

**February 7, 2023, Public Hearing Testimony before the Connecticut General Assembly's
Committee on Children
In Support of Raised Senate Bill No. 929
"An Act Expanding school meal programs to provide free school meals to all students."**

Dear Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, Vice Chair Kushner, Vice Chair Keitt, Senator Seminara, Representative Dauphinais, and members of the Committee on Children:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Raised Senate Bill 929, "An Act Expanding school meal programs to provide free school meals to all students." As President of the United Way of Western Connecticut, I am submitting testimony in support of short and long-term funding for universal no-cost meals for Connecticut students.

Across Connecticut, more than 131,000 children are facing food insecurity. A hungry child cannot learn, and no child should be made to feel less than because they cannot afford a meal. **No-cost school meals allow students to learn and thrive.** Continuing no-cost school meals is a priority for our 15-town region that spans from Stamford to greater Danbury to southern Litchfield County, encompassing urban, suburban, and rural communities of varied socioeconomic and demographic makeup.

When pandemic era funding ended in December, it left thousands of children, families, and schools scrambling for solutions to ensure that students are successful and school meal programs are financially viable. No cost school meals for all students are critically important to the health and wellbeing of our entire community. Studies show a direct link between access to universal school meals and improved academic performance, attendance, and classroom behavior. Kids feel safer in school when meals are universally available. The risk of obesity is lower, especially for children in poverty. Families have economic relief.

According to the 2021 United Way "ALICE in Focus: Children" report, **41 % of ALICE** (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) households in Connecticut experienced food insecurity. These are families that are employed, yet often cannot afford necessities like food, housing, transportation, health care, and more. In Western Connecticut, more than 1 in 3 families live at the ALICE threshold or below the federal poverty level. Because they make more than the federal poverty level, ALICE families are ineligible for many critical programs, including Free and Reduced-Price School Meals. SB 929 responds to the economic reality of Western Connecticut families: a family of four in Western Connecticut needs to earn **over \$90,000 annually to meet the ALICE Survival Budget**. The same family could earn **no more than \$36,000 to qualify for free school meals and \$51,000 for reduced-price school meals**.

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**. Universal access to school meals is an essential ingredient to education and our economy. When children are fed and when families are financially stable, they thrive and so do our communities. This bill places the children of Connecticut first and will transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of families in our state.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of SB 929 to expand school meal programs to provide free school meals to all students.

Respectfully,
Isabel Almeida, President, United Way of Western Connecticut

