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Before the House Committee on Health and Human Services
In Opposition to House Bill 2600
Written Only

February 16, 2016

Chair Hawkins and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding Kansas Appleseed's reasons for opposing HB 2600. As a nonprofit, nonpartisan anti-poverty organization, Kansas Appleseed is committed to advocating for policies that protect vulnerable and excluded Kansans. A significant portion of our advocacy work focuses on ensuring every child in Kansas has a safe, secure childhood and a hopeful future, including – at a minimum – consistent access to sufficient amounts of nutritionally adequate foods.

Our Childhood Hunger Initiative began because Kansas is falling far short of meeting our kids' most basic food-related needs. One in five Kansas kids is food insecure, without consistent access to nutritious food. Unfortunately, Kansas families and communities do not take sufficient advantage of federal nutrition programs that are designed to help ensure children aren't going hungry. In comparisons of actual participants to eligible individuals, Kansas ranks 50th in the nation for Summer Food Service Program participation, 33rd for school breakfast participation, and 42nd for participation in SNAP, which Kansas calls the food assistance program. As a state, we cannot accept that Kansas kids are going hungry. Food assistance helps provide the fuel children need to succeed in school and have a chance at a better future.

At Kansas Appleseed, we're working to identify the causes for low food assistance participation and change the policies which discourage and prevent eligible individuals from receiving food assistance benefits. Causes for low participation include lack of awareness by eligible individuals who don't know they qualify for food assistance or don't know how to apply, potential recipients' embarrassment about asking for help, and counterproductive DCF policies and practices which create numerous, burdensome obligations recipients must meet to obtain and maintain food assistance benefits.

The DCF policies proposed in HB 2600, when added to an already lengthy list of tasks for recipients to complete, many put in place by 2015's HOPE Act, combine to create significant hurdles for recipients to overcome. To apply for benefits, a food assistance applicant must complete a 22-page questionnaire, have an interview with a DCF case worker, and provide significant documentation of identity, income and expenses. Compliance with child support enforcement requires recipients to complete another lengthy questionnaire and return it within a short timeframe. Kansas has recently created new categories of ineligible individuals, barring individuals with past drug convictions from receiving food assistance benefits, even when there's no reason to believe they're currently abusing illegal drugs. We've

changed the calculation for households with undocumented immigrants, denying citizen children who live with undocumented immigrants the benefits that similarly situated children in other families would receive.

Most policymakers and advocates agree that moving Kansans out of poverty is an important policy goal. However, the patchwork approach of the past few years – creating an ever-lengthening to-do list for recipients, cutting off benefits for extended periods of time for minor infractions, excluding new groups from eligibility entirely – will not reduce poverty in Kansas.

To really help individuals move toward self-sufficiency, we need to take a step back and examine at the entire process – from application to renewal to the transition off of benefits – to reduce unnecessary burdens and bring back the policies that ensure benefits are available to help struggling Kansans get back on their feet. When eligible individuals apply for benefits, they should be approved quickly so they and their children aren't going without food or losing their housing or other necessities while they wait for approval. We should limit recipients' cooperation requirements to steps that are truly necessary to ensure eligibility or to move a recipient out of poverty, so recipients aren't so busy working to maintain their benefits that they don't have time to find a job, get into treatment or participate in an employment training program.

If we don't protect the safety net, the individuals who need assistance will fall further into poverty, making it that much more difficult for them to climb out. When unexpected things like job loss, illness or accidents happen, it's helpful to get support from family or friends, but for those without that support, food assistance is an essential help to provide people with the fuel and nutrition they need.

The proposed administrative barrier of requiring identity verification from additional adult family members in households applying for food assistance will further reduce the number of eligible Kansans who cannot access food assistance benefits, causing more struggling Kansans to needlessly go hungry.

House Bill 2600 places unduly harsh penalties on food assistance recipients who don't comply quickly enough with work requirements, cutting off crucial benefits for months at a time. Federal law allows states to reinstate benefits as of the date of compliance, which would be an effective way to ensure that individuals are completing work requirements without taking the food from their and their children's mouths. The current proposal increases periods of ineligibility from three months for a first offense, six months for a second offense and one year for a third offense, counterproductive actions that would leave Kansas families without the fuel their children need to succeed in school and their adult members need to get the job or job training they required to come into compliance with food assistance work requirements (and eventually move out of poverty).

The HOPE Act went into effect on July 1, 2015. Between June 2015 and November 2015, 8,000 Kansans lost food assistance benefits. House Bill 2600 will create even more barriers between eligible Kansans and the benefits they need; rather than helping Kansans move out of poverty, this bill will keep more Kansans from climbing out. Kansas Appleseed respectfully asks that you oppose the bill.