



Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, March 2, 2020

Testimony submitted by Robin Lamott Sparks, Executive Director

End Hunger Connecticut

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

Connecticut is a leader in the country regarding feeding our children at school. Almost twice as many students in Connecticut participate in the free and reduced price meals program versus full paid lunches at schools; we have greatly increased the number of schools serving breakfast; and we rank in the top 10 in the country for the number of children who participate in the free summer meals program. And, during the pandemic, feeding our children has taken on a new urgency; ensuring our children have access to healthy, nutritious meals has been a priority we all have shared. Yet, once these children graduate high school and begin college, that same commitment has been lacking.

While the current bill's goal regarding expanding access to SNAP is to be lauded, we would suggest alternative language regarding student eligibility. The current bill links college programs to the SNAP Employment and Training program, which is designed for those individuals who are already receiving SNAP. Alternatively, we would like to see Connecticut expand SNAP eligibility to more low-income college students by increasing the number of employment and training programs which exempt students from the 20-hour work requirement.

The face of the average college student has changed greatly over time, as has the cost of attending college full-time. In fact, according to national data, the percentage of all undergraduates who had a household income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line increased from 28 percent in 1996 to 39 percent in 2016. In addition, the number of students receiving federal aid through Pell Grants also increased from about 23 percent in 1999 to about 40 percent in 2016.

A December 2018 US Government Accountability Office (GAO) analysis of Department of Education (Education) data also showed that almost 2 million at-risk students who were potentially eligible for SNAP did not report receiving benefits in 2016. In addition, they found that having a low income was the most common risk factor for food insecurity among college students.

And, a recent study in our neighboring state found that nearly half of the community college students and a third of the public university students in Massachusetts experienced food insecurity. Here in Connecticut, most of our community colleges, as well as Central Connecticut State University, have food pantries on campus for their students. They also recognize that food insecurity is a real issue with which our college students are living here in our state. The Committee supporting a more detailed assessment of food insecurity amongst college students across the state will only help institutions of higher education to address these students needs.



Under current SNAP policy, students in higher education are required to not only meet the income guidelines and other criteria to be determined eligible for the program, but they also must work 20 hours a week. For a student trying to take classes, 20 hours can be tough to balance with a full college class schedule and the requisite schoolwork that accompanies those classes. According to the July 2016 Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, food-insecure students were less likely to attend and perform well in class and more likely to withdraw from a course all together. Other studies confirming this association looked at GPAs and found that students with a GPA above 3.1 were 60% less likely to be food-insecure.

However, federal law does allow state to exempt students from this requirement if they are enrolled in a program for the purpose of employment or training. These programs must be operated by a state or local government, target low-income households, and increase participants' employability. Many other states, including Massachusetts, have expanded SNAP eligibility for college students using this provision. And, some states have not only deemed many community college programs exempt, but some 4-year programs as well. Consequently, we support the alternative language attached to this testimony.

With the new language, we know that even more hardworking students will be able to achieve their goals of furthering their education and employment opportunities, while also receiving food assistance during their time as a student. No one can learn if they are hungry, no matter their age. Hence, we applaud the Committee for looking at ways to increase eligibility and accessibility of SNAP benefits for college students.

Thank you.