



February 20, 2024

Members of the Children, Youth and Families Finance and Policy Committee:

Second Harvest Heartland, a Brooklyn Park-based food bank serving a network of more than 1,500 food shelves and program partners across 41 counties in Minnesota and 18 in western Wisconsin, is pleased to offer our support for HF 3855 (Gomez), a bill directing the Department of Human Services to participate in the federal Restaurant Meals Program through the USDA.

We know that not everyone facing hunger has the home, health, or ability to use the groceries our food bank provides to hunger relief agencies. This includes individuals and families with inconsistent access to a kitchen (including unhoused individuals), people with challenges caused by physical mobility issues or chronic illnesses, or those who are simply managing through a crisis or time of transition.

To better support and serve these neighbors, we launched our innovative Kitchen Coalition program (then known as Minnesota Central Kitchen) at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This network of local restaurants and caterers turn food bank ingredients into nutritious, freshly prepared meals. Then, trusted nonprofits get those meals to neighbors on a predictable schedule.

To date, more than 4 million meals and \$17 million has been invested locally through meals prepared by community for community, and we continue to distribute 25,000 meals to our communities every week through 75+ nonprofit distribution partners. Thankfully, the legislature approved \$3.5 million for prepared meal program grants in the 2023 legislative session to support this approach to reducing hunger in our communities. Yet we know the need still exceeds our capacity to meet it through food banking alone.

This is why we are supporting HF 3855. While federal restrictions prevent Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants from using federal benefits to purchase hot or prepared foods in most cases, states can opt to participate in the Restaurant Meals Program in order to create more flexibility and fairness for food insecure Minnesotans. This in turn may encourage more eligible residents to participate in the SNAP program, which would boost Minnesota's low SNAP participation rates and inject more federal dollars into our local economies.

With food shelf visits and demand for emergency food assistance at all-time highs in our state, every little bit helps, and HF 3855 would expand food access, incentivize more eligible Minnesotans to participate in SNAP, and allow our neighbors to choose and enjoy the kind of foods that many take for granted. For these reasons, we hope you will consider supporting this bill, which will have a positive impact for some of our most vulnerable residents.

Sincerely,

Zach Rodvold
Director of Public Affairs
Second Harvest Heartland