Gov. Jennifer Granholm has signed into law a change in the distribution of Bridge Card (food stamp) benefits from once a month to twice a month. The change will affect households receiving $100 or more a month - about 78 percent of the state's caseload.

The law is problematic on many grounds. First, lawmakers did not consult Bridge Card recipients on how the change will affect them. Second, they did not consider alternative solutions to the problems they sought to resolve through the change. Third, supporters' claims that recipients will buy more fresh foods as a result are untested.

This change is the result of lobbying by the state's grocers, who face real problems that deserve thoughtful solutions. In many neighborhoods, food stamps are a big part of stores' revenues. Because benefits are distributed early in the month, such stores face a boom-and-bust monthly business cycle. Other states address this problem by staggering single payments to households throughout the month.

A majority of Bridge Card recipients prefer once-a-month distribution, according to a survey sponsored by the Michigan Department of Human Services. Because the survey did not ask recipients their benefit amounts, it was dismissed by the law's advocates, who argued that opponents of the change will likely be unaffected by it.

Focus groups in an ongoing study led by me in southeastern Michigan, however, raise specific concerns.

Recipients worry about not being able to take advantage of sales, and about getting even less food than before if stores stop offering end-of-the-month sales. Transportation problems, rising gasoline prices and disability threaten to make grocery shopping more difficult for affected seniors and families with special needs. For example, one Detroit-area parent drives more than 20 miles one way to a specialty store to buy food for his child, who suffers from celiac disease.

Some focus group participants do support a twice-monthly distribution. These include mothers who find it easier to budget for groceries two weeks at a time, and who find the prospect of shorter periods of want every two weeks more bearable than longer periods once a month. Some also seek external control over their budgets when overwhelmed with requests for food assistance from acquaintances experiencing crises of their own.

Will Bridge Card recipients buy more fresh fruits and vegetables than before? The groups suggest that this is less likely.

Recipients who buy fresh foods now already budget and shop weekly. Those who purchase few fresh foods currently blame inadequate benefit levels, which will be unaffected by the change in distribution. At about $1 per person per meal, benefits are simply too low to include enough fresh fruits and vegetables, which tend to be more expensive than canned ones.

The Department of Human Services, the agency responsible for implementing the law, now awaits federal clearance for twice-monthly distribution of food stamps. Meanwhile, as all of us experience sticker shock in grocery store aisles and at the gas pump, many Bridge Card recipients grow doubly anxious about putting enough food on their tables.