll on the ability to stand and prepare meals at length. During the summer, we would see more families with children come dine to stretch their food budget when school was not in session (in Curry County 64% of students are eligible for Free and Reduced Price school meals⁵).

Now, we are seeing an ever-increasing number of community members coming to eat (seniors, families, and people with disabilities) who are living in a vehicle or have no shelter and have no kitchen at all.

In other words, **most of the people who dine at the church are income-eligible for SNAP and** also would be eligible for a SNAP program DHS could plan under SB 1585 to target hunger in those who **are of advanced age, have a disability, or live without a kitchen.**

Oregon Can Increase Food Security By Adopting the USDA's State Option

We know that what we observe in Curry County isn't unusual: Oregon experiences some of the highest numbers of people and families who are living in poverty and people who are homeless, disabled and elderly have particular vulnerability to food insecurity, hunger and lack of readily available hot or prepared meals. These three vulnerable populations also have the fewer options for purchasing healthy food in the SNAP Program, despite their urgent need. SB 1585 will give Oregon Department of Human Services a mandate to identify creative and commonsense solutions to increasing food access, food security, and food choices for certain recipients of SNAP by looking at the options that the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture gives states in their statewide administration of the SNAP program.

The particular option of interest is called RMP, in which Oregon Dept. of Human Services could enter into agreements with additional food vendors to accept EBT/SNAP benefits by coding those recipients' EBT cards (electronically) to apply benefits for eligible food items at additional vendors who are currently excluded. Under federal SNAP option guidelines, the recipients eligible for this special code are those who are over 60, are disabled, or homeless and lack a kitchen facility.

What do we mean by additional vendors who are currently excluded? USDA's SNAP program considers a corner grocery or other food vendor a "restaurant" if over 50% of what it *sells* (not the ratio of offerings or percent of floor space dedicated to certain foods) are hot foods, re-heated foods, or cold prepared foods like a fruit cup or salad (even if there is no dine-in service). This means that many places for buying *allowed* groceries and food items are categorized as "restaurants" and therefore not available to SNAP recipients, if the grocer does over half its business in restricted food types.

The (so-called) "Restaurant" Meals Program (RMP) allows eligible individuals to use their SNAP benefits to purchase eligible foods, including prepared foods, at any qualified participating grocer, deli counter, restaurant, or other food vendor. It gives more flexibility to food vendors to opt-in to accepting SNAP/EBT at their option, and gives more options to aged, disabled, and homeless SNAP recipients about where to get their family's food.

Currently, 9 states have opted into RMP, including two of our Western states neighbors, Arizona and California.

⁵ Oregon Hunger Task Force, *Curry County Hunger Fact Sheet 2023*, accessed Feb. 6, 2024, available at <https://www.oregonhungertaskforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023CurryCountyFactSheet-1.pdf>

Right now, otherwise eligible low-income Oregonians who have SNAP, who are over 60 or disabled and unable to prepare meals for themselves, or are experiencing homelessness and do not have access to facilities to store or prepare foods, cannot access a hot or prepared food item that their California neighbors can at a store ten miles south, simply because **Oregon still needs to opt in** to the USDA's program.

How SB 1585 Will Help Close Food Access Gaps and Increase Nutritious Options

In speaking with our congregation and guests at the Community Kitchen, we see how the options explored through SB 1585 would make an immediate difference in the lives of our community members. Here are four people (names and some details changed for privacy) who would benefit from SB 1585:

Meet **Sharon**, a woman in her 80s who lives alone, and no longer drives. She lives just down the block from a popular, busy, corner store grocery that has a refrigerated dairy case, fresh fruits and vegetables, and shelf-stable groceries for sale. However, because 50% of the grocer's sales are coffee and cold sandwiches and salads during the morning and lunch rush, then under Oregon's current program, Sharon as a SNAP recipient cannot purchase (otherwise-eligible) milk, eggs, cereal, and bananas for breakfast here.

Or consider **Jason**, a young man who suffered serious injuries in a car accident that left his hands mangled. He can no longer grasp a knife to cut or pour without spilling. He is like **Dana**, who when their rheumatoid arthritis flares up, can't chop or open jars. Under the federal flexibility offered to states, both Jason and Dana would be eligible to have their SNAP card coded so that they could purchase prepared ingredients or assembled meals.

Katie is a mother who lost her housing after her tourism-industry position was cut during the pandemic. She and her two children slept in her car for days at a time between couch-surfing for several months, until their family received help from a church to get into an apartment she found, and she could start working again. During the time they were homeless, they did not have access to a kitchen to cook or store meat or cheese, and so Katie served her children peanut butter and jelly sandwiches she made in the back of the car. If Oregon had opted into the RMP program, she would have been able to purchase a rotisserie chicken or deli-counter soup to serve sometimes for warmth, nutrition, and variety.

A Boost for Stores, Delis, Food Counters, and other Food Vendors

In addition to increasing the options for *where* and *what* food can be bought by a household with SNAP benefits, adopting the RMP will lead to new opportunities for food entrepreneurs to tap into SNAP dollars. Many new food vendors could (but would not have to) opt into accepting EBT/SNAP. Economic research shows that for every \$1.00 EBT spent on the RMP, \$1.79 is generated in economic activity in the community where participating stores, delis, food counters, and other food vendors are located, thus benefiting the entire community.⁶ If SB 1585 leads to Oregon Dept. of Human Services adopting the federal RMP plan, we at St. Timothy pledge to partner with our local Worksource, Employment & Training program, Chamber of Commerce, and community college to provide outreach and assistance to interested food vendors and entrepreneurs to opt into this new source of customer dollars.

Our hope is that this bill will lead to Oregon adopting the RMP program for SNAP with the USDA, and then through a streamlined memorandum of understanding between Oregon

⁶ Food Research & Action Center, *The Positive Effect Of SNAP Benefits On Participants And Communities*, accessed Feb. 6, 2024, available at <https://frac.org/programs/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/positive-effect-snap-benefits-p-articipants-communities>

St. Timothy's Episcopal Church Support Letter for SB 1585

Department of Human Services and any eligible food establishment, regardless of urban/rural location.

SB 1585 will let Oregon explore options for rolling out plans to be sure that vulnerable Oregonians can access and use SNAP resources for nutritious meals, increasing food security, and making sound public health policy a state priority.

For these reasons, St. Timothy's Episcopal Church strongly supports SB 1585 and asks the committee members to vote in support to provide access to food security, food choices and food safety for our most vulnerable Oregonians.

Together in Service,


Fr. Bernie Lindley (Feb 6, 2024 14:22 PST)

Fr. Bernie Lindley, Vicar
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church

CC: Bryn Thomas, Bryn.Thomas@OregonLegislature.Gov