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80th Legislature

Senate Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Affairs, and Coastal Resources

SB 1497, relating to a competitive grant pilot program for certain small retailers of fresh produce.

My name is Celia Hagert. I am a senior policy analyst for the Center for Public Policy Priorities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of SB 1497.

Obesity is the fastest growing cause of disease and death in America. However, many diet related diseases, including type-2 diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, and strokes can be prevented through proper food and improved eating habits. Fresh fruits and vegetables help lower the incidence of these diseases. Unfortunately, many people who live in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to grocery stores that sell a variety of fresh produce.

The Problem:

Many low-income neighborhoods rely on small corner stores for their grocery needs. These stores usually cannot afford the refrigeration units and other related expenses to stock an adequate variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. Instead, they typically carry foods that have a longer shelf life, such as junk food.

Additionally, residents of these low-income communities often lack adequate transportation to shop at larger chain grocery stores that are located outside their immediate area. In fact, in a 2002 study by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, it has found that middle- and upper-income neighborhoods had 2.26 times as many supermarkets per capita than low-income neighborhoods. For many families, these corner stores are the only convenient source for groceries.

A 2004 study by a University of Houston professor confirms this arrangement. The study found that low-income neighborhoods had access to convenience stores located in their area, but very few grocery stores. These neighborhood stores often stocked little or no fresh produce.

Without healthy food options, these families are eating readily available junk food on a regular basis. With the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables, low-income families are less likely to be able to maintain healthy weights and have increased chances of developing a diet-related disease.

This competitive small grants pilot program would allow the state to test a strategy for improving access to fresh produce. Low-income neighborhoods that do not have a large grocery retailer within a 1 mile radius would be eligible for a grant. This is an important step in identifying ways to combat the fresh produce access problem.

One Success Story:

Examples across the country show that by giving these corner-store “bodegas” the tools and assistance they need to stock fresh produce, lasting changes can be made in the eating habits of neighborhood residents.

One such success story is a small grocery store in Bayview, California. Until a few years ago, this store stocked little fresh produce, although it was located in the heart of a low-income neighborhood. In 2003, the manager was provided with technical and marketing assistance to provide fresh fruits and vegetables. Now, fresh produce makes up 30% of his sales. His store provides a healthy grocery option for a neighborhood with few other options.

California is currently in the process of implementing a similar program called the “Healthy Purchase Program.”

By providing small retailers in low-income neighborhoods with the assistance to stock fresh produce, Texas accomplishes several goals:

- 1) **Increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables helps Texas families improve their eating habits.**
- 2) **Increased consumption of fresh produce helps lower the incidence of diet-related diseases.**
- 3) **Lowering the incidence of diet-related diseases will save the state money in the long run by reducing the cost of caring for persons with these illnesses.**