



March 15, 2023

Chairman Elkin and members of the Senate Education Committee,

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 a "do-pass" on HB 1491 to ensure more kids have access to a free school meals. With this bill, we have an opportunity to take impactful steps toward ending childhood hunger across our state.

We believe that when you feed a child, you feed the future. Last year, more than 47,000 North Dakota children (1 in 4 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.

Daily we hear from teachers, administrators, and counselors that hunger among school-aged children continues to be an issue.

Children who are under or malnourished or food insecure face a myriad of issues and challenges. Although the effects of food insecurity can be harmful to anyone, they can be particularly devastating for children. Not having enough healthy food can have serious implications for a child's physical and mental health, academic achievement, and future economic prosperity. Children facing hunger and more likely to have diet related health conditions, experience developmental impairments as they grow, intend to have more social and behavioral problems than they carry to adulthood.

And to think that we have 47,000 ND kids in that camp is heartbreaking.

As you know in 2020, Congress issued a set of waivers to provide free school breakfast and lunches, to all kids regardless of family income. For two years, families didn't have any out of pocket costs to ensure their kids were fed at school. Then in September 2022, that support went away, but the need didn't.

In fact, we saw a 14% in clientele in 2022 compared to 2021. Families are still struggling in a post-COVID world, with inflation and the price of nearly everything rising. Their dollars don't stretch as far as they used to, so they are making sacrifices regularly, choosing between food, and rent, and medication, and heat. They shouldn't have to choose between feeding their kids at home or feeding their kids at school.

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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.

Thank you for your consideration and support of HB 1491.

Melissa Sobolik
CEO

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