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Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 95
Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee

Dear Chair Schmidt and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, we are pleased to present this testimony on the importance of state options in implementing a three month time limit for unemployed childless adults in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a national, nonpartisan research and policy institute work on federal and state policies designed both to reduce poverty and inequality and to restore fiscal responsibility in equitable and effective ways. We apply our deep expertise in budget and tax issues and in programs and policies that help low-income people, in order to help inform debates and achieve better policy outcomes.

The Center has a long history of extensive work at the state and federal level on the SNAP. One area of recent focus has been the implementation of the three month time limit in SNAP for unemployed childless adults. We have published extensively about the history and impact of the time limit and the importance of the waiver option for states to respond to local needs.

The proposed SOAR Act (SB 95, Committee on Public Health and Welfare) would provide important flexibility for the state of Kansas by allowing the state to temporarily waive the current time limit in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in areas of the state with persistently high unemployment.

One of the harshest rules in SNAP limits unemployed individuals aged 18 to 50 not living with children to three months of SNAP benefits in any 36-month period when they aren't employed or in a work or training program for at least 20 hours a week. SNAP recipients have their benefits cut off after three months irrespective of whether they are searching diligently for a job or willing to participate in a qualifying work or job training program. This provision of federal law that passed as

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Attachment 1128

part of the 1996 welfare law is effectively a severe time limit for food assistance, even for people who are working less than half time or diligently looking for work.

The unemployed, nondisabled childless adults on SNAP subject to this rule tend to be very poor. According to USDA, the average income of jobless childless adults on SNAP is 17 percent of the poverty line, or just about \$2,000 a year. These SNAP recipients are generally low-skilled workers with limited job prospects. SNAP participants subject to the three-month cut-off are more likely than other SNAP participants to lack basic job skills like reading, writing, and basic mathematics, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has found.¹

When the time limit passed as a part of the 1996 welfare law, it included a provision to allow states to temporarily suspend the time limit in areas with sustained high levels of unemployment. Every state except Delaware has waived the time limit for at least part of their state at some point. During the recent recession, many states, including Kansas, qualified for state-wide waivers from the time limit. By 2016, most states had to reimpose the time limit in at least part of state, but many continue to waive hard hit areas of the state.

Kansas's current ban on applying for a waiver of the time limit even in times of high unemployment or disaster unnecessarily restricts the state's policy options. The waiver option is designed to allow states to respond to increased needs in areas with sustained high levels of unemployment during future economic downturns or other emergencies. Lifting the ban through the passage of SOAR will give Kansas the option to temporarily suspend this time limit in order to provide basic food assistance to unemployed workers who live in areas hardest hit by tough times and are unable to find employment due to a scarcity of jobs in the region.

Future temporary suspensions will also allow the state to:

- 1) Bring federal dollars into the hardest hit areas to help boost local economies.
- 2) Develop reasonable work requirements that better address the needs of unemployed adults who live in areas with sustained high unemployment. Separate from the time limit, Kansas can structure a work requirement to support people in their efforts to secure employment and access educational or training programs. Such a work requirement could allow SNAP participants working less than half time or searching for work to keep food on the table.
- 3) Alleviate the burden on local service providers like food banks and food pantries who are unable to meet all of the basic food needs of people with low income, particularly during downturns in the economy when the need for assistance increases dramatically.

The state option to request a waiver of the three month time limit has proven to be a powerful tool for states to mitigate temporary economic downturns, disasters and a sudden loss of jobs. Kansas policymakers will have greater flexibility and additional policy options to support unemployed

workers and parts of the state hardest hit by high rates of sustained unemployment as a result of challenging economic times.

If enacted, proposed SB 95 would improve the Governor's ability to respond to the needs of low-income Kansans.

Thank you for your consideration.

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ⁱ "Food Stamp Employment and Training Program," United States General Accounting Office (GAO—3-388), March 2003, p. 17.