

Hunger Network in Ohio



Good morning, Chairwoman Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig and other members of the committee. My name is Nick Bates and I am an ordained Deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and called to serve as the Director of the Hunger Network in Ohio – an ecumenical, faith-based network that believes we can end hunger in Ohio by addressing the root causes of poverty.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in **opposition to SB 17 today**. This bill changes the rules and reporting requirements for the social benefit programs SNAP, Medicaid, and unemployment compensation.

SNAP is our number one defense against hunger. It is effective and efficient serving nearly 1.5 million Ohioans in November.¹ I visit many faith-based food pantries, and one thing is clear – **the faith community cannot replace SNAP**. We cannot rely on the Churches to solve community-wide problems. The body of Christ has many parts² and congregations cannot solve hunger and poverty on our own. We need a public commitment.

Benefit programs are more than individual lifelines – they are about the entire community. SNAP keeps grocery stores in low-income areas and generates \$1.54 worth of economic activity for every dollar of federal spending.³ Unemployment assistance protects communities when a recession hits. Medicaid not only keeps my neighbor healthy, but allows my neighbor's children to be healthy when they play with my children.

I have been doing anti-poverty work since 2004 and I am amazed at how people come together and find creative and collaborative ways to overcome the hurdles of poverty – in a true loaves and fish kind of way.⁴ I believe SB 17 will create additional hurdles for folks struggling to make ends meet. This proposal forces everyone to fit into one neatly tied box of poverty of what we assume poverty looks like, but the reality is poverty is diverse and people create very logical but different solutions for their circumstance. Below I will share a few examples on how SB 17 will add unnecessary hurdles to families navigating poverty.

¹ <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-November-2020-2.stm>

² 1 Corinthians 12:12

³ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-boosts-retailers-and-local-economies#:~:text=In%20fiscal%20year%202019%2C%20SNAP,food%20for%20consumption%20at%20home.>

⁴ Luke 9:10-17

Hurdle 1: EBT card photos discourage neighbors and clergy. In addition to doubling the administrative costs of producing EBT cards,⁵ the photo ID requirement will create barriers in grocery store check-out lines.

Currently, an authorized user must have the physical EBT card and its pin number. There is one card issued to the household. Spouses, children, or grandparents might not be pictured on the card, but are authorized users. In my 2019 testimony on this issue, I shared a story of two kids using their household's EBT card to purchase food⁶ for their family. Clearly their picture would not be on the card. Similarly, households can authorize other people to use their card on their behalf. I know pastors and congregation members who regularly do the grocery shopping for others. Clearly an EBT photo would not match their pastor or volunteer.

This becomes even more difficult for African American clergy, volunteers, and social workers who may run errands for others and be seen as suspicious, because they are carrying a card that has a white person's picture on it. Lutheran Pastor Rev. Larry Novak – an HNO board member - shared a story of Ruth when he testified in 2019 on this issue. Ruth is an African American woman who serves her neighbors in Bellefontaine, and she was concerned about what will happen if she is carrying a card with a white person's picture on it.⁷

Hurdle 2: Change reporting doesn't reflect the inconsistency of low-wage work.

SB 17 will also require households to report changes to their income within 10 days of that change occurring. Most of us in this room probably know how much money we will make this year, or have a way of figuring it out. We know when our household income will increase or decrease and will adjust accordingly. However, this is not the reality for individuals living in the low-wage economy. Income changes weekly.

Most low-wage workers are hourly employees and their schedules fluctuate from week-to-week. Let's imagine a person working in a restaurant who applies for benefits in October. She is one of more than 500,000 people who work in restaurants and bars across Ohio⁸ - many of who rely on tips for their income. She works regularly and then in December she makes a few hundred dollars above her normal monthly earnings. It wasn't in a big bonus, or adjustment to her pay rate. It was because the restaurant was filled and people ordered desert and extra glass of wine in the run up to the holidays. This waitress, wanting to keep her paperwork in order, reports earning a few hundred extra dollars within 10 days of recognizing the change. This causes her to lose her benefits. In January she is scheduled for the same hours and same shifts, but she is sent home early every night because the restaurant is slow. At the end of the month, she is short on cash and has to decide whether to pay rent, take out a payday loan, or not buy food. We cut her benefits because SB 17 didn't accurately acknowledge how the economy works for low wage people.

⁵ <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/download?key=13073&format=pdf>

⁶ Testimony delivered on Oct. 9, 2019 <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/legislation-committee-documents?id=GA133-SB-165>

⁷ Testimony delivered on Oct. 13, 2019 <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/legislation-committee-documents?id=GA133-SB-165>

⁸ <https://restaurant.org/downloads/pdfs/state-statistics/ohio.pdf>

Hurdle 3: Work Requirements don't recognize the value of all work equally. Many Ohioans between 55 and 65 provide immeasurable value by caring for grandchildren or aging parents. Targeting this demographic with additional work requirements will harm these networks of support. These caregiving relationships are not official employer/employee relationships, because family is family. There will not be a box on a form that will exempt them or acknowledge that they are working. We cannot pass a law that will undercut family's support of one another.

Hurdle 4: The elimination of categorical eligibility will waste time of clients and volunteers. Under current law, people apply for benefits online. Many though, rely on non-profit programs, including trained church volunteers, to assist in the application process. The vast majority of the time, people qualify for multiple programs at the same time. SB 17 will remove the presumption of qualifying for additional benefits and require more work on our congregational volunteers and reduce the number of people they can serve each day.

Sixty-nine percent⁹ of Americans do not have at least \$1,000 in savings. Statistically speaking, it is unlikely that a person applying for SNAP have a secret hidden treasure. The requirement of separate applications will waste time and frankly intimidate people.

Hurdle 5: Harsh asset testing limits will force families into impossible choices

Asset testing also looks at items in addition to cash. This bill requires families to potentially sacrifice long-term opportunities for a short-term gain. For example, a family could be required to sell a car, creating additional barriers toward financial stability. In rural Ohio, for example, many families have a family car, a truck, and an off-road vehicle to travel around their property. For many, these are all necessary. One for family travel, the other for work, and one to properly care for their land. This is one example where the increased asset testing becomes problematic.

In Conclusion – Each hurdle will disrupt service delivery to people who are working and trying to play by the rules. Most of these families do not have the cash-on-hand to handle a few weeks of additional processing time and will be forced to go without food, not pay their bills on time, or take-out payday loans. These new hurdles will do little to nothing to prevent fraud or abuse of the system and instead will penalize our hardworking neighbors who are struggling to make ends meet. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.

The Hunger Network in Ohio is a non-profit, non-partisan network that has board leadership from the ELCA, UMC, UCC, and Episcopal Dioceses in Ohio. They receive support from congregations, individuals, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as part of their State Public Policy Office Network.

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⁹ <https://money.yahoo.com/survey-69-americans-less-1-171927256.html>