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Judiciary Committee

*Subcommittees*

Juvenile Law

Public Safety



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Chair Maggie McIntosh and Members of the Committee  
House Appropriations Committee  
House Office Building Room 121  
Annapolis, MD 21401

March 8, 2021

**Testimony in Support of House Bill 891 – Hunger Free Campus Grant Program - Established**

Dear Chair McIntosh, Vice Chair Chang and Committee Members:

I am pleased to present House Bill 891 which would create a new grant program to help community colleges and four-year public colleges and universities in Maryland set up and scale programming to address food insecurity on college campuses.

Food insecurity among college students is a growing concern nationally, especially as the cost of attending college continues to rise faster than inflation. The U.S. Dept. of Agriculture defines food insecurity as an “economic or social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.” USDA’s survey on food insecurity includes questions like, “The food that I bought did not last and I did not have the money to buy more,” “I cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food,” and in more extreme cases “I did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.” Food insecurity on campus is also more common among marginalized student populations including first generation college students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, racial minorities (specifically African American and Indigenous students), former foster youth, LGBTQ+ youth, immigrant youth, and student parents. Food insecurity at Maryland institutions is also well-documented, with one in five students at University of Maryland – College Park reporting food insecurity before COVID-19.

College students today are not what we think of when we imagine typical college students –18-year-olds matriculating directly from high school who are still financially dependent on their parents. These ‘traditional’ college students are in fact now the minority of students enrolled nationally. According to U.S. Department of Education data, around half of all undergraduate students are financially independent from their parents, meaning they are responsible for bearing the burden of tuition, fees, housing, transportation, books, food and childcare for themselves and their dependents. Nationally, over 20 percent of college students today have children and 14 percent are parenting alone. A whopping 64 percent of college students in 2016 worked at least part time, and a quarter of all undergraduates worked full time while pursuing their education. Balancing work, school and family responsibilities along with associated expenses is challenging, and after bills are due for tuition and fees, rent and childcare, food often gets the short end of the stick.

Although the issue of food insecurity existed prior to COVID-19, the pandemic has only exacerbated the issue and will continue to do so as colleges and universities around the state of Maryland work to meet

the needs of their students. A report from the Real College Lab found that in Spring of 2020, nearly 3 in 5 students were experiencing basic needs insecurity, and 44% of students at two-year colleges and 38% of students at four-year colleges and universities were affected by food insecurity. This report also found that food insecurity among college students is more pervasive at two-year and community colleges than at four-year colleges.

We know that addressing students' food insecurity is not only a moral issue – but also is a good return-on-investment for the current tax dollars Maryland invests in higher education. Research indicates that food insecurity affects students' physical, psychological and academic outcomes, and makes students more likely to dropout, preventing them from attaining a degree that could provide them with higher, family-sustaining wages. And the unfortunate reality is that half of students entering college today will not graduate. The more Maryland can do to leverage our state investment in our higher education institutions – both to institutions themselves and through financial aid – to increase graduation rates, the better off we will be. Individuals with associates and bachelor's degrees earn higher salaries than those without higher education credentials, bringing in more tax revenue for our state and bolstering our economy. We should be doing everything in our power to help students stay in college and persist towards degrees, and this program is designed to do just that, providing institutional flexibility to address food insecurity in a range of ways.

This bill is modeled after successful legislation in California and New Jersey which passed and has been implemented within the past several years. Many other states including Pennsylvania, Minnesota and others are considering similar bills as well. California in particular has been at the forefront of addressing students' basic needs insecurity, including food and housing insecurity, with several legislative proposals on the table including expanding students' SNAP access, helping higher education students improve SNAP outreach to students, reconfiguring scholarship aid for student parents and supporting foster youth students as they transition into the higher education space.

Many Maryland institutions are already doing some elements of this work already, however a modest state commitment will build a roster of best practices, help institutions scale and add elements to their existing programming, and will also foster a community of practice for Maryland institutions to address this problem comprehensively and in concert, as opposed to in a piecemeal way.

In addition to the grant program, the bill also asks the MD Higher Education Commission to include a section on basic needs insecurity in the next iteration of the state's strategic plan, to weave food insecurity into the conversation around graduation rates and educational attainment at the highest policy level. We cannot have a conversation around student food insecurity without lifting up student voices. I am proud to have the support of several student government associations from across the state, which you will see in both written and oral testimony. I am a proud first-generation college student and hope that this grant program will help more Maryland students stay enrolled and graduate on time without worrying where their next meal will come from. It is time for Maryland to take this crucial step for college and university students to achieve the nutritional support they need.

For all these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on HB 891.

Sincerely,

Delegate Debra M. Davis

District 28, Charles County