



September 20, 2023

The Honorable Robyn Kennedy, Senate Chair
The Honorable Jay Livingstone, House Chair
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities
State House, Boston, MA 02133

RE: Testimony in Support of S.76/H.134, S.85/H.150, S.75/H.144, & S.117/H.187

Dear Chair Kennedy, Chair Livingstone and Members of the Joint Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the following four bills:

- S.76/H.134 An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance for Massachusetts Immigrant Residents
- S.85/H.150 An Act Relative to An Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program
- S.75/H.144 An Act to Lift Kids Out of Deep Poverty
- S.117/H.187 An Act to Protect Safety Net Access of Massachusetts Residents

We also thank the committee for its past support and ongoing leadership in supporting children, families, and people with disabilities in meeting their basic needs.

Project Bread is a statewide anti-hunger organization committed to connecting people and communities in Massachusetts to reliable sources of food while advocating for policies that make food accessible—so that no one goes hungry. Despite the return to a more stable economy, food insecurity is still at an elevated level. According to the Census Bureau, currently over 1 in 5 households and nearly 1 in 4 households with children have faced food insecurity over the last month. Food is the most basic of human needs, and research has shown time and time again the long-term negative outcomes associated with lack of access to this basic need – people experiencing food insecurity will get sick more





often,¹ are more likely to be hospitalized², and have higher rates of obesity, depression, and chronic illness².

Food insecurity is a complex issue with many root causes, but we know a lack of resources is a major driver. Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) as well as unrestricted cash such as through the Child Tax Credit (CTC), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) and Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disable, and Children (EAEDC) can help ensure households have the resources to purchase basic necessities as well as be a launching off point to escape poverty and food insecurity. In 2021, when families had additional resources in the form of increased federal assistance including an expanded CTC, the national child poverty rate was 5.2%.³ Just this week, we learned that the ending of this increased assistance increased child poverty to 12.4% in 2022.⁴

These programs are particularly important in Massachusetts as an especially expensive state in which to live. Someone working full-time making minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom apartment in any community in our state.⁵ The costs of rent³, childcare⁶, and healthcare⁷ are higher than average in our state. And most households do not have enough savings to cover an unexpected expense of \$400.⁸ So, when life brings an unexpected change or challenge, as life always does – a divorce, a lost job, a health care crisis – the bills add up and people struggle to put food on the table.

Benefits of nutrition and cash assistance

SNAP is the most effective anti-hunger program and is among the most effective anti-poverty programs. By providing additional buying power through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card,

¹ Seligman HK, Laraia BA, Kushel MB. Food Insecurity Is Associated with Chronic Disease among Low-Income NHANES Participants. *J Nutr.* 2010;140(2):304. doi:10.3945/JN.109.112573

² Gundersen C, Ziliak JP. Food Insecurity And Health Outcomes. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.20150645>. 2017;34(11):1830-1839. doi:10.1377/HLTHAFF.2015.0645

³ John Creamer, Emily A. Shrider, Kalee Burns, and Frances Chen, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-277, Poverty in the United States: 2021, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, DC, September 2022.

⁴ Emily A. Shrider and John Creamer, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-280, Poverty in the United States: 2022, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, DC, September 2023.

⁵ Aurand A, Emmanuel D, Threet D, Yentel D. the High Cost of Housing. Published online 2020:281. www.nlihc.org/oor

⁶ Child Care Aware of America. The US High and the High Cost of Child Care: A Review of Prices and Proposed Solutions for a Broken System. Published online 2018.

⁷ Kaiser Family Foundation. Average Annual Family Premium per Enrolled Employee For Employer-Based Health Insurance. Accessed July 15, 2021. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/family-coverage/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Total Annual Premium%22,%22sort%22:%22desc%22%7D>

⁸ Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2019, Featuring Supplemental Data from April 2020. 2020;(May):66. www.federalreserve.gov/publications/default.htm.



households are able to have convenience and dignity of purchasing what they want or need from a retailer in their community. One report found that SNAP reduces food insecurity by 30%.⁹ On average, SNAP lifts an estimated 112,000 people, including 37,000 children, out of poverty in Massachusetts per year.¹⁰ Additionally, every household enrolled in SNAP brings additional federal dollars into the state, which in addition to supporting families can stimulate the local economy. Every one dollar in federal SNAP benefits generates \$1.50 in economic activity.¹¹

SNAP is also the vanguard response to food insecurity, expanding to support households during regional or national crises, but always available for when individual families face a crisis. Our partners in the emergency food system do incredible work in trying to meet these moments. However, for every meal Feeding America affiliated food banks provide, SNAP is estimated to provide nine⁸. Food insecurity will not be solved by charity alone.

