

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 21, 2016

The Honorable Scott Walker  
Governor of Wisconsin  
115 East Capitol  
Madison, WI 53702

Dear Governor Walker:

FoodShare, Wisconsin's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), is essential to improving food security for thousands of low-income individuals and families in Wisconsin. It is critical that this program remains accessible and available to Wisconsin families and individuals who are struggling to make ends meet while they look for work in a state economy that continues to lag behind our neighbors and the nation. We are concerned that the state's recent changes in FoodShare eligibility and the under-performing FoodShare Employment and Training (FSET) program are moving vulnerable Wisconsinites deeper into poverty rather than lifting them up.

Recent reports have concluded that poverty in Wisconsin has reached alarming levels.<sup>1</sup> In fact, poverty rates are the highest they have been in years in many parts of the state. Our goal is helping people achieve economic security and independence, but the state's employment and training programs are not working as promised to achieve this goal.

Unfortunately, your Administration is failing to ensure people are fully aware of and participating in the FSET program, and recent reports show that only 10 percent of recipients who were referred to FSET have been successfully placed in jobs. In addition, federal corrective actions have been placed on ResCare,<sup>2</sup> a private vendor that is supported by taxpayer funding. ResCare operates FSET in Milwaukee County and six other counties and is the subject of civil rights violations and non-compliance with Wisconsin's approved FSET plan. We are deeply troubled by these reports and the fact that your plan relies on a state program that is not functioning as promised to Wisconsin taxpayers.

While the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 requires able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) receiving SNAP benefits to either work or participate in work training programs such as FSET, the law allows exemptions for states experiencing high unemployment rates. Currently, 20 counties and 10 cities in our state have unemployment levels that would allow them to qualify for an exemption waiver. The idea for the waiver is simple: we should not require people to have jobs in order to receive SNAP benefits when they are unable to find work because the economy is suffering and state job training programs are failing to keep their promise of moving people from dependence to independence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Significant Changes in Wisconsin Poverty: Comparisons of the Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2010-2014 and 2005-2009 5-Year Estimates*, University of Wisconsin-Madison Applied Population Lab (Dec. 15, 2015), [http://www.apl.wisc.edu/publications/acs\\_5years\\_dec15/acs\\_poverty\\_brief.html](http://www.apl.wisc.edu/publications/acs_5years_dec15/acs_poverty_brief.html).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Tim English, Regional Administrator, Midwest Region, United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, to Kitty Rhoades, Secretary, Wisconsin Department of Health Services (Oct. 14, 2015), <http://www.hungertaskforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/FNS-Correspondence-to-State-WI-ET-Visit-10-14-15.pdf>.

In the face of economic insecurity across Wisconsin, you have chosen to reject this exemption waiver option, putting thousands of vulnerable Wisconsinites at risk of losing access to critical food assistance. Instead of denying access to food, we urge you to reconsider your decision and reinstate Wisconsin's long-held federal waiver to ensure continued food security for Wisconsinites struggling to get ahead in a struggling economy. The impact of your decision is being felt in very real ways by low-income individuals who are struggling to find employment. Already, reports indicate that over 30,000 Wisconsinites have been kicked off of the FoodShare program for not meeting the FSET program requirements, including 16,560 in Milwaukee County since the requirements went into effect on April 1, 2015.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, your decision has also put a strain on our Wisconsin food banks, who help our most needy avoid hunger, and are now facing an increased demand that may jeopardize their food supply. Hunger Task Force, for example, already serves over 34,000 individuals each month in Milwaukee County. If these trends in FoodShare disenrollment continue, there could be a dramatic increase in the number people turning to Hunger Task Force for assistance.

The solution to these problems should not be to build barriers and make it harder for people to achieve economic independence. Rather, we must continue to support opportunities to lift people up and out of poverty and ensure that our jobs training programs are truly working. As such, we urge you to immediately restore food assistance to thousands of individuals by requesting and reinstating the waiver on federal work requirements for ABAWD FoodShare recipients in the 20 counties and 10 cities that are currently eligible and continue working to fully implement all federal recommendations and corrective actions for FSET.

We look forward to hearing from you on this critical matter.

Sincerely,



Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator



Gwen Moore  
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress



Ron Kind  
Member of Congress

Cc: Kitty Rhoades, Wisconsin DHS Secretary

<sup>3</sup> *FoodShare Employment and Training (FSET) Program Data*, Wisconsin Department of Health Services (Jan. 29, 2016), <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/initiatives/fset-data.htm#state-referred>.