



## Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of

### Senate Bill 1418, An Act Reducing Barriers To Food Security

#### Human Services Committee

March 6, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Lesser, Representative Gilcrest, Senator Harding, Representative Case and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of **Senate Bill 1418, An Act Reducing Barriers To Food Security. We applaud the legislation's efforts to present comprehensive measures designed to address food insecurity for vulnerable populations and improving access to nutritious food across the state.**

Since 1925, the Hartford Foundation has proudly served as the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. This year, the foundation celebrates 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, 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 emotional well-being.

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 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 Senate Bill 1418, An Act Reducing Barriers To Food Security. Through our work, we have seen increased needs among families with children to access adequate food, health, and other basic services. High grocery prices and the rising number of families with limited income struggling to make ends meet require the state to provide a safety net that ensures that students have the nutrition needed to learn and grow.

**One in eight Connecticut children experiences hunger, with Black and Latine children making up a disproportionate share. By funding free school breakfasts, Connecticut can reduce child hunger and advance equity in health and education in communities across the state.**



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. The foundation continues to support DataHaven in providing current, actionable data on this issue. We also appreciate the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity first annual [report](#) issued in 2024 on food insecurity that can also inform this work: There are 65 Low-Income, Low-Access census tracts (“food deserts”) in Connecticut with an average distance of at least one mile to a grocery store, and 207 with an average distance of at least 0.5 miles. The foundation supports the concept in the legislation of the Commissioner of Agriculture supporting nonprofit organizations in establishing or expanding food security hubs designed to aggregate, store, and distribute locally grown nutritional food, with priority given to organizations serving food desert areas.

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 across Greater Hartford in providing direct services and addressing systemic challenges.** Our grants tackle a range of related issues, including food security and healthy food choice and other supports for wellness. This past year, the foundation’s investments included more than \$688,000 in **Emergency Assistance Grants** to 71 nonprofit organizations throughout the region. More than half of these grants were focused on for food or food assistance. 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. **Our investments have helped to address a portion of the enormous need, but philanthropy cannot adequately address food insecurity without state investment in free food programs in public schools where access to food is essential. We appreciate the bill’s provision to modify school lunch programs, requiring local and regional boards of education to provide free lunches to all students, eliminating previous restrictions. Universal food programs ensure all students have easy access to the nutrition needed to be ready to learn.**

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 years 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 eleven 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). 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 districts and communities continue to develop strategies to improve student outcomes, ensuring that every student has access to nutritious meals is essential.**

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.

The foundation support the provisions in Senate Bill 1418 which establishes a grant program managed by the Commissioner of Agriculture to help nonprofit organizations establish or expand food security hubs to distribute locally grown nutritionally adequate food, with priority given to organizations serving food desert areas. The foundation also supports the portion of the bill that requires local and regional boards of education to provide free lunches to all students, eliminating previous restrictions.

**The foundation also supports the legislation’s proposed increase to supplemental nutrition assistance benefits by raising the minimum monthly benefit to \$95 and creating a healthy food incentive program that provides extra benefits for purchasing fresh produce at farmers’ markets.** The foundation supports the proposed development of a Restaurant Meals Program for eligible beneficiaries including seniors, individuals with disabilities, and people experiencing homelessness, allowing them to purchase meals at participating restaurants. These provisions offer good ideas for making nutritious food accessible, particularly for populations who often struggle to secure healthy food options of their choice.

The foundation supports the proposal’s call for the state to apply for a Medicaid waiver to cover "food as medicine" and increased funding for supplemental nutrition commodities assistance, with a requirement to purchase at least 15 percent of food from Connecticut farmers. This is an innovation that recognizes good nutrition promotes wellness while supporting the state’s farmers.

This legislation represents a comprehensive package of initiatives to address food insecurity that supports vulnerable populations and improves access to nutritious food across the state. The Hartford Foundation is ready to partner with legislators, the administration, 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.

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