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**Capitol View
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**Nebraska Press Association**

**Wait, What? Governor Reverses Stand on Aid for Kids**

Wait, what? Governor Jim Pillen has reversed his opposition to a federal summer grocery program that would aid around 150,000 children of low-income families.

Pillen succumbed to a lot of outside pressure from a bipartisan group of state lawmakers, a bill introduced by one of them to request the aid and another state senator who made it his priority to ensure it would be debated in the remaining days of the legislative session.

Back in December he proclaimed that he didn’t “believe in welfare.” That comment attracted local and national news media attention and raised the ire of state Sen. Jen Day of Gretna who introduced the bill. She said she had been a single mom at one time and remembers the pain of wondering from where food for her kids was going to come.

Pillen and state officials said the Summer EBT card with $120 in benefits, $40 per month for three months, will be paired with increased outreach in an effort to connect low-income families with nutritional guides, summer programming for children and additional food aid.

Sen. Ray Aguilar of Grand Island, a Republican and the now longest-serving member in Nebraska's Legislature, used his personal priority on the Day bill, increasing the chance it would be advanced to the floor of the Legislature and signaling further conservative support for the program. During the public hearing on the bill, 17 people testified in support of the bill, with an additional 153 people submitting written comments in support of it. No one testified or submitted comments in opposition.

In announcing his decision, Pillen pointed to conversations with Aguilar and other advocates — including a group of young adults who the governor met observing the state's Supreme Court last week — who had challenged the governor on his position.

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Kudos to his spin-doctor for comments reported in the Lincoln Journal Star newspaper. "Never in a gazillion years when I was 16 or 17 or 18 would I have thought of coming and putting forth a need to the governor or coming here to the Capitol," Pillen said. "And so, I just can't tell you how proud I am of those young people (and) how proud I am of their voice; making sure their voice was heard."

But wait, it gets better. "This isn't about me winning," he added. "This is about coming to the conclusion of what is best for our kids in Nebraska."

Pillen said his administration contacted the federal Ag Department last week to inquire about opting into the program, the deadline for which was Jan. 1. He said USDA officials were excited about Nebraska's decision to join the program — and the state's rollout of additional outreach efforts that will accompany its implementation, which are meant to provide "touch points" that are important to Pillen.

Aguilar said the safety net offered by the $40-per-month aid allowances "are important when you consider rural kids don't have the networks of support that are available to some other areas of the state," thanking Pillen and the state Department of Health and Human Services for their willingness to implement the program.

Day said, "I truly don't think it would have happened if we hadn't continued to put pressure on him from the outside, in terms of phone calls and emails and engagement from Nebraskans themselves on how they truly felt about this program.”

Here’s hoping the governor’s change of mind reflects a change of heart and not just a realization that Pillen Farms LLC received more than $1.5 million in federal funds during the

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Covid pandemic alone. Or that a pork processor in Fremont in which he is heavily invested just received a $25 million federal grant.

Now if he would just apologize to reporter Yanqi Xu for his comments about a story on nitrate levels near his farms which he didn’t read because he said the writer was obviously from “communist China.”

Now, that would be a change of heart!

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 25 years.*