

## JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

### Testimony on H-5775, Medically Tailored Meals Pilot Program House Finance Committee April 30, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Abney, and members of the House Finance Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio. I am a resident of Cumberland. This testimony is given in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

I strongly urge your support for H-5775 – An Act Relating Human Services – Medical Assistance, sponsored by Representative Caldwell and co-sponsored by Representatives Potter, Morales, Slater, Kazarian, and Cruz.

This piece of legislation proposes a one-year pilot program through the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to provide nutritional assistance, including medically tailored meals, groceries, and produce, to individuals with diet-related disease or food insecurity where there is a clinical need.

### ONGOING WORK IN NEW ENGLAND

Over the past 4 years I have coordinated a randomized comparative effectiveness trial of a produce prescription program and grocery store gift card food program led by researchers Drs. Caroline Kistin and Michael Silverstein who are based at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute. This study focused on low-income, English or Spanish speaking women, who had at least one infant or toddler receiving care at Boston Medical Center Pediatrics. The study participants were a diverse group with 58% self-identifying as Latinas, 42% self-identifying as Black, over half speaking Spanish, and less than a third being born in the US. Our evaluation examined food security, fruit and vegetable consumption, and maternal depression and anxiety symptoms. All study participants were surveyed once a month for 12 months.

This trial found that both the produce prescription and grocery store gift card programs **IMPROVED FOOD SECURITY** and **DECREASED DEPRESSIVE** and **ANXIETY SYMPTOMS**. Both programs were also positively rated by participants.

### Food is Medicine

Produce prescription programs, along with medically tailored groceries and medically tailored meals, are Food is Medicine initiatives that can manage or prevent a wide range of diet-related illnesses. According to Tufts' Food is Medicine Institute, Food is Medicine can play a critical role in addressing the growing disease burdens, costs, and inequities in diet-related illnesses in our community.<sup>1</sup>

The positive impact of Food is Medicine initiatives like produce prescription programs is not only seen in mothers with infants and toddlers.

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<sup>1</sup> Food is Medicine Institute, "About Food Is Medicine @ Tufts."

An Iowa-based company Mom's Meals delivered medically tailored meals across the country. A program with Inland Empire Health Plan (IEHP) in California saw a **50% REDUCTION IN EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT VISITS** and **HOSPITALIZATIONS** in individuals with congestive heart failure. Additionally, **COST OF CARE** for those in the program **FELL** from \$7.2 million to \$5.4 million, **AN ANNUAL SAVINGS OF \$1.8 MILLION** (or \$19,355 per member).<sup>2</sup>

An analysis conducted on the association between medically tailored meals participation and subsequent health care use found that recipients of medically tailored meals had **FEWER INPATIENT ADMISSIONS** and **SKILLED NURSING FACILITY ADMISSIONS** and **LESS OVERALL MEDICAL SPENDING**. This was a **net cost savings of \$13.6 billion** annually from an insurer perspective.<sup>3</sup>

A recent analysis of the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) produce prescription programs found that that these programs help **IMPROVE THE FOOD and NUTRITION SECURITY** and **PRODUCE CONSUMPTION OF ITS PARTICIPANTS**. This included patients who are veterans, prediabetic, diabetic, obese, amongst other medical conditions.

### **Addressing Food Insecurity and Promoting Health Equity**

The pandemic exposed the stark reality of food insecurity for many families in our country - including right here in Rhode Island. According to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank's 2024 Status Report on Hunger, 38% of households are food insecure, with rates as high as 55% in communities of color.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

H-5775 represents a proactive approach to addressing the intertwined issues of chronic disease management and food insecurity. By implementing this pilot program, Rhode Island can improve health outcomes for vulnerable populations while achieving cost saving in healthcare expenditures

I urge this committee to support and pass H-5775, taking a significant step toward a healthier and equitable Rhode Island.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jocelyn Antonio

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<sup>2</sup> Meals, "Mom's Meals®, Inland Empire Health Plan Food as Medicine Pilot Demonstrates Long-Term Benefits beyond Conclusion."

<sup>3</sup> Hager et al., "Association of National Expansion of Insurance Coverage of Medically Tailored Meals With Estimated Hospitalizations and Health Care Expenditures in the US."

<sup>4</sup> Food Bank, "2024 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island."

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