

May 21, 2025

**Written Testimony in Support of H-5536
Submitted to the House Finance Committee**

Dear Marvin L. Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Brown University's School of Public Health. For the past 15 years, my research has focused on promoting healthy eating among historically marginalized communities. I also serve as a Board Member of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. I write today in strong support of Representative Speakman's bill H-5536, which would provide state funding for the Bonus Bucks program.

Bonus Bucks is a proven, effective, and community-centered program that increases access to fresh, locally grown food for SNAP participants while simultaneously supporting Rhode Island's farmers and local food economy. Since 2009, Farm Fresh Rhode Island has successfully administered Bonus Bucks at most farmers markets across the state, offering a \$1-for-\$1 match for fruits and vegetables purchased using SNAP benefits. This is not a short-term COVID response program—it is a long-standing initiative with a deep track record of success, having distributed more than \$1.7 million in Bonus Bucks to local farmers.

This program is a clear win-win-win: it helps low-income families access more nutritious food, supports small farms and food businesses with direct sales, and strengthens our local food system. As a public health professional, I see firsthand the positive health impacts of improving access to fresh produce. **Diet-related chronic diseases—such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers—are the leading causes of death in the United States and contribute significantly to rising healthcare costs in our state. This bill will help promote healthy diets and reduce the burden of chronic disease, all while supporting our local farmers and food producers.**

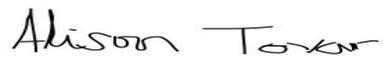
To date, Farm Fresh RI has relied on federal grants and private fundraising to sustain the program, including funds from the USDA Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program. But federal funds require a local match, and Farm Fresh cannot continue to bear this responsibility alone. State funding would not only secure the sustainability of Bonus Bucks, especially in the event of future federal cuts, but would also allow the program to grow and reach even more families.

Rhode Island is currently the only New England state that does not allocate state funding to such programs. H-5536 represents a modest, strategic investment that prioritizes both public health and local economic resilience.

I urge the committee to fully fund H-5536 and ensure that Rhode Island families and farmers can continue to benefit from this essential program.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Alison Tovar

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alison Tovar". The letters are cursive and fluid, with the first name and last name clearly distinguishable.

Associate Professor

Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences

Brown University School of Public Health

Tel: 401-863-7327

Box G-S121-4, Providence, RI 02912, USA