

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 2641

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Hearing Date: April 13, 2021 8:00 AM

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Omar Rodriguez

Manager of Grants and Advocacy

Pharr, TX

The Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley is in full support of this bill.

Kara Nickens, CEO

Wichita Falls Area Food Bank

Wichita Falls, TX

My name is Kara Nickens, and I am the chief executive officer of the Wichita Falls Area Food Bank and a member of Feeding Texas. The Wichita Falls Area Food Bank supports the committee substitute for House Bill 2641 because ensuring needy families can access SNAP is critical to the mission of our food bank. Our food bank serves a 12-county area slightly larger than the state of Massachusetts and works with 180 local partners to nourish our communities. In addition to emergency food distribution, we offer nutrition education and help people apply for SNAP and other benefits through a partnership with Feeding Texas and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. We also supply meals and snacks to senior centers, day care centers, and after-school programs and administer the farmer's market nutrition program for seniors and new moms. Before the pandemic, the food insecurity rate in our service area was over 16% -- among the highest rates in Texas. Over 37,000 of our community members faced hunger—and that was before COVID-19 shut down the economy. Since the pandemic hit, food insecurity has soared along with the number of people in our lines. Most of the folks we are seeing have never needed food assistance before. These are people who lost their jobs and their livelihoods overnight. Even some of our donors have been among those seeking help. As a rural food bank, we have faced distinct challenges during the economic downturn. We have to pay more to feed each person than our larger urban counterparts do because we are located in a food desert. To reach the people in the most remote parts of our service area we have to do mobile delivery--to towns like Electra and Throckmorton. So we were especially hard hit by the increase in transportation prices. I can assure you that my food bank has done everything we can to meet the increased demand, but we face significant challenges ahead in delivering the close to 10 million meals that will be needed this year to meet the demand. That is why I urge you the committee to support the committee substitute for HB 2641. Because SNAP is the most immediate way to get people out of our lines and into the grocery store. The current limits on vehicle value prevents too many needy Texans from accessing the temporary help they need to weather crises like the one we are going through now. Many of our clients have been forced to move in with other family members to make ends meet. The people we serve need reliable cars to look for work. They need reliable cars to get their kids to school. They need to be able to help elderly family members get to doctors' visits. Trying to sell a car quickly during an economic downturn just so your kids can eat is not a compassionate or practical policy.

Jamie Olson, Director of Government Affairs

Feeding Texas

Austin, TX

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is our nation's first line of defense against hunger and a means-tested program. This means that applicants must have income below a certain level to qualify for assistance. Texas also uses a Vehicle Asset Test to determine SNAP eligibility, which is a limit placed on the value of the vehicles that a household may own and still qualify for the program. In the late 1990's, USDA authorized states to set their own vehicle and cash asset limits, or to eliminate

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the asset test entirely. Thirty-five states have used this option to eliminate asset tests completely. Texas chose to update the limit to \$15,000 for the highest-valued vehicle owned by the household but kept the \$4,650 limit--set by Congress in 1973—for additional vehicles. If a car's value exceeds these limits, they do not qualify for food assistance.

Depending on how old you are, both 1973 and 2001 were a LONG time ago. It's time to update the vehicle asset limits so that all Texans in need can access temporary food assistance when they fall on hard times, without scrambling to sell a vehicle that they may rely on to get to work. This is particularly important during times of crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, which catapulted hundreds of thousands of working families into poverty overnight.

Before the pandemic, one-in-seven Texas families struggled with food insecurity. That number soared to one-in-four at the height of the economic crisis, as did the number of Texas waiting in line at our food banks. Most of these folks had never needed food assistance before. These are people who lost their jobs and their livelihoods overnight. One of the things we noticed—when food banks shifted to a drive-through model to limit in-person contact—was the kind of cars people were driving. There were more late-model vehicles, more big shiny trucks.

So we started asking folks with nice cars whether they had applied for SNAP. Some said yes, but they were denied; others no—they didn't think they would qualify or hadn't even heard of the program. One guy in line at a Central Texas Food Bank distribution shared his story: he's a single dad who uses his truck for freelance construction work. When the pandemic hit, he not only lost income, but his apartment as well. He now lives in his truck with his son, but was denied SNAP due to the value of his vehicle.

HHSC data shows that between Jan 2019 and Dec 2020, 1,263 SNAP applicants were denied benefits due to vehicle resources on average each month. This includes over a year's worth of denials before the pandemic even hit. We need to update these limits so we can get more people out of food bank lines and into the grocery store. Trying to sell a car quickly during an economic downturn just so your kids can eat is not a compassionate or practical policy.

Rachel Cooper

Every Texan

Austin, TX

Every Texan supports HB 2641 by Rodriguez as it will reduce hunger in Texas by updating the state's outdated vehicle asset limits for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to more accurately reflect the true cost of reliable transportation.

As the record long lines of cars waiting for help from food banks throughout the pandemic have shown, millions of Texans are a paycheck away from hunger. These are families that work, and own cars to get to work, but have limited savings so they have little ability to absorb a loss of income. SNAP is designed to respond quickly to crises like the loss of a job by supplementing food budgets and making it possible for struggling families to buy the food they need at their local grocery store. But many of the families waiting in line at food banks across the state were there because of Texas' outdate vehicle asset test limits that disqualified them from SNAP even with little to no income to buy food.

Texas chooses to enforce stringent SNAP eligibility guidelines that go beyond federal requirements. In addition to our income limit, since 2001 Texas has allowed a resource limit of \$5,000 in countable cash, a first vehicle worth up to \$15,000, and any additional vehicles can be worth up to \$4,650 (any excess vehicle value is counted towards the cash resource limit). These limits were never indexed to inflation and no longer reflect the current cost of a safe and dependable family car or truck.

The negative impact of outdated vehicle limits is magnified because to receive SNAP in Texas most adults must work or be looking for work through the SNAP Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) program for at least 30 hours per week unless they are exempt. As public transportation options are extremely limited, 90 percent of Texans drive to work and maintaining steady employment requires owning a vehicle capable of passing the state's rigorous inspection system. The current vehicle limits, especially the lower limit of \$4,650 which was originally set in the 1970's, can no longer cover the cost of a reliable car (currently a 2005 Ford Expedition with 237,000 miles is listed for \$4,650).

HB 2641 updates Texas' SNAP vehicle limits to reflect the rise in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for new vehicles. By indexing to the CPI, SNAP vehicle values will more closely align with the intent of the Legislature when vehicle limits were last updated

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in 2001 and would more accurately capture the prices of today's cars and trucks.

Katherine Byers, Dr.

Houston Food Bank

Houston, TX

In order to determine a family's SNAP eligibility, HB 2641 would, on a yearly basis, index the vehicle values to inflation so the first vehicle valued at \$15,000 is raised to approximately \$22,500 and the second at \$4,650 is raised to \$7,000. This helps ensure that families do not have to choose between the motor vehicles which assist them in getting to work and school and their food security. While an improvement to current policy, This legislation would help the most families if the value of the second vehicle was raised to that of the first.

Kathy Turner

self, retired

McGregor, TX

I oppose this bill. The current law is sufficient and superior.