Tuesday, November 19, 2019

Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Rooms 111 & 146
Boston MA 02133

RE: S48/H145 An Act relative to an agricultural healthy incentives program

Dear Chairs Chang-Diaz and Khan, and Members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in response to S48/H145, An Act relative to an agricultural healthy incentives program, to the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities.

The Collaborative is a network of Massachusetts food system organizations, working to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. The Plan was developed for and accepted by the Massachusetts Food Policy Council, a 17-member entity comprising state agency, legislative, and industry representatives, established by the Legislature and Governor to develop recommendations, including legislative and regulatory changes, to promote sustainability and equity in the Commonwealth’s food system.

The Plan represents the views of thousands of residents and farms, as well as hundreds of organizations and businesses. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to food system policy, where issues of economic development, natural resources, equitable access to resources, and others are all taken into account when considering laws and regulations related to the food system. The goals of S48/H145 are directly addressed in an action item in the Plan:

Leverage and maximize the FINI grant award to increase use of SNAP and complementary benefit programs at farmers markets, farm stands, mobile markets, and for community supported agriculture (CSA) programs. Identify, support, and implement methods to sustain FINI-related healthy food purchasing incentive initiatives. ([http://mafoodsystem.org/plan/goal/rec/action/542/](http://mafoodsystem.org/plan/goal/rec/action/542/))

The Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) was launched in April 2017, and provides a 1-to-1 match for purchases of fruits and vegetables made by SNAP recipients at participating farmers markets, farmstands, mobile markets, and CSAs, thereby incentivizing healthier eating for some of Massachusetts’ most vulnerable residents. Since it began, the program has provided more than $13.5 million in fresh, healthy, local food to low-income families, and at the same time supported Massachusetts farmers. The Program demonstrates many important connections within
the food system, in that it provides access to fresh, healthy, local foods to communities that have traditionally been underserved, thereby helping to improve health outcomes, while at the same time increasing sales for local farms, helping them to remain sustainable, create and retain jobs, and protect natural resources.

Incentives that give consumers more buying power to purchase fresh and healthy food through food assistance programs have a long history of success in Massachusetts, dating back to our first-in-the-nation farmers market coupon program for WIC recipients in 1986. There is a need and opportunity to support and expand these efforts in order to: deliver SNAP and other benefits more strategically to help increase purchases of fresh, healthy, local food; demonstrate the long term viability of such incentives programs; and offer a model that can be replicated widely and sustained into the future. Many communities are looking to Massachusetts as a leader once again, as the only state with a statewide nutrition incentive program.

The Commonwealth has invested heavily in extensive operating infrastructure, management, and outreach, and this legislation is needed to protect that investment, and to ensure that the Program and a funding source exist in statute so that it will continue to operate.

We recommend a number of changes to the bill before passage, items that will make the language of the law more closely hew to the Program as it currently operates.

As written, the bill would add Section 2F (a), with the second sentence reading: “The program shall provide that for every dollar of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, established pursuant to the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, 7 U.S.C. section 2011 hereinafter referred to as SNAP, redeemed for fruit and vegetable purchases, either fresh, canned, dried or frozen, by a SNAP recipient, the recipient shall receive a matching benefit reimbursed on the recipient’s EBT card of one dollar, within limits to be established by the department.”

We recommend two changes to this sentence:

- The language suggests that every SNAP dollar spent on produce anywhere is eligible for the incentive when, in fact, only authorized HIP vendors can process these transactions. We recommend amending “by a SNAP recipient” to read “by a SNAP recipient at a participating vendor,” to make it clear that HIP is a limited program.

- The language saying that “every dollar” raises concerns that the incentives only relates to whole dollar amounts. We recommend eliminating “for every dollar of” and changing “the recipient shall” to “shall entitle the recipient to” to make it clear that purchases are matched, whatever the amount.

In addition, Section (b) would read “There shall be established and set up on the books of the commonwealth a separate fund, to be jointly administered by the commissioners of the department of agricultural resources and the department of transitional assistance...” While the agencies work together to administer the program, the funds are administered solely by the Department of Transitional Assistance and so the language should reflect that by removing reference to the Department of Agricultural Resources.
Finally, Section (c) would read “The department of transitional assistance or its partners shall apply for any available federal programs such as Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Grants administered by the United States Department of Agriculture to provide matching benefits to be deposited in the Fund.” Using ‘shall’ requires that the Department apply for funds that may not be appropriate or may even be burdensome due to matching or reporting requirements. In addition, the name of the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Grants program has been changed to the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program. We recommend changing ‘shall’ to ‘may’ and updating the program name, or removing Section (c) completely.

We appreciate the Committee taking up this issue, and urge you to consider it in the context of Massachusetts’ food system as a whole. The Plan, which provides that context, is available at http://mafoodsystem.org/plan/, and the Collaborative is available to provide additional information and connections to practitioners and advocates who can offer further details, at the pleasure of the Committee.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Winton Pitcoff
Director