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Testimony for House Bill 2525—Committee on Children and Seniors

Chairwoman Concannon and Members of the Committee:

I am Karen Siebert, advocacy and public policy advisor for Harvesters—The Community Food Network, which has warehouses in Kansas City, Missouri, and in Topeka. But I am here today also representing the Association of Kansas Food Banks. Harvesters, the Kansas Food Bank in Wichita and Second Harvest Community Food Bank in St. Joe together serve the food insecure in every county in the state. Last year, our networks of charitable food pantries distributed nearly 51 million pounds of food to those in need in Kansas, from our smallest rural communities to major metropolitan areas.

We support House Bill 2525 because it helps our most vulnerable low-income Kansans access the work and family supports they need. While we support all aspects of this bill, we will speak specifically to the importance of rescinding the child support requirement for eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known in Kansas as Food Assistance.

While our food banks' networks of food pantries and kitchens are the backbone of the charitable response to hunger in Kansas, we are only part of the solution. The most far-reaching and stable source of food assistance for those facing food insecurity is SNAP.

The USDA estimates that just 69% of eligible Kansans receive the federal SNAP benefits for which they are eligible. There are many reasons for these low participation rates, but the child support enforcement requirement is certainly one of them.

Our food banks provide information to our member agencies and their clients about the SNAP program, which may provide families with more significant and stable support than the charitable system can provide. We have SNAP outreach staff who can assist people who are filling out their SNAP applications. It is in that context that we have seen many people fill out pages and pages of the SNAP application only to have them get to the child support requirement and stop the application process.

There was the father who had primary custody of his two children, but didn't want to rock the boat with his children's mom, who had partial custody and helped out with in-kind support when she could, like buying clothes and school supplies. He couldn't risk the relationship and the limited support he already received so he would continue to struggle to meet his children's nutritional needs. There was the grandma raising a grandchild who didn't want to create legal problems for her child (the parent), who she knew couldn't afford to pay child support. So the grandma would continue to struggle. And there

was the mom who knew that re-engaging her psychologically abusive ex would only lead to more abuse. Again, the mom and the children are the ones to suffer. And those are only the people we know about. We have no way of knowing how many people, filling out an online application at the library or a written one at their kitchen table after the kids have gone to bed, have chosen not to complete the SNAP application out of fear.

We agree that parents sharing financial and emotional responsibility for a child is in the best interests of the children and the parents. But threatening economically fragile families' access to food is simply not the right way to increase engagement with the child support system.

We ask for your careful consideration and vote in support of this bill that will help ensure that Kansas families have the food and nutrition they need to lead healthy, productive lives.