June 19, 2013

The Honorable Theresce Murray
President
Massachusetts Senate
Commonwealth of Massachusetts
State House
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Senate Bill No. 1805, An Act Encouraging Low-Income Savings and Economic Opportunity
Amendment No. 63, EBT Photo ID

Dear Senate President Murray:

AARP is a nonprofit, non-partisan membership organization for people 50 and over. We have 37 million members nationwide and more than 825,000 here in the Commonwealth. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support Amendment No. 63, EBT Photo ID in Senate Bill No. 1805, An Act Encouraging Low-Income Savings and Economic Opportunity.

The current proposal of adding a photo identification on the SNAP card would create a burden on vulnerable older residents, many of whom may rely on others to purchase their food or would need to travel to a site for recertification and to obtain the identification. AARP believes that government has a responsibility to design and implement programs in ways that promote rather than discourage, participation by all who are eligible, including legal, noncitizen residents.

Nearly 9 million people 50+ across the nation are at risk of daily hunger—a 79 percent increase in only 10 years. With 140,000 Bay State seniors going to bed hungry every night, we know that number will only increase as the aging population grows unless we act. The tough economy doesn’t help: from 2007 to 2009, the number of those aged 50-59 at risk of hunger increased 38 percent, to nearly 4.9 million. The most dramatic increase in food insecurity was among those whose annual incomes were more than twice the poverty line.

A cornerstone of the nation’s nutritional safety net, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) helps prevent and alleviate food insecurity and hunger. A federal program, administered at the state level, SNAP helps families and seniors buy the nutritious food they need for good health. In fiscal year 2010, 16 percent of all households receiving SNAP benefits included at least one individual age 60 or older; 2.9 million older households received these benefits. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, over 45 percent of all SNAP households include one or more elder or disabled member (source: DTA Facts and Figures Report, April 2013, SNAP Caseload).

Robert G. Romasco, President
Addison Barry Rand, Chief Executive Officer
Since 2002 states have been required to issue food benefits through electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems, which have some potential for reducing food-benefit theft. We believe service providers should treat people seeking assistance fairly, justly, and with respect and dignity. States should incorporate strong consumer protection provisions into their EBT systems to ensure that beneficiaries are not harmed under these systems.

One of the best features about SNAP is that using the program is discreet and easy. Benefits come on a SNAP card that looks and acts like a debit card. When people buy food with it, funds are deducted electronically. SNAP also provides a significant boost to local economies. Every $5 in new SNAP benefits generates nearly twice as much ($9.20) in total community spending.

Right now, 119,000 Massachusetts seniors are eligible for SNAP but are not taking advantage of the benefit. Only one-third of those 60+ who are eligible for help buying food through SNAP receive these benefits, compared to two-thirds of SNAP-eligible people in other age groups. Some are too embarrassed, or too proud, to ask for help; others may not know the program exists. Working with local groups, AARP Foundation is educating eligible people and enrolling them in the program.

SNAP is not welfare, and seniors with regular income from Social Security or a pension may still get benefits, which average $130 a month – and can help prevent seniors from having to make the tough choice about whether to buy food or medicine. AARP supports efforts to maintain SNAP benefits as a means to ensuring nutritional adequacy for this most vulnerable population. We urge to pass Amendment No. 63 striking the language that would discourage, rather than promote participation by all who are eligible.

We look forward to working with you and would be happy to assist you in any way possible on this important issue. Please do not hesitate to contact Jessica Costantino at 617.305.0538 or jcostantino@aarp.org if you have any questions or concerns.

Very truly yours,

Michael E. Festa
State Director

Linda F. Fitzgerald
State President