

To Chair Sen. Sara Gelsler Blouin, Vice-Chair Sen. Art Robinson, and members of the committee,

The majority of graduate student employees in the state of Oregon have formed labor unions to advocate and negotiate better working conditions. Common areas of concern are low pay, housing, and food insecurity. The approximately 4,200 graduate employees who are members of the American Federation of Teachers include graduate teaching and research assistants at University of Oregon, Portland State University, and Oregon State University.

Every employee is kept to less than 20 hours a week of employment, commonly being paid for 12 to 19 hours per week. Right now in the state of Oregon, these hours do not count towards SNAP eligibility.

Most graduate employees are below the poverty line and are 24-35 years old, and many are married and with kids. Starting your family with low pay is already hard – not being able to qualify your household for SNAP is heart breaking.

Graduate employees are advocating for higher pay, hardship funds, and frequently use on-campus food banks and resources to redress these conditions. One thing that cannot be won in collective bargaining is having their hours of work count towards SNAP benefits.

I myself spent 5 years as a graduate employee at Oregon State University where I regularly relied on campus free food, food banks, my union hardship fund, and cutting corners with nutrition to make ends meet. It was a difficult period of my life. If I had been able to use my hours towards SNAP benefits, I would have done everything I could to do make it happen.

The Senate Committee on Human Services would help qualify hundreds of working families and parents by passing SB 609. Our labor federation is in strong support and grateful to see this bill. This bill gives many graduate employees hope for a brighter and more nutritious future ahead.

Thank you,

Andrea Haverkamp, Ph.D.  
AFT-Oregon Political Organizer