While SNAP is powerful, we know food insecurity rarely appears in isolation. Food insecure households often face any number of challenges stemming from or related to the lack of resources. In 2021, the federal government expanded the Child Tax Credit and provided eligible households with monthly payments. Using Census Data, Project Bread found that an estimated 70% of households in Massachusetts that received this tax credit spent the payment on food, rent, utilities, or debt. The highest category was food, underscoring the importance of unrestricted cash in helping families.

Recognizing the importance of food and cash assistance for the economy and residents of Massachusetts, Project Bread urges the committee to report the following four bills favorably:

An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance for Massachusetts Immigrant Residents

Every day at Project Bread, we talk to families who are struggling to afford food. Nearly half of our clients through our Health Care Partnership program and nearly a quarter of callers to the FoodSource Hotline prefer using a language other than English in accessing our services. While not all these callers and clients are immigrants, many are, and some of them are unable to access SNAP not because of their income, but because of their immigration status. In fact, the number two reason that a caller who is screened for SNAP is ineligible is based on immigration status. Those denied benefits include individuals who are fleeing violence or humanitarian crises and seek safe haven in our state. Many do not immediately have authorization to work or struggle to find consistent, well-paying work. These

⁹ Ratcliffe C., McKernan, S.M., How Much Does Snap Reduce Food Insecurity? (2010). *USDA Economic Research Service*.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=84335>

¹⁰ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_machusetts.pdf

¹¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_machusetts.pdf



families deserve access to the same support provided to other residents of the Commonwealth when being faced with challenges meeting their basic needs.

We can change that in the Commonwealth. Massachusetts has repeatedly led in welcoming our immigrant neighbors and now we have an opportunity to help ensure they have the same access to basic needs as other Massachusetts residents by passing An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance for Immigrants Residents. This would re-establish state funded analogs to SNAP and TAFDC for legally present immigrants who would otherwise qualify for these programs based on their household size and income, but do not qualify on the federal level based on their immigration status alone.

Many legally present immigrants are unable to receive benefits simply based on the type of visa they hold, despite what trauma they may have experienced to leave their home country, their legal authority to work in this country, and their ability to do so while caring for children and family. Some of the categories of immigrants that cannot receive SNAP or cash assistance include those pending asylum applicants, DACA/Dreamers, individuals on humanitarian parole, victims of violence, and immigrants under Temporary Protected Status. Other statuses such as Lawful Permanent Residents and battered immigrants must wait 5 years to receive federal benefits.

Our FoodSource Hotline counselors and Healthcare Partnerships case managers hear over and over how confusing and discouraging it is for immigrant households that can apply and receive WIC, school meals for their children, and MassHealth, but are ineligible for other programs. Some households, for example, can apply as a smaller family unit and receive SNAP for only their citizen children, but any adults with the wrong type of status are not counted. This results in low-income families with children who receive some assistance, but not enough to support the entire household. As one example, a Health Care Partnerships case manager worked with a family of 6, but they are only getting SNAP for a single child born in the country. If this household qualified for the maximum benefit, they would only receive \$281 per month, or \$1.56 per person per day. If our safety net is intended to help individuals and families maintain or improve their health and perform to their full potential in school or at work, it is not working for these families.

Massachusetts can and should adopt a better approach— in fact, we have. After the federal government put in place some of these harsh restrictions, the Commonwealth stepped up and provided benefits to immigrant households from 1997-2002. Massachusetts has the 7th largest foreign-born population in the United States and many of the recent arrivals are fleeing violence and persecution in their homeland. We urge you to please report this legislation out favorably so Massachusetts can continue to lead in supporting our immigrant neighbors.



An Act Relative to An Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program

Launched in 2017, HIP provides a dollar-for-dollar match, up to a monthly limit based on household size, for SNAP dollars spent on fruits and vegetables purchased at farmers markets, farm stands, mobile markets, and community support agriculture programs across the state. The impact has included:

- Over 133,000 households have participated in the program: 54% of the households that have used the program include a senior, 23% include a child, and more than 35% include a person with a disability.¹²
- For every dollar spent on purchasing produce directly from a Massachusetts farmer, an additional \$2 in local economic activity is generated, meaning HIP has stimulated at least another \$98 million in financial transactions in the Commonwealth.¹³

Project Bread's FoodSource Hotline screens callers for SNAP eligibility and provides callers across Massachusetts with information and referrals to community food resources. We are grateful for the Legislature's support of this important program. Through our FoodSource Hotline we have also provided thousands of residents' information on HIP. Noelle from Framingham called us to apply for SNAP. During our call, the counselor mentioned HIP and the benefits of the dollar-for-dollar match. Noelle called back to find a winter farmers' market. Unfortunately, the area she lives in does not have a farmers' market during the winter months, but HIP has been so helpful to her that she was willing to travel to a town close by. She talked about not being able to afford fresh veggies before applying for SNAP. Now, she loves making salads and occasionally bakes zucchini bread to share with her neighbors. She reports having more money to go towards her bills and said she hopes this program stays around forever.

