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Testimony HB 1431
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Chair Schaible and Members of the Education Committee:

Good day. I am Karen Ehrens, a Licensed Registered Dietitian, and a person who works to reduce hunger in our state and our communities.

Getting enough food every day for a healthy and active lifestyle (food security) is extremely important for all North Dakotans, and especially for children. Children are our future. Children who do not have food security (food insecurity) are at least twice as likely to report being in fair or poor health. Food insecurity in children is associated with poor educational performance and academic outcomes and with mental health and behavioral health challenges.¹ Food at school served at lunch, breakfast, or healthful snacks is a vital source of healthful food for North Dakota's children.

Over the past year, access to food for every one of us has been challenged. For families living with few resources, and at or near the poverty level, have been especially challenged to find enough food every day for their families. The U.S. Census Bureau has been conducting weekly online surveys studying how the coronavirus pandemic is impacting households across the country from a social and economic perspective. This Household Pulse Survey has uncovered that specifically to North Dakota, in April – July, 2020, one-third to one-half of adults with children in their families reported recent food insufficiency in the week prior to answering the survey. Families with children who reported food insufficiency and obtained free groceries or meal(s) relied heavily on food provided by schools; for 7/10 weeks, 50 - 90% of families found food at school or other programs aimed at children.²

Organizations and agencies are responding to unprecedented food needs deepened and widened by the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic stresses. School foodservice personnel have been adapting rapidly, with flexibility, creativity and hard work to meet the different ways in which education is being delivered, whether that is in-person, at distance, or a hybrid of those ways. School meals prepared and served to children are available at no charge from nearly every North Dakota school with the support of federal funding and waivers through June 30, 2021.

Other examples of how North Dakota organizations and agencies have stepped up to meet food needs CARES Act funding that helped increase cold-holding infrastructure (freezers and coolers) for 83 food pantries and rural grocery stores and funds to help four retailers across 6 locations accept and process online grocery ordering. Senior meals providers received extra federal funding to cover additional costs of packaging for meals picked up or delivered. Many people started or expanded gardens to grow their own food and to share the harvest with others. Food boxes and additional federal funding, along with donations from individuals and the private sector, boosted amounts of food available through the charitable feeding networks that include food pantries and soup kitchens. Volunteers have stepped up in these uncertain times to help get food to people's hands. Federal funding has increased SNAP monthly amounts for many who receive it, and Pandemic EBT benefits were made available to families with children when school was not in session. These efforts across the spectrum have reached many people, and all have played a role in keeping people from hunger and food insecurity.

Even with these efforts, however, the latest data available from the Census Household pulse survey in December, 2020 estimate that 14- 15 percent of adults in households with children in North Dakota reported that they “sometimes” or “often” did not have enough to eat in the week prior to answering the survey.³ Food from schools and other programs aimed at children continue to be the most-accessed resources for households with children to find food help.

Creative solutions are welcomed and needed to ensure that the most vulnerable among us, our children, have enough to eat now and into the future past the pandemic. Ensuring that all the children in our care in the state of North Dakota have enough to eat is a basic minimum that should and can be provided. Schools can continue to be trusted and available partners to get food to children when they have adequate support for all the people and resources needed to provide vital school meals: food service personnel with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and wages; food to serve, equipment to store, prepare and serve food during school the school day; and the ability to cover the expenses for doing so. A first step would be to study the many issues that impact the payment for and foods used in school meal programs; it would be a plus to determine how to serve more North Dakota foods to North Dakota students.

Experience and research have shown that nourishing food is essential to learning and as an integral part of the school day for all children, just as are books, desks, computers, and the things we assume are necessary for learning. Many advocacy groups including pediatricians, public health workers, teachers groups, nutrition organizations and even the national School Nutrition Association are advocating for Universal School Meals. Universal School Meals, or meals as an integrated part of the school day not singled out as a separate fee for families, can bring many benefits to students, schools, and our society. Food for school children is an worthy investment with dividends of healthier children with improved learning.

References:

1. *The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being*, Food Research & Action Center , December 2017. Accessed at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>
2. *North Dakota Families are Facing Food Hardship During the COVID-19 Pandemic* Issue Brief Analysis by K. Ehrens with support from ND Compass. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html>
http://hungerfreend.org/image/cache/ND_Families_Face_Food_Hardship_Pulse_Survey_COVID_July_2020_pdf.pdf
3. Household Pulse Survey Data Tables, accessed 1.25.2021 at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>