Rhode Island Food Policy Council

Testimony by Sheila Brush on behalf of Rhode Island Food Policy Council to the House Committee on the Judiciary in opposition to House Bill 5249

April 14, 2015

The Rhode Island Food Policy Council was established two years ago to promote a more accessible, equitable and sustainable food system in Rhode Island. The 22-member Council includes food producers, processors, distributors, consumers and recyclers, as well as professionals in public health, food safety and other related fields. One of our main goals is to ensure that every Rhode Island resident will have access to safe, fresh, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, regardless of income or race.

Approximately 180,000 Rhode Islanders — 17% of our population — currently depend on SNAP benefits to help ensure that they will have sufficient food. The provisions of House Bill 5249 would make it more difficult for low income families to use SNAP EBT cards to purchase groceries, and for that reason the RI Food Policy Council strongly opposes the bill.

We want to emphasize 5 points.

The use of a PIN number in conjunction with the SNAP EBT card already provides safeguards against an unauthorized person using an EBT card. The EBT card is issued to the head of an eligible household, and that person’s name appears on the card. The card holder selects a PIN number that must be punched in when the EBT card is used. The safety feature in place to ensure that the person using an EBT card has been authorized by the cardholder to do so is the fact that the user must have been given the PIN number.

Under Federal rules, other members of the household or other authorized representatives of the household may legally utilize the card to purchase groceries on behalf of the eligible household. Requiring a photo ID would make it impossible for a household member who did not have a photo ID to shop on behalf of the household.

Since other household members may legally use an EBT card to purchase groceries, when someone presents an EBT card and a photo ID to a cashier, the name on the photo ID will not necessarily be the same as the name on the EBT card. So requiring a photo ID provides no check against misuse of a card.

The proposed penalty, which calls for a month-long suspension of a store’s authorization to accept EBT cards, could be highly detrimental to a low-income neighborhood. Imagine the impact on a low-income neighborhood with one grocery store if that store were to lose its ability to accept SNAP EBT cards for a month because a cashier had failed to check an ID.

Under Federal rules, SNAP beneficiaries cannot be treated differently than other shoppers. So if SNAP recipients are asked for photo identification, then all store customers using debit cards or credit cards must be asked for photo identification. We are concerned that this might discourage some stores from participating in SNAP.

For all of the above reasons, the RI Food Policy Council urges you to reject this bill.

Sheila Deming Brush
Policy Committee Chair
Rhode Island Food Policy Council

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