



## Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of

### **Senate Bill 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs To Provide Free School Meals To All Students.**

**Committee on Children  
February 7, 2023**

Good afternoon Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, Senator Seminara, Representative Dauphinais and distinguished members of the Committee on Children. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of **Senate Bill 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs To Provide Free School Meals To All Students.**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. As a community foundation, we manage approximately \$1 billion in assets. Over the past two years, the Foundation has distributed a record-breaking \$99 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 \$940 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 Latinx 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, housing, physical and mental health, and the digital divide.

**While the Foundation and other philanthropic organizations have and will continue to support this work, the state must lead the effort to prevent and eliminate food insecurity.** Public commitment must also address the interplay of basic human needs, including access to healthy, nutritious food, and provide adequate support to the nonprofit organizations delivering these services.

To this end, the Foundation supports **Senate Bill 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs To Provide Free School Meals To All.** One in eight Connecticut children experience hunger, with Black and Latinx children making up a disproportionate share. By funding healthy school meals for all students, Connecticut can reduce child hunger and advance equity in health and education in nearly every community across the state.

Each year, the Foundation provides approximately \$7 million in basic human needs grants to support both regional and local agencies in Greater Hartford. This past year, the Foundation awarded more than \$1.4 million to support food programs that respond to emergency and short-term needs as well as food services during the holidays. Other services supported by our basic human needs grants include emergency housing, fuel assistance, medical and dental services, employment counseling, clothing and other personal care items.



As we witnessed with long lines at food distribution sites during the height of COVID-19, many middle and lower-income families struggle with food insecurity. Providing school meals offers some relief to families and ensures that those struggling to make ends meet don't have to worry about lunch debt, or having to pack lunches on school days, reducing their grocery costs, which frees up resources for other necessities.

The Foundation applauds the bill's incorporation of locally grown food in school meals. Many residents live in food deserts where the availability of healthy, fresh food is limited and often more expensive than other communities.

When schools have been able to provide *all* students with free school meals, there has been an increase in children participating in the lunch program. Providing free meals to all students removed the stigma associated with a free meal program, so students are more comfortable and more likely to participate.

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.

Funding free school meals also reduces costs for local schools, including administrative costs related to paperwork around school meal programs. This frees up time and resources for school food directors to focus on feeding nutritious meals to their students.

The Hartford Foundation is ready to partner with legislators, the administration, advocates, philanthropy and other stakeholders to prevent and eliminate food insecurity. We also invite policymakers to meet with us to understand and discuss how philanthropic dollars can fill gaps in equitable strategies to support Connecticut residents that may not be best suited for public dollars.

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