

TO: Health & Human Services Committee
FROM: Tom Venzor, Executive Director
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: March 2, 2023
RE: LB84 (Eliminate Sunset on SNAP Eligibility) (Support)

The Nebraska Catholic Conference advocates for the public policy interests of the Catholic Church and advances the Gospel of Life through engaging, educating, and empowering public officials, Catholic laity, and the general public.

Access to food cannot be reduced to a purely economic question, even if economic and financial considerations are prudent for thoughtful public policy deliberations. While we may not often think about food in moral terms, provision of food is indeed a moral issue. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have noted: “Food sustains life itself; it is not just another product. Providing food for all is a Gospel imperative, not just another policy choice.”¹

This Gospel imperative to provide food to the hungry, as we hear in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, is ultimately rooted in the dignity of the human person. Again, to draw from the U.S. Bishops’ teaching on food access:

“The dignity of every person must always be respected because each person is a precious child of God. In light of our commitment to the right to life of every person, we believe all people also have basic rights to material and spiritual support, including the right to food, which are required to sustain life and to live a truly human existence. This clear commitment to the dignity and value of every human life must be reflected both in individual choices and actions and in the policies and structures of society.”²

The imperative of meeting the needs of the hungry, of course, is a responsibility that falls not only to each and every one of us as individuals, but it is also a responsibility for other forms of community and society, such as the family, religious organizations, private associations, and governmental entities. Each of these “cells” of society play a complementary, yet unique, role in addressing what Pope Francis has called the “scandal of hunger.”³ Being confronted by this scandal should “challenge[] our personal and social conscience, in order to achieve a just and lasting solution” to hunger.⁴

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food* (2012), available at <https://www.usccb.org/resources/i-was-hungry-you-gave-me-food> (last accessed on March 2, 2023).

² Ibid.

³ Pope Francis, “Message of Pope Francis for World Food Day 2013,” available at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/food/documents/papa-francesco_20131016_messaggio-giornata-alimentazione.html (last accessed on March 2, 2023).

⁴ Ibid.

LB84, which would eliminate the sunset of the 165% gross income limit for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) adopted by the Legislature in 2021, is a step in the right direction for addressing the food security needs of Nebraska’s low-income population. The legislative and moral act of maintaining the gross income eligibility at 165% of the Federal Poverty Limit (FPL) would continue food access to thousands of households.

Through retaining the gross income eligibility, LB84 helps to reduce the “cliff effect” which refers “to the sudden and often unexpected decrease in public benefits that can occur with a small increase in earnings.”⁵ This cliff effect “can create an anchor into, rather than a ladder out of, poverty.”⁶

By reducing the cliff effect, LB84 creates a culture of opportunity. This culture of opportunity is not only a culture of opportunity to access needed food assistance but also a culture of opportunity that helps families arrive at economic self-sufficiency and a greater sense of accomplishment.

The people of God who make up the Catholic Church in Nebraska will continue to do their part to meet the needs of the poor—whether that be through providing for the spiritual needs of those seeking comfort in Christ, empowering parents living in poverty with more educational choice opportunities, or providing housing, food, counseling, and clothing assistance to Nebraska’s low-income families.

Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska—the charitable outreach arm of the Diocese of Lincoln—last year provided 306 tons of food given to the hungry of southern Nebraska. This includes everything from food pantry services to providing sack lunches to the homeless and hungry to providing full Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners to hundreds of families in need.

Catholic Charities of Omaha—the charitable outreach arm of the Archdiocese of Omaha—last year distributed 2.1 million pounds of food to nearly 300,000 people through their food pantries and a mobile food pantry and homebound food delivery program.

The point is not to boast of the Church’s efforts, but to underscore one last policy argument for your consideration. The U.S. Bishops calculate that “all the food that churches and charities provide to hungry people is only about 6 percent of what is provided by federal government nutrition programs.”⁷ The Catholic Church, among so many others, is doing what we can to address the “scandal of hunger” in our communities, but more action is needed to combat hunger in Nebraska. This action must come not only from private individuals acting out of their charity and selfless generosity, but it must also come from broader societal actions such as public policy.

We respectfully request that you advance LB84 to General File. Thank you for your time and consideration.

⁵ National Conference of State Legislatures, “Moving On Up: Helping Families Climb the Economic Ladder by Addressing Benefits Cliffs,” p. 1 (July 2019).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Hope in a Time of Poverty: Nutrition and Food Security,” available at <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/economic-justice-economy/hope-in-a-time-of-poverty-nutrition> (last accessed on March 2, 2023).