

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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I would like to thank the members of the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement for the opportunity to testify today in support of HB 6229. My name is Marlene Schwartz and I am a Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences, and the Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut.

The mission of the Rudd Center is to promote solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. One of our areas of expertise is food insecurity, and more specifically, we have been studying food insecurity among college students over the past couple of years.

We strongly support this proposed act to address the needs of food insecure students at public institutions of higher education. I commend the committee in creating this very timely bill, as there is evidence from around the country that food insecurity among college students is a serious problem that the pandemic has made worse. As you can imagine, when a student doesn't have enough to eat, it is very difficult to succeed academically. Therefore, it is in the best interest of institutions of higher education to address this issue.

This bill is a welcome continuation of the work that we began in response to SA 19-25. In order to comply with that special act, UConn administered a survey in October 2019 to assess food insecurity on all five of our campuses: Storrs, Avery Point, Hartford, Waterbury, and Stamford, and reported back to the legislature in January 2020.

There were a number of important findings from that survey. First, more than one-third of all respondents reported low or very low food security as measured by items from the USDA's standard assessment tool. This high number is notably higher than the statewide estimates of food insecurity in Connecticut, where the rates range from 12.8% in Tolland County to 17.0% in New London County based on a report from December 2020 by the Office of Legislative Research (1).

The second important finding from this study was that students on the regional campuses reported substantially higher rates of food insecurity than students in Storrs. Among Storrs students, those on the meal plan had the lowest rates of food insecurity. This suggests that we need to pay special attention to the regional campus students and the availability of affordable

food on campus. Clearly, having a meal plan is a protective factor against food insecurity, so we need interventions to make meal plans more accessible to students in Storrs. Further, if it is not feasible to have a comprehensive dining plan on the regional campuses, we must find ways to provide opportunities for students to purchase reasonably priced, healthy food on each of our four Regional campuses.

A third critical finding was that this survey detected significant ethnic and racial disparities, with Black and Latinx students reporting overall higher rates of food insecurity than white and Asian students. This finding highlights that food insecurity contributes to racial and ethnic health disparities in college students, and addressing this problem in the microcosm of institutes of higher education may provide guidance on how we can better address this problem as a state.

The challenge in interpreting the data from our first survey was that the number of students who took the survey from the Regional campuses was quite low. We now have a new survey specifically for students on these campuses that we will administer this semester. We have added many questions to better understand the contextual factors contributing to food insecurity and get student input on possible solutions. We look forward to sharing those findings publicly.

We have one recommendation to strengthen this bill, which is that all Connecticut institutions of higher education should include the same set of validated questions based on the USDA's 18-item Food Insecurity Module. This is the tool used nationally and will allow the easiest comparisons over time and across schools. Schools should then be welcome to add additional questions to their surveys based on their unique student populations. As I mentioned, we have developed additional questions for our 2021 survey, and we would be happy to share these publicly for other schools to consider.

## References

1. Food insecurity in Connecticut. A report by the Office of Legislative Research. December 18 2020. Jennifer Proto, Principal Analyst. Available at: <https://cga.ct.gov/2020/rpt/pdf/2020-R-0329.pdf>