

Chairman Heinert and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to provide testimony in support of HB 1475 to provide free school lunch for students in grades K-12. In 2017 the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 6% of children in North Dakota were living in “high poverty areas”. In 2022, the Great Plains Food Bank reported that their most recent estimates of food insecurity in the state were 1 in 6 people. To be food insecure is to have an inconsistent or no lack of access to foods, particularly foods that are high in nutrients and minerals. According to Feeding America, a child who is food insecure is at an increased risk of delayed development, chronic illnesses such as asthma and anemia, and behavioral troubles like anxiety, aggression, and hyperactivity. A 2019 study published in the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that asthma diagnosis rates and depressive symptoms were 19.1% and 27.9% higher respectively than children who were not in food insecure households. That same study also noted that foregone medical care rates were 179.8% higher for those same households. In North Dakota, a study by the North Dakota News Cooperative found that 82% of people polled want free school lunches for all students. The statistics prove how important this legislation is, and how widely it is supported in our state.

I understand that for many, the cost of this is prohibitive. I know it’s not in the nature of many people to mark a large chunk of money for something that won’t benefit themselves at all. But I ask you to look past the price tag and see the change this funding could make in the lives of so many children in North Dakota. Children who are food insecure are fighting an uphill battle for the rest of their lives. One way this can be helped is to ensure that all school

children in our state have access to consistent meals in school. Making sure that all kids, regardless of family income, can have at least five warm and nutritious meals a week is something we should not shy away from. While many kids from impoverished families may already be receiving free lunches, this bill would help the kids whose families currently make just a little too much money to qualify for free meals, but do not make enough money to properly make ends meet. This was my family in 2016 when my mom did what most people would commend her for doing, and got a promotion at work. But with her new job, we didn't qualify for reduced price lunch anymore, and now had to pay full price for three kids eating lunch five days a week. By the end of the school year, we owed over \$1,000. My parents worked hard to pay this off over the summer, but by the end of my senior year (the next school year), we owed close to \$2,000 as we never had enough left over in the months to pay off the debt. I almost didn't get to walk at graduation because we owed lunch money. While that type of consequence is now illegal in North Dakota, this bill will protect more families from having to worry about the debt hanging over their heads, and keep children fed so they can focus in class, play with their friends or in sports after school, and their brain and body can develop fully.

Thank you for your time Chairman Heinert and Members of the Committee.

Heather Tyulyandin, West Fargo