



Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of

House Bill 5510, An Act Concerning Funding for School Meals

Appropriations Committee

March 26, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of **House Bill 5510, An Act Concerning Funding for School Meals**.

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. In the past two years, the Foundation has distributed \$104.5 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 \$998 million since its founding in 1925.

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, the Hartford Foundation supports basic human needs in our region, applying an equity lens to the systems and programs that address access to food, stable housing, physical and mental health care, and the digital divide.

The Hartford Foundation and other philanthropic organizations have supported increasing food security across the Greater Hartford region for many years. **To advance efforts to ensure children and families throughout Connecticut have the nutrition they need to thrive, the state must lead efforts to invest in preventing and eliminating food insecurity.** Public commitment must also address the interconnection across basic human needs programs and systems to increase access to healthy food, and physical and mental health and housing services to provide adequate support to the nonprofit organizations and state agencies delivering these services.

To advance these goals, the Foundation supports House Bill 5510, An Act Concerning Funding for School Meals. **One in eight Connecticut children experience hunger, with Black and Latine children making up a disproportionate share. By continuing funding free school breakfasts, Connecticut can reduce child hunger and advance equity in health and education in communities across the state.**

Through the Hartford Foundation's data-informed grantmaking, we have seen an increased needs among families with children, exacerbated by the pandemic and its lingering effects, to access adequate food, health, and other basic services. For many years, **the Foundation has provided annual grants to address basic human needs (totaling approximately \$7 million each year) to support both regional and local nonprofit agencies in Greater Hartford in providing direct services and addressing systemic challenges.**

Our grants tackle a range of related issues from increasing access to emergency shelter, diversion of



homelessness, physical and mental health care, as well as food security and healthy food choice and other supports for wellness. This past year, the Foundation's investments included more than \$574,000 in **Emergency Assistance Grants** to 65 nonprofit organizations throughout the region. These grants prioritized nonprofits that serve neighborhoods and towns in the region with a higher percentage of residents living in poverty and seek to reduce barriers to equitable access to basic needs.

As reported in [DataHaven's 2023 Greater Hartford Community Wellbeing Index](#), with rising inflation, many Connecticut families have struggled with food insecurity. In 2022, the food insecurity rate in Connecticut was 17 percent, with Latino households experiencing the highest rates of food insecurity at 34 percent and Black households at 25 percent, compared to 11 percent of White households.

According to the US Department of Agriculture, food prices in 2022 increased year-over-year an average of 11.4 percent, some categories (including eggs and poultry) reaching as high as 21.5 percent, with no categories reporting price decreases. While the rate of increases has in some cases decreased in 2023, rising food prices have continued to impact family income leaving fewer dollars to address other basic needs.

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. Growers and distributors are partnering to smooth out projected steep variations in revenue during the next three years. 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 years to [Hartford Food System \(HFS\)](#). The agency's work takes place throughout the Greater Hartford region, with a particular focus on Hartford. HSF 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 ten 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). The Foundation has worked with these districts to develop stronger partnerships among schools, families, nonprofits, and the community help students feel increased connectedness to their school, leading to increased attendance, academic engagement, and persistence to graduation.

A majority of these school districts have schools where the majority of its students, in many cases the entire student body, are eligible for free and reduced school lunches as identified by Connecticut Department of Education. **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 districts and communities continue to develop strategies to improve student outcomes, ensuring that every student has access to nutritious meals is essential.** For many years, the Foundation also has supported summer programs to help keep youth engaged in supportive activities after the academic school year ends. A key factor in supporting those efforts is ensuring adequate access to food to support student and family engagement. Many of us have witnessed how food can be a tool for bringing people together.



Studies show a direct link between access to universal school meals and improved academic performance, attendance, and classroom behavior. Students feel safer in school with meals for all. 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.

While House Bill 5510 does not provide free school meals for all students, it does provide funding for free breakfasts to students in schools participating in the school breakfast program and reimbursing school districts which have adopted the United States Department of Agriculture Community Eligibility Provision. The USDA program is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas, which allows participating districts to provide free meals to all students and receive reimbursements based on a formula. The Foundation supports this effort to ensure participating schools and school districts are fully covered for the cost of student breakfasts.

The Hartford Foundation is ready to partner with legislators, the administration, advocates, philanthropy, and other stakeholders to prevent and 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.

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