

# JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

## Testimony on H-5536, Appropriation for the Farm Fresh Bonus Bucks Program House Finance Committee May 21, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Abeny and members of the House Finance Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**. I am a resident of the town of Cumberland. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

I am writing to express my **strong support** for **House Resolution 5536**, sponsored by Representative Donovan and co-sponsored by Representatives Tanzi, Furtado, Morales, Stewart, Cortvriend, Fogarty, Ajello, Alzate, and Speakman.

This bill proposes a \$200,000 appropriation to support incentives for produce through the Farm Fresh Bonus Bucks program. Farm Fresh RI's Bonus Bucks initiative doubles the value of SNAP benefits spent on local produce at participating outlets, strengthening both individual health and the local food system.<sup>1</sup> Access to healthy foods has a profound impact on health outcomes, particularly among low-income populations.

### Addressing Food Insecurity and Promoting Health Equity

Food insecurity remains a significant public health challenge 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>2</sup> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits often fall short of enabling purchase of adequate healthy foods. By doubling SNAP redemption for fruits, vegetables, and herbs, the Bonus Bucks program provides a powerful, evidence-based method to:<sup>3</sup>

- Increase fruity and vegetable intake
- Reduce food insecurity
- Improve diet-related health outcomes

### Equity & Access

Nutrition incentive programs are known to reduce disparities in access to healthy food. Farmers market programs that match SNAP not only address financial barriers but also geographical and cultural access, particularly in underserved neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup>

### Health Impact & Cost-Effectiveness

Research on similar initiatives like Double Up Food Bucks shows a strong return on investment—up to **\$3 in community return for every \$1 spent**—and demonstrable improvements in dietary intake and

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<sup>1</sup> Rhode Island Department of Health, "Enhancing Nutrition Security: An Overview of Fruit and Vegetable Programs in Rhode Island."

<sup>2</sup> Food Bank, "2024 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island."

<sup>3</sup> Rummo et al., "The Impact of Financial Incentives on SNAP Transactions at Mobile Produce Markets"; Weinberg, "Incentivizing SNAP Beneficiaries to Purchase Healthier Food."

<sup>4</sup> Rummo et al., "The Impact of Financial Incentives on SNAP Transactions at Mobile Produce Markets"; Weinberg, "Incentivizing SNAP Beneficiaries to Purchase Healthier Food."

health outcome.<sup>5</sup> These gains translate into long-term public health savings, including reduced chronic disease risk and healthcare utilization.

## **Conclusion**

House Bill 5536 represents a strategic, evidence-based investment in public health, nutrition equity, and the economic resilience of Rhode Island communities. By funding the Bonus Bucks program, the state can expand access to healthy food, support local farmers, and reduce diet-related health disparities.

I respectfully encourage the committee to support H-5536 and help ensure the health, dignity, and economic vitality of Rhode Islanders.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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<sup>5</sup> Callahan et al., “SNAP Healthy Food Pricing Incentive Programs: State Comparison & Evaluation”; Farm Fresh Rhode Island, “Cultivating Regional Growth: Expanding the New England Nutrition Incentive.”

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