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Written Testimony in STRONG SUPPORT of House Bill 452: SNAP for Students Act
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Good afternoon Chairperson Barnes and members of the House Appropriations Committee. My name is Dr. Julia Wolfson and I am an Associate Professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health with joint appointments in the Department of International Health and the Department of Health Policy and Management. I am a core faculty member with the Institute for Health and Social Policy and the Lerner Center for Public Health Advocacy. I am a nationally recognized expert in food policy and factors at the individual, environmental, and policy levels that influence food security, diet quality, and diet related health outcomes.

I appreciate the opportunity to express my strong support for House Bill 452: SNAP for Students Act. Food insecurity, or the inability to access or afford enough food for a healthy diet, is an important public health issue in the United States generally and among college students in particular. By providing participants money for food, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is a critical program for mitigating food insecurity among low-income populations. Until recently, there have been steep barriers to college students being able to access SNAP benefits. **Passing HB 452 will be an important step towards ensuring that college students in Maryland will be able to access to SNAP benefits even after federal pandemic era policies that granted greater access to SNAP for college students expire.**

My recent research using a longitudinal and nationally representative sample of college students has shown that preventing food insecurity among college students is important for the following reasons:

First, food insecurity among college students is a growing problem. Recent studies have shown unprecedented levels of food insecurity on college campuses, well above estimates among the general population, with under-represented minority students and first-generation college students particularly at risk. It is estimated that 33-41% of college students experience food insecurity, and on some campuses students with food insecurity exceed 50%.⁽¹⁾ By comparison, food insecurity among the general population in 2020 and 2021 was about 11%.

Second, food insecurity is associated with numerous adverse health outcomes that have consequences in the short and long term. Food insecurity is associated with poor mental health, poor diet quality, and higher risk of diabetes and obesity, among other health problems. My own research has shown that college students in 1999-2003 who experienced food insecurity were more likely than those who did not to also experience food insecurity 18 years later.⁽²⁾ College students who were economically independent from their parents, as many current students are, were more than 2 times as likely to experience food insecurity as adults if they were food insecure during college.

Third, college students who experience food insecurity are less likely to graduate from college. My research, again using a nationally representative sample and longitudinal data following students over an 18 year period, shows that college students who experience food insecurity are less likely to graduate at all, and those who do are less likely to obtain a Bachelor's or Graduate level degree compared to an Associate's degree.⁽³⁾ For first-generation college students the disparity is particularly stark. Only 47% of first-generation students with food insecurity as college students graduated with any college level degree 18 years later.

Given the importance of a college degree for economic mobility and financial security, as well as the robust body of evidence regarding the mental and physical health problems associated with food insecurity,(4) findings from my and others research underscore important lasting negative effects of experiencing food insecurity during college. SNAP is one of the most important and successful policy tools to reduce food insecurity. Improving and ensuring access to SNAP is a common sense, practical, and effective means to help low-income college students avoid food insecurity while attending school. **I strongly support HB 452 as an important action Maryland can take to ensure college students in need are always able to access SNAP benefits.**

I submit this testimony in my capacity as a public health expert and as a concerned resident of Maryland. I am not representing the view or position of Johns Hopkins University or the Bloomberg School of Public Health.

References

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