Greater Hartford Gives Foundation testimony in Support of

House Bill 5144, An Act Concerning Funding For School Meals

Appropriations Committee
March 5, 2026

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Somers, Representative Nuccio and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. The Greater Hartford Gives Foundation (formerly the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving) **appreciates this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bill 5144, An Act Concerning Funding for School Meals. As the state navigates reductions in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and new federal requirements, the legislation provides funding to ensure critical access to healthy meals for Connecticut students, helping to ensure they have the nutrition necessary to be ready to learn.** The foundation supports this bill which provides additional funding to the Department of Education to provide breakfasts to students at no cost at schools participating in the school breakfast program, and lunch to students eligible for reduced-price meals, at no cost at schools participating in the school lunch program.

This proposal provides funding to reimburse school districts for the difference between the federal reimbursement rate for reduced-price and fully paid school meals. We have seen that eligible students and mechanisms for funding school food programs proposed in Connecticut legislation varies. We encourage the Committee to use approaches that are financially feasible to sustain funding and move towards universal access to food programs in schools to ensure all students have a healthy start and avoids the stigma that can occur when some students participate in the program and others do not. Fundamentally the foundation supports the intent of this proposal to provide support to the many families in Connecticut living on low- and moderate-incomes, including families in communities of color who have struggled historically to manage food prices and other basic needs.

Since 1925, the Greater Hartford Gives Foundation has proudly served as the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. Last year, the foundation celebrated 100 years of service and remains committed to building an even greater Hartford region. Over the past two years, we have distributed more than $100 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the foundation has awarded grants of more than $1 billion since its founding.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and advance equity in social and economic mobility in Greater Hartford's Black and Latine communities, Greater Hartford Gives supports basic human needs in our region by ensuring food security, reducing homelessness, and expanding access to health care. This work recognizes that longstanding systems and practices are challenged to meet people's most basic human needs. Through our investments, we have seen that when essential needs are met, people are better able to achieve stability and other goals.

We support nonprofits working to reduce homelessness and food insecurity and helping to improve the physical and emotional wellbeing of Greater Hartford residents, prioritizing Black and Latine residents who are disproportionately impacted by structural racism and bias. Our grantmaking helps to strengthen

the local and regional safety net and ensure people have the stability necessary to participate in education, the workforce, and their community. We support activities that increase the coordination among basic needs providers, and the responsiveness of local and state agencies.

Reliable access to nutritious food is essential to family stability and community well-being. When families can put food on the table, students and young adults are better positioned to succeed in school, maintain employment, manage health conditions, and remain connected to their communities. At the same time, food insecurity does not occur in isolation. It is shaped by unequal educational opportunities, access to affordable housing, inadequate wages, health disparities, and neighborhood disinvestment.

The foundation's food security strategy responds to these interconnected realities by supporting organizations that provide immediate relief and addressing structural factors that perpetuate insecurity. We do this by monitoring federal, state, and private funding streams and policies to identify gaps and opportunities where philanthropic investment can be nimble and catalytic.

To advance these goals, the foundation supports **House Bill 5144, An Act Concerning Funding for School Meals which allocates state funding and builds on Governor Lamont's proposal to provide free school breakfasts to all students in the state by providing free school lunches for all Connecticut students who are eligible for free or reduced priced lunches.** Through our work, we have seen increased needs among families with children to access adequate food, health, and other basic services. Recent changes to federal nutrition programs, high grocery prices and other basic needs, and the rising number of families with limited income struggling require the state to provide a safety net that ensures students have the nutrition needed to learn and grow.

A key aspect of the foundation's role is to provide access to data that can inform policy decisions. We are pleased to highlight key relevant data and resources:

The DataHaven Community Wellbeing Survey also shows that food insecurity continues to rise especially for people living with children, documenting the share of Connecticut adults reporting food insecurity in the past 12 months by presence of children in the home, 2015 to 2025.

According to Feeding America, more than 516,000 (1 in 7) Connecticut residents struggle with hunger; more than 122,000 (1 in 6) children are food insecure. Child hunger has risen, with rates reaching up to 25 percent in cities like Hartford and New Haven. The food insecurity crisis among children can lead to developmental delays, mental health issues, and physical illnesses.

Research from leading organizations including the Food Research & Action Center, No Kid Hungry, and the USDA have found that breakfast programs improve food access, academic achievement, cognitive function and health, student behavior, and school attendance.

The **Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity**'s State of Food Insecurity in Connecticut 2025 Report found that the overall state of food security in Connecticut has significantly worsened and that will likely continue in the coming years without significant intervention.

Connecticut has passed Maine for the highest food insecurity rate in New England. **It should be noted that among the key recommendations made in both the 2024 and 2025 Commission reports on food insecurity is the implementation of universal free school meals for all Connecticut students. The**

proposed legislation takes the important significant step of offering universal free breakfast, while targeting support for free lunches to students eligible for free and reduced lunch. We believe this strikes a reasonable balance given the many pressures on the budget and allows time to learn from this first universal student meal program and the impact of this substantial investment.

The Commission report also affirms that two of the key drivers of continued growth in food insecurity are rising prices and falling federal support. In 2025 the net federal support for food security programs continued a four-year decrease from its COVID-era high point. Funding for a number of important federal programs, such as SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed), the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA), and the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS) was eliminated entirely, while cost-sharing changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are projected to see reduced federal funding to Connecticut by between $40 million and $173 million per year once they take effect partially in Fiscal Year 27 and fully in Fiscal Year 28.

