

Letter in support of LB 1116 Adopt the Grocer Reinvestment Option Act
(Sen. Ibach) hearing Ag Co 1/30/24

This letter in support of LB1116, is submitted on behalf of Food Bank for the Heartland. A “food desert” is an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food, especially fruits and vegetables. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation – food deserts are more common in areas with smaller populations, higher rates of abandoned or vacant homes and residents who have lower levels of education, lower incomes, and higher rates of unemployment. Areas as described exist across Nebraska, impacting rural and urban counties.

In Nebraska, 1 in 10 individuals, with 1 in 8 being children, experience food insecurity. Many food-insecure Nebraskans live in food deserts, compounding their challenges to access healthy food. The impact on these families is detrimental. The levels of fats, cholesterol and sugars consumed by people living in food deserts tend to be higher, causing higher risks for health problems and obesity rates. The lack of consistent access to nutritious food compounds for children – having a devastating impact on their potential to thrive. In addition to causing social and behavioral problems, there is a strong correlation between hunger and chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes — leading to long-term effects on a child’s mental, emotional, and physical health.

Food deserts are a serious problem across Nebraska. Food Bank for the Heartland is working hard to eradicate the short-term need for emergency or supplemental food. One resource our Food Bank utilizes is a Mobile Pantry - a one-day distribution event that provides fresh fruit and vegetables along with shelf stable foods to those who live in areas with limited access to supermarkets. In FY2023, the Food Bank hosted 403 mobile pantry events, providing 2,609,038 meals across our 93-county service area at a cost of \$2,146,772. These one-day distribution events reach people struggling with food insecurity including children, families, seniors and veterans. However, the distribution events are limited in scope. Consistent access to a grocery store with a variety of foods and enabling families to choose foods they prefer is optimum.

Opening a supermarket is an investment risk. Grant or loan funding to support efforts to retain or initiate a grocery store in areas of need creates a pathway forward to sustainability. The benefit to people living in food desert areas and helping to stabilize communities is laudable. Incenting these stores to accept SNAP and WIC payments is also an important aspect of this program. These nutrition programs inject cash into grocery stores and broaden the number families who can support a local retailer. The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) estimates that \$1 in SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity at local retailers. The jobs created or sustained in this retail sector also benefit families living in these communities.

Food Bank for the Heartland supports providing consistent access to healthy food and this bill would provide needed infrastructure funds to facilitate opening and sustaining grocery stores where they are needed most in Nebraska, to improve the health of Heartland families.