

**Statement from U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren to Joint Committee on Higher Education
on the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative**

October 7, 2021

Thank you to Senator Gobi, Representative Rogers, and members of the Joint Committee on Higher Education for the opportunity to submit testimony for this hearing, and to Senator Chandler and Representatives Vargas and Domb for leading the *Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative* legislation. I commend the advocates and legislators who have collaborated on this bill to address the challenge of ending student hunger.

Far too many college students struggle to meet their basic needs, making it difficult for them to focus on their education. A survey by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that 39% of students at two-year colleges and 29% of students at four-year institutions faced food insecurity in fall 2020.¹ These findings are consistent with a 2018 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report that found that three in ten college students struggle with food insecurity, and that almost six in ten potentially eligible students are not enrolled in SNAP.² Students who are worried about where their next meal will come from or other basic needs will naturally have difficulty focusing on their education. In fact, 55% of students facing food insecurity reported deciding not to buy a required textbook, and 25% reported dropping a class.³

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many students have faced even greater challenges meeting their basic needs, as supports like on-campus food pantries have become less accessible. The Hunger-Free Campus Initiative legislation responds to this challenge through systems-level solutions. While the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021* temporarily expanded SNAP eligibility for college students in response to the pandemic,⁴ a large portion of our students still face tremendous challenges in accessing food resources. Because of our country's legacy of discrimination, we see Black, Latino, and transgender students disproportionately experience food insecurity at higher levels – at rates of 52%, 47%, and 51%, respectively.⁵ Our colleges and universities do not have the capacity necessary, in staff nor programming, to address these worsening challenges. The Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative bill helps students by expanding universities and

¹ The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, "Real College 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic," March 2021, https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RCSurvey_NatlOnePager_FINAL_3.22.2021.pdf.

² Government Accountability Office, "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits," December 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696313.pdf>.

³ "Hunger on Campus: The Challenge of Food Insecurity for College Students," James Dubick, Brandon Mathews, and Clare Cady, October 2016, http://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger_On_Campus.pdf.

⁴ USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "Students," <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students>.

⁵ The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice "2019 #RealCollege Survey Report", June 2020 <https://www.mass.edu/strategic/documents/2019%20HOPE%20Center%20MA%20Report.pdf>.

colleges' anti-hunger campus infrastructures. The bill will fund the Department of Higher Education to establish an Office of Capacity Building service that supports public higher education institutions in understanding and addressing existing gaps in addressing food insecurity on their campuses, increase university staff capable of connecting students to resources, and establish the Hunger-Free Grant Program to fund creative campus-specific solutions to student hunger.

Colleges, universities, and states cannot solve this problem alone. I am fighting at the federal level to expand access to federal nutrition benefits and other support for students. Since 2017, I have been working in partnership with Massachusetts advocates and educators to end student hunger on college campuses. In February 2017, in response to concerns raised by leaders at Bunker Hill Community College and others, I requested that the GAO complete a study on the extent of food insecurity present in our nation's colleges and universities, which found that "substantial federal investment in higher education is at risk if college students drop out because they cannot afford basic necessities like food."⁶ In response, I introduced the *College Student Hunger Act of 2019* with Representative Al Lawson⁷. The legislation sought to increase outreach to students that are eligible for SNAP and expand the SNAP eligibility criteria for college students by aligning SNAP eligibility requirements with those of key low-income financial aid programs such as the Pell Grant.

I strongly supported temporary changes that expanded SNAP access for students during the COVID-19 public health emergency.⁸ In May 2021, I introduced the bicameral *Student Food Security Act*, which is an expanded version of my earlier *College Student Hunger Act of 2019*. This new version of the legislation added a \$1 billion per year grant program to incentivize and fund colleges to implement anti-hunger initiatives on their campuses. It also requires the Department of Education to collect data on food and housing insecurity at colleges.

While we continue the work to move this legislation forward on the federal level, I am glad to see Massachusetts take additional steps to support college students who continue to experience food insecurity during this period of unprecedented hardship in our country. The *Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative* bill is critical to ensuring that students can focus on their education and meet their basic needs, and I ask the Committee to give it your fair and full consideration.

⁶ Government Accountability Office, "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits," December 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696313.pdf>.

⁷ The Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren, Press Release, "Senator Warren and Representative Lawson Introduce the College Student Hunger Act of 2019 to Address Hunger on College Campuses" July 2019 [Senator Warren and Representative Lawson Introduce the College Student Hunger Act of 2019 to Address Hunger on College Campuses | U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts \(senate.gov\)](https://www.senate.gov/legislation/record/2019/07/2019071601)

⁸ USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "Students," <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students>.

Thank you again to the Joint Committee for the opportunity to provide this statement. I look forward to our continued partnership as we work together to root out hunger across the campuses of our Commonwealth.