An analysis by **DataHaven** projects Connecticut families will see between $132 million and $180 million in reduced SNAP benefits per year, with the Department of Social Services estimating restrictions to the SNAP-LIHEAP "Heat and Eat" connection will reduce statewide SNAP benefits by approximately $62.5 million per year.

Access to free school meals in Connecticut decreased in the 2025-26 school year for the third consecutive year due to the end of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)-funded free meals for reduced-price eligible students, bringing access back to pre-COVID levels.

This all comes at a time when the cost of groceries is significantly higher than during pre-COVID years, with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) finding that prices rose by 3 percent in 2025 (after increasing 2.3 percent in 2024, 5.5 percent in 2023, and 9.9 percent in 2022).

Connecticut has made efforts to increase funding on food security over the past fiscal year, due in large part to increases for programs such as the Connecticut Nutrition Assistance Program (CT-NAP) and Local Food for Schools Incentive Program (LFSIP). Unfortunately, these increases in support are likely not sufficient to make up for federal reductions phasing in between now and FY28.

The foundation's investments in food security provide us with perspective and learning we are pleased to share now and as additional strategies to address these and related issues continue to develop:

For many years, **the foundation has provided annual grants to address basic human needs (totaling approximately $8 million this past year) to support regional and local nonprofit agencies in providing direct services and addressing systemic challenges**. Our grants tackle a range of related issues, including food security and healthy food choices and other supports for wellness. These grants include the Foundation's annual Basic Human Needs Emergency Assistance grants where more than 60 percent of funding supports food assistance. Last year, a total of $755,000 has been granted to 70 nonprofits, including faith-based and mutual aid organizations. These grants prioritized nonprofits that serve neighborhoods and towns with a higher percentage of residents living in poverty and sought to reduce barriers to equitable access to basic needs. Our investments have helped to address a portion of the enormous need, but philanthropy cannot adequately address food insecurity without state investments to mitigate federal SNAP reductions as well as in free food programs in public schools where access to food is essential.

In November 2022, the foundation awarded a three-year, $550,000 grant to **Connecticut Foodshare** to support Greater Hartford food distribution and its Value-Added Product food rescue program. According to the demographic data and census tract information of Connecticut Foodbank's target population, an estimated 39 percent of its constituents are people of color.

In December 2022, the foundation awarded $200,000 over three-year to **Hartford Food System** (HFS). The agency's work takes place throughout the Greater Hartford region, with a particular focus on Hartford. HFS works collaboratively with other nonprofit organizations to provide a systems-based approach that focuses on the root causes of food insecurity and challenges across food systems. HFS has also been successful in engaging Hartford residents to promote food justice and an equitable food economy.

For the past twelve years, the foundation has worked to support seven of Greater Hartford region's Alliance Districts (Bloomfield, East Hartford, Hartford, Manchester, Vernon, Windsor, and Windsor Locks). This work has focused on supporting integration of school, parent, and community partnerships to ensure that all partners are working together to meet the holistic needs of students. These efforts focus on ensuring that all students have the support they need to successfully graduate from high school. These districts have schools where the majority of its students—in many cases the entire student body—are eligible for free and reduced school lunches. **Most of the districts the foundation works with have asked us for assistance with supporting basic human needs for their students and their families, including access to food. As these communities continue to develop strategies to improve student outcomes, ensuring that every student has access to nutritious meals is essential.**

As schools implement school breakfasts and other food programs, it is also important to consider the model used for delivering meals to students. In the study Alternative School Breakfast Service Models and Associations with Breakfast Participation, Diet Quality, Body Mass Index, Attendance, Behavior, and Academic Performance: A Systematic Review different models of providing Breakfast After the Bell (BATB) were examined to see if student participation could be improved. The models included Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC); Grab-and-Go (GG); and Second Chance Breakfast (SCB). Each initiative integrates breakfast into the school day. BIC provides students breakfast at their desks during the first 15 minutes of class, typically while morning announcements and attendance is taken. GG is a flexible model and offers students the opportunity to pick up breakfast on their way to class, either from the cafeteria or in coolers or carts located in the hallways. SCB serves breakfast in the cafeteria or at kiosks or in carts in the hallways between classes .

The evidence suggested BATB approaches have the potential to increase school breakfast participation, which can lead to improvements in students' nutrition through consumption and diet quality, and improvements in students' classroom behavior. **Investing in a school meals program that makes school breakfast easily accessible for all students and provides valuable nutrition will have a beneficial impact on student health and education**.

According to the Rockefeller Foundation, every dollar invested in providing healthy meals for students leads to at least two dollars in health, economic, equity, and environmental benefits. The Greater Hartford Gives Foundation is ready to partner with legislators, the administration, nonprofits, advocates, philanthropy, and other stakeholders to eliminate food insecurity. We invite policymakers and other stakeholders to meet with us to explore public-private partnerships and ways philanthropic dollars could

complement existing resources to help address funding gaps and foster equitable strategies to support Connecticut residents with significant unmet needs.

The foundation is committed to working with legislators, government leaders, nonprofit and other community partners to tackle tough issues before us.

If you have questions regarding our testimony, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.