Noelle's story is particularly poignant and demonstrates the need to permanently authorize HIP as a part of the Department of Transition Assistance (DTA), as opposed to the status quo of HIP being authorized only through the annual budget process. With uncertainty and limited funding, DTA has been limited in its ability to plan and maximize the impact of HIP. In the initial implementation, farmers were recruited as vendors on a first-come, first-served basis. This left farmers from marginalized communities, such as farmers who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color out of the program, and created geographic gaps, particularly during the winter. By enshrining HIP in the general laws and as part of the regular responsibilities of the Department, the Commonwealth can more effectively and

¹² Healthy Incentives Program fact sheets | Mass.gov. Accessed September 5, 2023. <https://www.mass.gov/lists/healthy-incentives-program-fact-sheets>

¹³ Thilmany D, Bauman A, Love E, Jablonski BBR. The Economic Contributions of Healthy Food Incentives.



consistently reach the goals of increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables for households experiencing food insecurity and increasing economic activity for smaller farms.

An Act to Lift Kids out of Deep Poverty would set a floor for cash assistance grants at 50% FPL, ensuring that no child would be in deep poverty. At Project Bread, we know the devastating tradeoffs that happen when a family is forced to choose between basic necessities. Our hotline counselors hear firsthand the struggles that families in Massachusetts face as they are forced to choose between housing, childcare, healthcare, groceries, and more. Food is too often the first necessity to be cut, as skipping meals may not be perceived as having the same immediate impact as gas needed for work or rent needed to prevent eviction.

The Committee favorably reported prior versions of these bills in two previous legislative sessions. Those favorable reports laid the groundwork for the Legislature's inclusion – after decades of frozen funding – of four grant increases in General Appropriations Acts, with the first increase effective January 2021 and the most recent increase effective April 2024.

However, even with these recent increases, the current maximum grant of \$783 a month for a family of three with no income is still less than Deep Poverty – currently \$1,036 a month. While the incremental increases in the budget are greatly appreciated, whether to raise cash assistance grants should not have to be a question every year. Instead, as the bills provide, grants should be increased more rapidly to the modest Deep Poverty level and then adjusted each year to keep up with increases in the cost of living.

Bringing families to half of the federal poverty level is still not enough – they will still fall short of the high cost of living in Massachusetts. But while insufficient, lifting kids out of deep poverty will make a big difference in their lives.

An Act Protecting Safety Net Access to Massachusetts Residents creates a public process before the Department of Transitional Assistance can close a community service office. These offices are public facing offices where applicants and clients can meet with DTA staff regarding their case or file an application for SNAP or cash assistance. In Project Bread's recent report on the barriers to SNAP, 43% of those surveyed reported the ability to apply without a computer was a concern when seeking food resources.¹⁴ A national survey conducted by Pew Research Center found that 14% of families making

¹⁴Avila M, Burns K, Bolcic-Jankovic D, et al. Barriers to SNAP. Project Bread.



under \$30,000 a year lack regular access to the internet.¹⁵ The ability to meet with a caseworker in-person or use DTA self-service kiosks helps bridge this digital divide when applying for basic needs support.

Massachusetts is a national leader in addressing hunger. We just passed School Meals for All – thank you to the Legislature – and the programs and policies we lead on continue to be lifted up nationally. We know the only way to end hunger is through systemic solutions, not charity alone. We have an opportunity here to support families in accessing resources to meet their needs, which we know will not only benefit their families but our entire community. This ensures that they can focus on work and education, and not on worrying about food. Research on SNAP shows that it is proven to reduce poverty. Recent research shows that one year of continuous participation in SNAP is also associated with lower healthcare costs the following year.¹⁶

Taken together, these four bills represent significant support for children, families, and persons with disabilities. Project Bread is grateful to the Committee for taking up these important bills and we urge you to report all four out favorably.

I also encourage any individual struggling with food insecurity to contact our FoodSource Hotline—800-645-8333—to begin an application for SNAP and to be connected to nearby community food resources.

Sincerely,

Erin McAleer

President & CEO, Project Bread

¹⁵ Perrin A, Atske S. 7% of Americans don't use the internet. Who are they? | Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center. Published April 2, 2021. Accessed September 30, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/02/7-of-americans-dont-use-the-internet-who-are-they/>

¹⁶ Dillamn, L., Humienny, A., and Xie, J. (2023, May 17). The Impact of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Enrollment on Health and Cost Outcomes. <https://catalyst.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/CAT.22.0366>