



Aging Committee

March 3, 2016

Testimony regarding Raised Bill no. 241 An Act Concerning the Dollar Value of Farmer's Market Vouchers for Senior Citizens

Good Day, Senator Flexer, Representative Serra and members of the Committee on Aging. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut!, a statewide anti-hunger organization. We have a SNAP outreach and call center and work with many older adults to access food. I am here today to speak on Raised Bill 241, An Act Concerning the Dollar Value of Farmer's Market Vouchers of Senior Citizens.

The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) is administered by the Department of Agriculture with funding from both the State of Connecticut and the USDA. The program allows for access to fresh and locally grown food through the state's farmers markets for seniors. There is a corresponding program for those using WIC. This is a valuable program and we often hear complaints from providers that there are not enough vouchers for those who need them. This is a program in demand without enough available funds. So while we support the concept of this legislation to raise the minimum dollar value of the vouchers to \$25, we cannot support it without additional funding to keep everyone on the program, and possibly add more recipients.

The current value of the coupon is \$18 for seniors who must be over age 60, and under 185% of the federal poverty level, as verified from their participation in a means testing program. These are qualifications necessary for participation in the program. The legislation as written, allows for an additional qualification that is not consistent with the USDA regulations. **Starting on line 15– 16 stating "...or has been identified by a municipal elderly agent as being at nutritional risk", [or] should be changed to and to comply with federal regulations.**

These coupons are sought after and used. In 2015, 91% of all SFMNP vouchers were redeemed, an increase from 2014. Last year 32,000 seniors received coupons and it is clear that as more markets accept the coupons they are used. Currently there are 125 Farmers Markets with 300 farmers accepting the vouchers. This is a program that helps get good nutrition to our aging population but also needed funds to our farmers, and helps with our Connecticut Grown program. Again, if the mandatory allotment was raised to \$25 from \$18, without a corresponding increase in funds many seniors who depend on the vouchers would lose the opportunity to have them.

More and more farmers markets are accepting the coupons including 13 in Fairfield County, and 6 in Litchfield County. Last year, in Tolland and Windham counties every farmers market accepted the SFMNP vouchers. I know that there are many markets accepting them in

Hartford, Middlesex and New Haven counties but current information was unavailable. However, due to lack of funding no new sites are currently being added to the SFMNP, as stated on the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's website.

Going in the wrong direction there has been a loss of funding to the program over the years. Late last year, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture cut \$3,648 from the SFMNP as a result of the December 2015 deficit mitigation plan, and there are likely to be cuts in this year's budget as well. Between FY 2009 and FY 2015 Connecticut saw a decrease of 9% in federal funding for both programs. If we continue to cut the funding to these programs we not only harm the health of those who purchase these foods but we ultimately harm the health of our agricultural sector.

The decision must be made whether to give less people more buying power or keep the buying power the same for all, unless there can be a corresponding increase in funds, which would be the better choice, however unlikely. It is with much appreciation that the Committee on Aging is forward thinking in raising this bill, and with increased funding it has the full support of End Hunger Connecticut!

Thank you.