

KIDS NEED TO EAT, INC.

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SB 372 Testimony for Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee

Chairwoman Pilcher-Cook, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share information relevant to proposed changes in eligibility for Kansas public assistance in Senate Bill 372. Kids need to Eat, Inc.(KN2E) sponsors *El Dorado LunchBox: Free Summer Meals for Kids* in Butler County. As KN2E's President and *LunchBox* Administrator, I am familiar with food insecurity issues among children in Kansas.

It is undisputed that children need reliable access to nutritious food into order to develop into healthy, responsible and successful adults. Now more than ever, Kansas needs its children and youth to grow to their fullest potential. Children are our state's future, and Kansas needs all of its children to succeed in life.

Childhood hunger is a public health issue that affects us all. Kids who don't get enough to eat are more likely to: struggle in school, get sick, have behavioral health problems, get into fights, and steal. Ensuring that families have access to adequate food for their children promotes the healthy development of children's brains and bodies, and promotes their ability to grow into responsible adults.

The LunchBox distributes free food to children during the summer to replace meals many kids eat for free in school when it is in session (over 70% of students in local elementary schools). Last summer it distributed over 16,000 meals to children. Local churches and civic organizations struggle with low attendance and declining revenues. It is not realistic to look to them to fill childhood nutrition gaps created by poverty and barriers to eligibility for food assistance benefits. Nonprofits like KN2E also face many challenges to meeting this need – including having to pay sales tax on food it purchases locally in order to provide it for free to children.

The harsh realities of childhood hunger in our communities is that many, if not most, food insecure households include an employed adult. These are the working poor. Too many local employers offer only part time jobs that don't even guarantee a minimum amount of hours each week, often with chaotic shift schedules, and generally paying minimum wage with no benefits. For example, a parent of two children working as a paraprofessional in our local schools struggles to pay rent and utilities, and needs financial assistance to ensure her children have access to nutritious meals.

KN2E Board member Sarah Johnston, MD, MPH, has conducted annual hunger surveys of 6th grade students since 2012. She has found that many kids are experiencing hunger, don't have enough to eat, skip meals due to lack of food at home, and some admit to stealing food due to hunger.

Early brain development is the foundation for the rest of a child's life. Children need nutritious meals for the healthy development of their bodies, brains and behavior. Hunger interferes with a child's ability to behave and learn, and can permanently affect a child's brain.

In considering changes to eligibility for food assistance programs such as SNAP, it is critical to always remember the consequences of those changes for the children. We need them to grow to their fullest potential for the workforce of the future. If we fail to feed the children now while their brains and bodies are developing, we lose a window of opportunity to help them grow into productive adults.