



August 6, 2015

Dear Co-Chair Chilton, Co-Chair Doar, and other Members of the National Commission on Hunger,

On behalf of Single Stop, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the issue of the pervasive problem of hunger and food insecurity. Single Stop shares the National Commission on Hunger's goal of more effectively using existing programs and funds to address this issue, and we respectfully offer our observations and recommendations for your consideration, with a particular focus on the issue of food insecurity among college students.

Single Stop is a national nonprofit organization that harnesses America's most effective anti-poverty tools to create economic mobility for low-income families and individuals. Our "one-stop shop" model is designed to help low-income families and individuals reach financial stability and lift them out of poverty by providing them access to the full spectrum of resources available to them. We partner with community-based organizations and community colleges to coordinate access to resources such as free tax preparation, legal services, financial counseling, and public benefits.

In 2009, we launched the Community College Initiative to increase completion rates of low-income community college students by addressing financial barriers facing these students. Single Stop community college sites enable students to tap into existing unspent federal and local resources that can be used as a supplemental form of financial aid. Since the inception of the initiative, Single Stop has served nearly 173,000 students and secured more than \$300 million in additional resources—tax credits, health insurance, nutrition assistance, and more—that students are using to pay for college. Currently, we have sites at community colleges in 8 states (NY, NJ, CA, MA, LA, PA, MS and FL), and this year Single Stop is expanding and introducing our model to four-year institutions to help curtail dropout rates across the board.

### **Hunger among College Students**

A college student today is no longer just the stereotypical 18-year-old without dependents and with no real need to work at all because of familial financial support. "Nontraditional" students are growing in number and they tend to be older, have their own families to care for, and are usually forced to work at least one job in order to make ends meet while making an investment in their education and future. More and more colleges are reporting that their students struggle with balancing school, work, and having enough money to eat three times a day. According to a recent scholarly article<sup>1</sup>, college students are subject to a high number of potential risk factors for food insecurity and hunger. College students face increased tuition and housing costs, and the need to work at least part-time to make ends meet while receiving low wages that do not represent the actual cost of living.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaines, A., et al. (2014). *Examining the role of financial factors, resources and skills in predicting food security status among college students*. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 38: 374-384.



The most important program to curtail hunger in the United States is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which exists as a safety net program for millions of needy individuals. A study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that household food insecurity decreased nearly 10 percent after six months of SNAP benefit receipt<sup>2</sup>. These results show that SNAP has the great potential to minimize the risk of students facing undue hardship. However, the federal government has put restrictions on SNAP eligibility that prevent many college students from receiving SNAP benefits at all, limiting the ability of students to combat hunger while in school.

Currently, there is limited comprehensive data on the prevalence of college student hunger. However, in a 2014 report by Feeding America, the nation's largest provider of charitable food assistance to low-income families, researchers found that 10 percent of its adult clients were students<sup>3</sup>. Colleges and universities are also beginning to document the phenomenon of food insecurity on their own campuses. In one study that sampled 557 undergraduates at the University of Alabama – Tuscaloosa, the prevalence of food insecurity was approximately 14 percent<sup>4</sup>. Oregon State University found that 50 percent of the student population were food insecure at one point in time during the previous academic year<sup>5</sup>. Another report from the City University of New York found that 39.2 percent of its students experienced food insecurity in the previous twelve months<sup>6</sup>.

Because of these alarming statistics and the inadequacy of SNAP access for college students, colleges are finding ways to combat student hunger. For instance, George Mason University created a voucher program to provide food coupons to hungry students<sup>7</sup>. The City University of New York (CUNY) introduced food pantries and emergency food programs to its campuses across New York City<sup>8</sup>. Pantries coordinate their hours of operation with class schedules so that more students can be accommodated throughout the day. In addition, some CUNY schools offer food preparation classes, meal vouchers for students in dire need, and on-site nutritionists. Many also partner with on-campus child care centers to ensure that student-parents and their children have access to food.

Additionally, colleges such as Oregon State University and Michigan State University have well-established food pantries and food subsidy programs, in addition to providing other non-food related supportive benefits including subsidies for textbooks and housing assistance<sup>9</sup>. According to the College

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<sup>2</sup> "Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table." (January 8, 2015). Center on Budget & Policy Priorities. <http://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table#part3>.

<sup>3</sup> Feeding America. (August 18, 2014). More Than 46 Million People Turn to the Feeding America Food Bank Network to Make Ends Meet [Press Release]. <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/news-and-updates/press-room/press-releases/more-than-46-million-people-turn-to-feeding-america.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Gaines, A., et al. (2014). *Examining the role of financial factors, resources and skills in predicting food security status among college students*. International Journal of Consumer Studies 38: 374-384.

<sup>5</sup> Patton-Lopez, M., et al. (2014). *Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among students attending a midsize rural university in Oregon*. Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, 46(3), 209-214.

<sup>6</sup> Freudenberg, N., et al. (2011). *Food Insecurity at CUNY: Results from a survey of CUNY undergraduate students*. "The Campaign for a Healthy CUNY." [http://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY\\_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Centers/Center%20for%20Human%20Environments/cunyfoodinsecurity.pdf](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Centers/Center%20for%20Human%20Environments/cunyfoodinsecurity.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Bahramour, T. (2014). More college students battle hunger as education and living costs rise. *The Washington Post*. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/more-college-students-battle-hunger-as-education-and-living-costs-rise/2014/04/09/60208db6-bb63-11e3-9a05-c739f29ccb08\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/more-college-students-battle-hunger-as-education-and-living-costs-rise/2014/04/09/60208db6-bb63-11e3-9a05-c739f29ccb08_story.html).

