

Testimony in response to

Proposed H.B. No. 6229 AN ACT ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF FOOD-INSECURE STUDENTS AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

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As a health equity researcher who studies disparities in food insecurity risk among marginalized populations and strategies to address food insecurity, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, I understand the need to address the systemic issues that perpetuate food insecurity on our college campuses. Along with colleagues, I have conducted a number of studies on food insecurity in Connecticut, particularly among food pantry clients and people who live in low-income neighborhoods. I also have lived experience with food insecurity in college. As a student from a low-income family, participating in both work-study opportunities at my land grant institution as well as the SNAP program helped me to successfully take care of myself as an undergraduate and go on to pursue graduate studies. While I support H.B. 6229, I believe the bill should be strengthened to require public reporting earlier than January 2023, and to require the use of a validated food security survey instruments to allow for better comparisons and accountability (for both tracking and interventions) across higher education institutions across the state.

In response to SA 19-25, *An Act Concerning Food Insecure Students at Public Institutions of Higher Education*, I worked with a team of students and administrators to develop and launch a survey of food insecurity among UConn undergraduates. That initial survey launched in October of 2019. The results pointed to notable disparities in food insecurity risk among students at the regional campuses (Avery Point, Hartford, Stamford, and Waterbury) compared to the Storrs campus. The data also suggested that Black men and women, and Latino men, experience more low and very low food security regardless of campus. Last, survey results indicated that having a meal plan offsets the disadvantage of having a low-income background. Our regional campus students do not have access to a comprehensive meal plan.

In addition to using the United States Department of Agriculture Food Security measure in our survey, we were able to add open-ended questions to allow UConn students to share their stories about food insecurity. Some of the students' responses indicated that future college food insecurity surveys should ask about other social determinants of health like housing status. We also learned about the financial barriers to student access to meal plans. **A Storrs student shared this quote: "I used to get my meals for free all through elementary, middle, and high school, so I don't get why I was never provided something and forced to pay that in college. I couldn't afford that in loans this year so I didn't do it. So now there's 2-3-week gaps that I don't go grocery shopping and pull something like one pack of eggs and a bag of chicken nuggets because it's gotten to that point."**

We also heard about the unique challenges with food insecurity at the regionals. One student said: **"For students living in the dorms in Stamford it is near impossible to maintain a healthy diet. I often go to bed hungry as do many of the students here that I have talked to."** Another regional campus student commented: **"Can UConn Hartford have more food available for the students, to give out for free so we don't have to spend or go hungry for the rest of the day? I was thinking of like fruits or snacks."**

Motivated to alleviate these disparities among UConn students, for the last year we've worked as a team of administrators, students, and researchers to develop a plan for multi-pronged, tailored approaches to improve food security at each UConn campus. It is clear from the data that we will need equity-focused solutions that address both the affordability and physical availability of food. By designating Work-Study eligible students as eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program pursuant to the Federal Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, this bill offers a great first step towards addressing the affordability issues that we learned from the 2019 food insecurity survey,

especially for students at our regional campuses. Our group has also worked to develop a follow-up survey of UConn regional campus students to better understand their experiences with food insecurity, how the covid-19 pandemic has impacted those experiences, and importantly, to learn which proposed solutions they prefer. This follow-up survey is scheduled to launch later this month.

At UConn, we are committed to continuing to assess student food insecurity and develop appropriate and sustainable interventions. We will make more progress across the state if we are measuring this problem using the same tools. Connecticut's Institutions of Higher Education will also be able to benefit from each other's experiences and expertise if there is a structured mechanism for us to compare our findings and initiatives back to the Legislature.