



To: Senate Committee on Education
From: Chris Baker, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon
RE: Testimony in support of SB 849
Date: April 26, 2021

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen, and members of the committee,

We strongly support [SB 849](#) which would provide pathways to opportunity for college students experiencing hunger and poverty by placing a Benefits Navigator on each public college and university.

Hunger-Free Oregon's values and work are centered on creating systemic changes to end hunger and poverty. We support policies that ensure Oregonians have equitable access to the resources and opportunities needed in order to afford life's essentials. We focus on ensuring that nutrition support programs are adequate, effective and equitable when we need them, and we believe the people most impacted by hunger and poverty are leaders in designing and enacting solutions.

Our work on college campuses began in 2018 when a group of students at the University of Oregon reached out to us asking for support to help elevate addressing essential need insecurities that they were experiencing while attending college. In response to those students, the Oregon Hunger Task Force held a large listening session on campus. Since then, the crisis of college student food and housing insecurities became urgent and clear through building relationships with students, conducting research, and supporting benefits access. This crisis, exasperated by the pandemic, drives our urgency in advocating for solutions that will end student insecurities and make higher education accessible to all.

Hunger-Free Oregon has provided resource training and support to students and administrators at Oregon community colleges and universities for many years. Through this process, we have seen the importance of benefits access for students to help close their financial aid gaps and increase the likelihood of college success. We primarily focus on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) access and outreach by supporting cross-campus outreach coordination, targeted messaging, and increasing understanding of student eligibility. There is enthusiasm and genuine desire by student leaders and administrators to increase access to SNAP and other benefit programs at their colleges, but it's clear there is limited capacity to support students in the ways they need to truly access these resources.

Pre-COVID, Oregon's general population food insecurity rate reflected that 1 in 10 Oregonians were struggling to put food on the table¹. Currently, 1 in 4² Oregonians are food insecure. Even before the pandemic, college student food insecurity rates were higher than that of the general population. Pre-COVID, data reflected that 41% of college students had experienced food insecurity³, with BIPOC students experiencing hunger at a rate nearly double than that of white students. In 2019, 50% of Oregon's Community College students with children were food insecure⁴. We suspect that because of COVID, college student food insecurity has drastically increased just as the general food insecurity rates have.

Last year, in partnership with the Oregon Student Association, we conducted a series of listening circles and shared an online survey that reached students across the state⁵. We asked students to share about their experiences in navigating food and basic needs insecurities while attending college. Students shared a clear need for consistent, hands-on support in order to access resources. Students know the importance of benefit programs for financial stability, but expressed the difficulties of navigating program eligibility that is often hard to understand how college students qualify, confusing application requirements, and traumatizing barriers that often lead to stopping an application process before it's completed. Students need benefits navigators that are consistently available on-campus (or in "on-campus" virtual settings) and have the time to provide trauma-informed and trustworthy application support while also being well-trained in the intersection of financial aid and benefits program eligibility. This is currently not possible at most Oregon community colleges and public universities and the piecemeal system of benefits information and access isn't working for students.

The work that we've contributed to the concept behind this bill comes straight from student feedback from the listening circles and the survey mentioned above. SB 849 provides pathways to opportunity for college students experiencing hunger and poverty

¹ Mark Edwards, *Oregon's Food Insecurity Rates by Demographic Groups (2017-2019)*, updated December 2020.

https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/oregon_food_insecurity_rates_by_demographic_groups_2017-2019.pdf

² Mark Edwards, *Oregon's Food Insecurity in the Time of COVID (2020)*

https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/oregonhungerreportdecember_2020.pdf

³ Hope Center, *2019 Oregon Community College #RealCollege Survey*. Updated April 2020.

https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_OregonCC_Report_v2.pdf

⁴ Hope Center, *2019 Oregon Community College #RealCollege Survey*. Updated April 2020.

https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_OregonCC_Report_v2.pdf

⁵ Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, *College Student Food Insecurity in Oregon: Listening Circle and Survey Thematic Analysis*, 2020.

https://oregonhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/College-Student-Food-Insecurity-in-Oregon_-Listening-Circle-and-Survey-Thematic-Analysis-1.pdf

by placing a Benefits Navigator on each public college and university. A benefits navigator that holds institutional knowledge while providing crucial resource support would mean students would have one point of access for all of their needs, reducing the amount of time they need to search for resources, and giving them more time to concentrate on their studies.

Connecting students to public benefits improves their financial stability and lowers their debt loads allowing them to focus on their education and worry less about surviving, which means they may be more likely to graduate. This has a positive impact on Oregon's economy by increasing family wages and raising the tax base.

This bill passed unanimously out of the House Committee on Education, it is one of the Oregon Hunger Task Force's top priority policies, it is supported by the Oregon Community College Association, the Oregon Council of Presidents, and has support from a broad range of community organizations.

Please support Oregon's students of Higher Education by passing SB 849. Thank you for your time.

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<https://oregonhunger.org/hunger-free-campuses/>