<sup>8</sup> West, M. (October 9, 2014). "Food Pantries Grow on New York Campuses." *The Wall Street Journal*. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/food-pantries-grow-on-new-york-campuses-1412878544>.

<sup>9</sup> Cady, C. "Food Insecurity on Campus." Personal interview. 5 May 2015.



and University Food Bank alliance, there are over 100 campus-based food pantries across the country<sup>10</sup>, and this number is steadily growing.

Hunger presents a significant barrier to student success. Without nutritional assistance, low-income students are highly susceptible to dropping out of college. As more and more students attend college with the idea that a college education is the solution to break out of the cycle of poverty, they are sometimes pulled back in due to being unable to access the resources they need to persist and graduate.

### **The Single Stop Model**

Many Single Stop clients are struggling to put food on the table each month even if they are in receipt of SNAP benefits. Single Stop counsels SNAP clients who are often forced to turn to food pantries to be able to provide for their families. Though food pantries do a tremendous job providing for hungry individuals and families every day, the bottom line is that there are a host of other issues that need to be addressed to complement benefits like SNAP and services like food pantries. Low-income individuals must be given the opportunity to access all of the benefits and services that exist to help them.

In order to address the full spectrum of need, Single Stop also provides the following:

- Eligibility screenings for tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, child care subsidies, rental assistance, and other health and human services programs;
- Free screenings for college students who may be eligible for federal financial aid such as Pell grants;
- Free tax preparation;
- Free financial counseling;
- Free legal services;
- Assistance with enrollment into programs like health insurance and TANF;
- Referrals to community services such as job training and housing programs; and
- Follow-up to ensure receipt of benefit and/or service.

When clients arrive at a Single Stop site, they not only get access to food assistance, but are able to access a wide variety of other financial supports that allow them to be able to afford food on their own in the future. For example, in 2015, Single Stop clients filed 112,575 tax returns that allowed low-income families access tax credits. Our model takes into consideration the idea that SNAP alone cannot solve the broader issue of hunger; families need to build up a foundation for economic security which includes access to a host of other benefits and resources. Far too often, we come across situations of mothers unable to afford day care services and forced to take leave without pay, exacerbating the issue of not having enough money to pay for food. Until we take a holistic approach to attacking poverty as the root cause of hunger, it will be very difficult to envision an end to hunger and food insecurity in the U.S.

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<sup>10</sup> College and University Food Bank Alliance. Q&A. <http://www.cufba.org/qa/>.



## **Recommendations to Combat College Student Hunger**

1. Include comprehensive, evidence-based student support services language under authorized activities for existing federally-funded student support services.

Congress should strengthen existing programs in laws such as the Higher Education Act (HEA) to ensure that students have access to a broad range of non-traditional financial supports that will allow them to pay for food directly or to have more money to spend on other needed essential items such as transportation and housing, indirectly freeing up more money to spend on groceries. The HEA includes definitions for supportive services in several sections including for Minority Serving Institutions and as part of TRIO, and making those definitions stronger to include comprehensive services such as connections to public benefits, free tax preparation, legal services, financial counseling, and community resources will allow more students to access more resources that will fight food insecurity.

Nontraditional students who are Hispanic, African American, Asian American, or students who attend American Indian Tribally Controlled Colleges, Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Predominately Black Institutions or Native Hawaiian-Speaking Institutions make up the largest percentage of community college students who drop out of college due to financial difficulties. Expanding the definition of financial student support services for these students will strengthen existing federal efforts to assist minority students and low-income students.

Moreover, requiring that these student support services are evidence-based will ensure that more students persist, graduate, and get good jobs, giving them the opportunity to escape poverty and ultimately reduce their need for government nutrition assistance programs.

2. Financial aid award letters should include an institution-specific list of on-campus and off-campus resources and services such as free tax preparation, enrollment in public benefits, legal services, and financial counseling that help college students succeed.

Many students are not aware of all the financial resources that are available to them outside of grants and loans. It is in the institutions' interest to help students locate the resources to help them stay in school, including resources that will help combat hunger. A simple one-line inclusion in each student's financial aid award letter encouraging the student to access other local resources that may be eligible for is a substantial start. In addition, the HEA should require each college to come up with a "college affordability checklist" for low-income students. The plan should list all off-campus support agencies such as Career Centers under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act as well as on-campus resources. As part of this requirement, the Department of Education could encourage campuses to develop on-campus resources including IRS-certified Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites or trained financial aid/student services staff who can provide application assistance for federal benefits. Colleges can be given flexibility on how to distribute this plan to students, but all should be required to distribute this information to independent students with a zero EFC who are most likely to be eligible for those programs.



3. The U.S. Department of Agriculture should issue guidance on how best to promote EBT-accepting locations on college campuses.

Students who are able to access SNAP face a barrier to using their benefits. They are often unable to purchase food with the benefits on their college campus because the school's food locations do not accept benefits from an EBT card. Colleges may not know how to comply with the federal rules about the use of EBT cards, and guidance about how to navigate these rules will allow on-campus food stores to accept EBT cards as an additional way to ensure that students do not go hungry.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, if we are to address hunger for college students, it is imperative to include the broader issue of poverty into the conversation. Our recommendations to tap into the country's underutilized resources designed to help low-income individuals and families have the potential to help thousands of low-income college students attain the credentials they need to lift themselves out of poverty. The reforms and recommendations we envision do not require the allocation of significant new funds but reimagine the use of existing dollars to increase our nation's college completion rate and bolster the earning potential of our workforce.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Stettner". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Andrew Stettner  
Chief Program Officer  
Single Stop