



September 18, 2023

The Honorable Joanne Comerford, Chair
The Honorable David Rogers, Chair
Joint Committee on Higher Education
State House, Boston, MA 02133

RE: Testimony in Support of S.835/H.1293, An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative

Dear Chair Comerford and Chair Rogers:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of S.835/H.1293, An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative.

COLLEGE STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY WAS A PROBLEM BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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 many signs of recovery from the pandemic, the rate of food insecurity remains at an elevated level. According to the Census Bureau, over 1 in 5 households and nearly 1 in 4 households with children are unsure of when or where their next meal will come from. Food is the most basic of human needs, and research has shown time and time again the long-term negative outcomes associated with food insecurity—families and individuals who don't have reliable access to food will get sick more often,ⁱ are more likely to be hospitalized,ⁱⁱ and have higher rates of obesity, depression, and chronic illness.ⁱⁱ

We know that students who are concerned with making ends meet and struggling to access basic needs cannot reach their full potential as future scholars, researchers, and leaders in our state's economy. In addition to the negative outcomes associated with food insecurity, college students who are facing food insecurity are less likely to complete their degree,ⁱⁱⁱ less likely to receive an advanced degree,ⁱⁱⁱ and more likely to have a lower grade point average than their food secure peers.^{iv} These outcomes are even more severe for first-generation students.^v When we consider the effects of higher education on the ability to earn a living wage and the high percentage of jobs that require at least some college education,^{vi} it is a disservice to deny these students the best opportunity possible to complete their degrees.

71% of college students who are considered “non-traditional,” or who are not “enrolled full-time in college directly after high school while remaining financially dependent on their parents.”^{vii}





These “non-traditional” students include the 22% of students caring for child dependents and the 14% of students who are doing so as single parents.^{vii} Balancing caring for a child and attending college is difficult enough without being concerned as to where your next meal will come from.

Thanks to the leadership of the Legislature, we now have School Meals for All for students in K-12 schools across the Commonwealth. The members of this committee and your colleagues recognized that a hungry student cannot learn— this does not end with a high school diploma. The Legislature has already recognized in numerous ways that an investment in higher education is an investment in the short- and long-term future of our state. To ensure that college students have the resources they need to thrive, we ask that the committee favorably report S.835/H.1293, An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative which would work to implement anti-hunger initiatives to address these challenges.

IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO ENDING COLLEGE STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

A Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice study in June 2020 reflecting 2019 data found that 37% of public university students in Massachusetts reported they have experienced food insecurity in the last thirty days.^{viii} These numbers are even higher among people who experience systemic discrimination. The Hope Center study found that, in Massachusetts, 52% of Black public university students, 47% of Latino public university students, and 46% of LGBTQ+ public university students had experienced food insecurity in the last thirty days.^{xi} As with all instances of food justice, college hunger is also an issue of racial equity, gender equity, and LGBTQ+ equity.

While many colleges have been utilizing student-led initiatives, food banks and food pantries, and SNAP application assistance, they continue to face barriers to addressing hunger on their campuses, such as lack of capacity and lack of resources. The same Hope Center study found that only 20% of food insecure students in Massachusetts utilized these benefits,^{viii} whether due to a lack of awareness that they qualify, the lack of accessibility of the applications and process, or the stigma surrounding receiving these benefits.

Project Bread’s FoodSource Hotline screens callers for SNAP eligibility and provides callers across Massachusetts with information and referrals to community food resources. This program is supported through funding from the Legislature, and we are grateful for this support. The following are two stories that demonstrate the importance of passing this bill for college students who are experiencing food insecurity:





Kelly from Pelham is enrolled as a full-time student and called us to receive more information about food assistance. Kelly lost her job but is not eligible for unemployment. Because she does not meet any of the criteria for SNAP benefits, she also does not receive any federal assistance. While we were able to provide her with information about food pantries in her area, Kelly is now forced to attend school while facing food insecurity and possible eviction, meaning there is no possible way for her to fully participate in her studies.

Another student, Sam, is a full-time student at UMass Amherst. He has recently fallen on hard times and is struggling to keep up with school, working a part-time job, and taking care of his mother who has been diagnosed with a condition that impacts mobility. They cannot afford a full-time personal care assistant. Sam called to inquire about food pantries in his area, and we were able to tell him about the SNAP program and help him fill out an online application.

These stories and stories like theirs demonstrate the need to develop an initiative that works to help college students struggling with food security. Passing An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative is an important step in identifying and addressing these challenges through capacity building and the provision of resources.

THE LEGISLATURE'S LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED TO MAKE MASSACHUSETTS CAMPUSES HUNGER-FREE

Because Project Bread often works closely with students and their families who are facing hunger and food insecurity, we understand the necessity of legislation to address this issue. An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative is an important step on this path. This legislation would:

- Create an Office of Capacity Building Services at the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education to provide funding, technical assistance, and grant opportunities to campuses aiming to address food insecurity.
- Incentivize campuses to leverage existing resources and maximize enrollment in federal nutrition programs.
- Urge campuses to create student-led food insecurity task forces to explore instituting anti-hunger initiatives to be considered for grant funding. These initiatives include student meal sharing programs, emergency funds for students to address their basic needs, campus food insecurity surveys, on-campus SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) vendors, and more.





Massachusetts is a national leader in addressing hunger. The programs and policies we lead 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 students and their 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.^{ix}

This legislation would work to give campuses the resources and capacity needed to meaningfully address food insecurity and give every student a fair chance to succeed. **For this reason, Project Bread urges you to report An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative out of the committee favorably so we can ensure more students have the resources and security necessary to become future leaders in our community and in our world.**

Sincerely,

Erin McAleer
President & CEO, Project Bread

ⁱ 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

ⁱⁱ 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

ⁱⁱⁱ Fu J. College students who experience food insecurity graduate at half the rate of their peers <https://thecounter.org/college-students-campus-hunger-snap/>

^{iv} van Woerden I, Hruschka D, Bruening M. Food insecurity negatively impacts academic performance. *J Public Affairs.* 2019; 19:e1864. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1864>

^v Association of American Colleges and Universities. Facts & Figures – Food and Housing Insecurities Disproportionately Hurt Black, First-Generation, and Community College Students. <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/facts-figures/jan-feb2017>

^{vi} Carnevale A, Smith N, Strohl J. Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524311.pdf>

^{vii} Feeding America. College Student Hunger Statistics and Research. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/college-hunger-research>

^{viii} The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. 2019 #RealCollege Survey Report. <https://www.mass.edu/strategic/documents/2019%20HOPE%20Center%20MA%20Report.pdf>

^{ix} 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>

