

NYSS Testimony

Joint Legislative Budget Meeting - Higher Education

Dear Committee Chair Krueger, Committee Chair Weinstein, and Committee Members,

My name is Julia Brandenstein, and I am a graduate student at SUNY Stony Brook who also serves as the graduate coordinator for the Center for Civic Justice and Food Pantry on Stony Brook's Campus. I am joined today by stakeholders from across New York, including community-based organizations, and local food banks, but most importantly, students from within SUNY and CUNY who are here bravely fighting for their right to overcome hunger on college campuses.

As one of the individuals who is most directly involved with the operations of our campus food pantry and engages with our student users on a day to day basis, I have directly observed the pertinent need for this policy. Since our food pantry does not have a designated budget, we operate off of grant funding, and donations. Any other food that we buy for the student community must be taken out of the budget of the Center for Civic Justice. Our food pantry is run by unpaid volunteers who on a day to day basis kindly give their time to keep our pantry open. I have worked alongside these students to unload pickup trucks full of hundreds of pounds of food that were donated by outside organizations because if we don't, no one else will. I have also listened to these same volunteers share with me nearly every week that we are running low or are completely out of an item we only restocked three days ago. I have seen our pantry in this condition for so long I can no longer recount the amount of times that I have said "I'm sorry, we are out of that item right now" while filling a student's order at the food pantry. After expanding our food pantry operations and outreach since its inception our visitor count has increased to over 1,000 students and last year alone we distributed around nearly 11,000 pounds of food.

I have spoken with representatives of organizations such as Stony Brook Hillel who share heartbreaking accounts of students who live in their cars who are forced to choose between their religious values and eating because readily available kosher food items are a rarity in a food pantry under strain. Not only do I and other members of the campus community recognize a need for increased capabilities in the food pantries of SUNY and CUNY systems, our users themselves can share how necessary these expanded funding opportunities are. Stony Brook students share that they use and find the food pantry important because:

- "Sometimes I do not have the means to buy groceries off campus."
- *Class of 2022*
- "I don't have enough groceries to last the week and need additional sources of food."
- *Class of 2024*
- "It's the closest food pantry to me. Rather than church pantries, I do not feel shy to take food since it's a university campus."
- *Anonymous*

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- “We have a very low salary as TA's and because it is hard to get food here [in Long Island] if you don't have a car.”
- *Class of 2021*

Though Stony Brook is acknowledged by representatives of New York as one of the premier institutions of higher learning that produces incredible graduates with the ability to propel our economy forward, it is hard for students to hold up the reputation of a world class university when they are hungry. Even though my experience in the food pantry provides me a valuable perspective on the necessity of this allocation, as a masters student studying Public Policy, I understand and have observed the difference that policy can make in the communities around us.

Through the budget allocation and policy our food pantry will be able to

- Help Students Access Existing Resources:
- Increase Institutions Capacity to Provide Basic Needs Resources to Students:
 - Alleviate Anxiety of Where Students' Next Meal Is Coming From
 - Focus On Excelling In Their Schoolwork; Hunger Is Not A Distraction
 - Allow Students Who Are Struggling With Poverty To Save Money That They Would Have Otherwise Spent On Groceries Or Buying Prepared Meals
 - Create More Volunteer Positions For Students, Exposing Them To Community Service Work
 - Encourage Healthy-Eating Habits In Students Who May Not Otherwise Have Access To Fresh Food, Fruits, And Vegetables

To further support the work of our pantry, and those across the SUNY/CUNY system, I implore you to support the Hunger Free Campus Grant funding in this fiscal year including an appropriation of \$10 million into the state budget.

Thank you for your time and consideration,
Julia Brandenstein

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