

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE
WELFARE AND SAFETY COMMITTEE
JANUARY 14, 2005
Minkie Medora, MS, RD**

SENATE PUBLIC HEALTH, WELFARE & SAFETY

EXHIBIT NO. 4

PUBLIC HEALTH, 1-14-05

BILL NO. SB 29

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee:

My name is Minkie Medora. I am a registered dietitian. I serve on the board of the Montana Food Bank Network and chair the board's Food Policy Council. I am also a member of the Montana Dietetic Association and therefore represent both these organizations today.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support for SB29 today and to request that the current lifetime ban on food stamp and TANF benefits to people with drug felonies be removed from the state statutes.

The issue of drug use and addiction is a serious one and people with this history need treatment and rehabilitation. However, that is an entirely separate issue from allowing them to have adequate and nutritious food to eat, and financial assistance.

Taking away their food and financial support for a lifetime is punitive, meaningless and downright inhumane. It does not make sense to create hardships for a lifetime to this group of people that are struggling to get their lives and their family's lives back together. Many of the people effected are women with children. Our state does not impose this ban on people with other felonies. Besides this ban, people with drug felonies also have a ban on housing assistance in Montana. So when they complete their prison term and are out on probation or parole, they don't get the support they need, and often go right back into the correction system.

We are not talking about large numbers of people or large dollar benefits here. The benefits are all federal dollars and - as someone from the department could explain, with such small numbers, the administrative cost would not impact their state budget.

As a nutritionist and a person involved with problems of hunger in the state, I want to mention that hunger and food insecurity has increased steadily in the country as a whole, and has continued to increase in Montana. Montana ranks 11th in the nation for food insecurity and hunger. Since the 2003 census data was released, 12.8% of the people in our state are food Insecure, and of that number, 4% are seriously hungry. That means that not only do the adults go without meals frequently, but they have to cut back on the food they can give their children.

This is a serious issue - not just because of the hardship it causes and the struggle for food, but because lack of food security leads to poor nutrition, intake of low-cost foods that are or poor quality, development of chronic diseases and obesity. For example, the risk of type 2 Diabetes has increased steadily in adults and there is new concern about the number of children who are overweight and developing this adult-type diabetes. Eventually, the burden of these health problems falls on the state's Medicaid program.

The food stamp program is the single most effective program for reducing hunger and improving nutrition and health of people who are in greatest need for this benefit. In 2002 – nationwide 54% of the households on food stamps were families with children and 27% had a disabled person in the home. And most important – 71% of the families with FS stay on the program for less than 2 years. While the eligibility level for food stamps is about 130% of the poverty level, about 88% of all food stamp users are at 100% of poverty level, and of these about half are much poorer – that means they are at 50% of the poverty level.

Not only does the food stamp program provide food and nutrition, the program has an Education & Training (E&T) program. People receiving food stamps can also enroll in nutrition education classes in our state through MSU that have been extremely successful.

Hunger is not the only poverty issue that low-income families face. They have great difficulty in meeting costs for rent, utilities, child care, health care and other daily needs. Numerous families have to make choices between paying for rent, utilities, medications, child care or food.

With the current outlook in our state, it is not likely that resources in all of these areas will improve. It is also anticipated that serious cuts in programs that provide these benefits to the poor are likely to be made in the federal budget that Congress will be working on starting next month.

The TANF program provides at least partial relief to families strapped for cash. TANF is a term limited program, available only to adults with dependant children. Families are very careful not to use up their 5 year time limit unless they are in dire need. Besides cash assistance, the TANF program offers E&T, child care benefits and assistance with job search – all of which enables them to become self-sufficient.

Finally, the Montana Food Bank Network conducted a study this past year at seven food banks to learn the reasons why people need food. Our study showed that lack of money for expenses due to: child care, rent, utility, unemployment, health care costs, as well as low wages and fixed incomes were the reasons most often given.

The current ban is contributing to the problems that poor people face. Reversing this ban can have a tremendous impact in resolving these problems for the people effected by it.

Several states started out earlier with this same ban and many have changed their rules now. Many others are working on bills similar to ours this year. Repealing the ban has received strong bi-partisan support in the states. I urge you to do the same.

Thank you very much
Minkie Medora, MS, RD.