

Kerri Parker: The human impact of making food harder to reach

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Every week, in congregations across Wisconsin, we hear stories that remind us of a simple truth: hunger is not an abstract issue. It has a name, a face, a family. It sits in the pews with us, showing up in after school programs, in conversations at church suppers, and in quiet moments when someone pulls a pastor aside to ask whether we know where they can find groceries before payday.

For many of the people our churches serve, FoodShare isn't just a benefit, but the difference between meals on the table and empty cupboards. FoodShare is designed to preserve dignity and stability. Any proposed changes to the program must be understood through the lens of human impact.

One bill currently under consideration by our state legislators (AB 180), aims to restrict certain purchases by FoodShare participants. While the intention may be to promote healthier choices, the practical effect could be something quite different for the people we see every day. When access points shrink, it is not a line in the statute that feels the consequences; it is a parent trying to stretch a limited budget, an elder relying on the corner store because they no longer drive, or a family living in a neighborhood where the closest full-service grocery store is miles away.

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Many of the small retailers who accept FoodShare are cornerstones of their neighborhoods. They are where families walk to when the bus is late or a paycheck is short. They know their customers by name. If new, complicated purchasing rules make participation too costly or too risky for them, they may step away from the

program altogether. When a store stops taking FoodShare, it can create a ripple effect far beyond one transaction. It can pull an anchor out of a community already working hard to stay afloat.

These proposals also place families in an untenable position. Imagine being a parent standing at a checkout counter, unsure whether the items in your cart, chosen carefully and frugally, will be allowed. Imagine the embarrassment of being told “no” in front of neighbors or coworkers. For individuals already navigating stigma, that moment can reinforce the painful belief that their lives, their struggles, or their choices are being judged.

Our faith communities teach that every person has inherent dignity and worth. We believe a just society should make it easier, not harder, for people to meet their most basic needs. And we know that good intentions can still produce harm if we do not listen to the lived experiences of those most affected.

Wisconsin’s churches work shoulder-to-shoulder with food pantries, shelters, and other community partners. We understand the fragile balance that families maintain when accessing food, transportation, childcare, and employment. When a policy threatens to disrupt that balance, even unintentionally, we must speak up.

FoodShare is more than a nutrition program. It is a covenant between a community and its people, affirming that no one should go hungry in a state blessed with so much. Before policy proposals move forward, we urge lawmakers to consider the human stories that will unfold at the checkout counter, at the kitchen table, and in the quiet moments when families must decide which essentials they can live without.

Our congregations will continue to walk alongside those who struggle. But we cannot do this work alone, nor should we create conditions that increase hardship. As our state’s leaders weigh changes to FoodShare, let us remember the real measure of any policy: whether it honors the dignity of the people it affects and helps ensure that every neighbor has enough to eat.

The Rev. Dr. Kerri Parker is the executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches.