

HB 1491 written testimony
Melissa Sobolik
CEO, Great Plains Food Bank

As the state's largest hunger-relief organization and its only food bank, the Great Plains Food Bank gives its full support and strongly urges the committee to recommend passage of House Bill 1491 to ensure all kids have access to a healthy school lunch. With this bill, we have an opportunity to take impactful steps toward ending childhood hunger throughout our state.

We believe that when you feed a child, you feed the future. Last year, more than 47,000 North Dakota children were served through the Great Plains Food Bank and our network of charitable hunger relief programs. Our trio of childhood hunger-relief programs – backpack program, school pantry program and youth summer meals program – along with our network of 200 partner food pantries across the state are feeding kids every day while they are home. But this does nothing to feed them while they are in school when they are trying to learn and to grow.

In 2022, we served the second largest number of individuals of any year in our organization's 40-year history and served more than any year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This equates to nearly 140,000 individuals (1 in 6 North Dakotans) that sought food assistance last year alone. With the high cost of food and inflation, every day we witness the strain families are under and being able to provide them a school meal would be an immediate boost for so many.

Daily we hear from teachers, administrators, and counselors that hunger among school-aged children continues to be an issue. We, at the Great Plains Food Bank have a responsibility to keep our children fed, but we can't do it alone. The only way we will eradicate childhood hunger is, together, with public, private, and nonprofit entities working alongside each other.

Opponents will ask if we can afford to feed our kids. I ask, "can we afford not to?"

Thank you for your consideration and support of HB 1491.