



March 5, 2019

Testimony in Support of H.B. 7257: An Act Concerning Food-Insecure Students at Public Institutions of Higher Education.

To: Senator Haskell, Representative Haddad and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

I submit this testimony in my position as the Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut. The UConn Rudd Center's mission is to promote solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. We believe that every young person, regardless of who they are, where they live, and what they look like, deserves the opportunity to eat healthfully.

The UConn Rudd Center applauds the Committee for raising H.B. 7257. Food insecurity among college students is a significant issue that has received relatively little research or policy attention. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as having limited or uncertain access to enough food for an active, healthy life. The prevalence of food insecurity in the U.S. is measured annually and in 2017, 11.8% of households reported low or very low food security.¹ A number of surveys have been done to assess the prevalence of food insecurity among college students; however, the 2018 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report concluded that there is a need for nationally representative data.² In the meantime, the data that do exist are very concerning: a recent survey of 43,000 students from over 60 community colleges and 4-year colleges/universities found that **36% of students reported experiencing food insecurity in the last 30 days.³ This is triple the rate of food-insecurity among all U.S. households in 2017.**

As education leaders in Connecticut encourage students from traditionally underrepresented groups to pursue a college degree, it is important to recognize that these students may face the challenge of food insecurity. College students at risk for food insecurity are most often low income, and also are more likely to be first-generation students, disabled, homeless or housing insecure, former foster youth, or single parents.¹ One study found that homosexual or bisexual (vs. heterosexual), and Black (vs. non-White Hispanic) students are at increased risk for food insecurity.² There are serious consequences of food insecurity for students, including lower academic achievement, and poor physical and mental health. Clearly, food insecurity is a significant barrier to student success in college.

More effort is needed to identify policy and practice solutions to this problem. Students who are food insecure may feel stigmatized, and therefore embarrassed to tell others and seek help. It is critical to decrease this stigma and raise awareness about the assistance that is available, such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps), which is the national first line of defense against hunger. College students with food insecurity may be eligible for food assistance benefits from the if they participate in a federal work-study or work-



training program. However, if not participating in one of these programs, eligible college students without children must work a minimum of 20 hours a week to qualify for SNAP benefits.¹ The GAO's analysis of Department of Education data shows that **almost 2 million at-risk students who were potentially eligible for SNAP did not report receiving benefits in 2016.**¹ There is much room for improvement in our systems to connect eligible college students with the SNAP program. The UConn Rudd Center also recommends that the state explore actions taken by other states (e.g., Massachusetts, New Jersey) to include community colleges as state-recognized employment and training programs, which could enable eligible students to receive SNAP.

Connecticut's college students are investing in higher education to prepare themselves for meaningful careers that contribute to our society and the economy. Our state should explore a range of policy and practice solutions to ensure that student food insecurity does not interfere with this investment. The UConn Rudd Center supports the efforts of this Committee and others working to understand the extent of food insecurity among college students in our public institutions.

Sincerely,

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¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2018). *Food Security Status of U.S. Households in 2017*. Washington DC. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx>

² U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018). *Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Nutrition Benefits*. Washington DC. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-95>

³ Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). *Still Hungry and Homeless in College*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. Retrieved from <https://hope4college.com/reports/>

¹ SNAP eligibility for college students depends not only on income and meeting a student exemption, but also on other determinations such as the level of the individual's financial assets, including savings and any state policy waivers that may apply to the individual's eligibility.