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**Representative Sean Patrick Brennan
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Sponsor Testimony

H.B. 157: To Enact the Hunger Free Campus Act

Chair Young, Vice-Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Brown Piccolantonio, and members of House Workforce and Higher Education Committee. Thank you for allowing us to present sponsor testimony on H.B. 157 to enact the Hunger Free Campus Act.

This legislation comes to you today after much work with a lot of key stakeholders, including a great cross section of anti-poverty, nutrition, workforce, and higher education advocates working in conjunction with Ohio's colleges and universities to craft a program that will effectively assist them in addressing an urgent and often overlooked issue that affects many of today's college students - food insecurity.

When I was a poor college student attending the University of Dayton on a Pell Grant, the Student Choice Grant, and other scholarships in the late 80s and early 90s, food accessibility was typically was not a problem. Tuition and housing costs were more affordable and you could grab 3 tacos at Taco Bell and 3 Kraft Mac 'n Cheese packages at Kroger for a buck, for instance. Further, I was a traditional college student – a single guy with no dependents living on campus.

However, today rising costs are making it tougher for students to find sustainable and affordable food options, especially for the growing number of non-traditional students with children. In fact, I recently learned that the average age of a student at Cleveland State University – my Master's degree alma mater - is 27. So,

students are now coming from all walks of life. In short, the non-traditional student of my time is today's traditional student.

Food insecurity among college students is more common than many realize. In fact, studies show that up to 48% of college students experience food insecurity at some point during their academic journey.

This issue goes beyond mere hunger; it affects students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. When students are unsure where their next meal will come from, they struggle to focus in class, perform poorly on exams, and are more likely to drop out. In fact, researchers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School and Public Health found that students considered food insecure were more than 40% less likely to graduate from college and more than 60% less likely to achieve a graduate or professional degree.

A Hunger Free Campus program addresses these challenges directly by providing accessible resources and support systems tailored to meet students' nutritional needs free from stigma. Such initiatives ensure that no student has to choose between paying the electric bill or buying textbooks or groceries, allowing them to concentrate fully on their education.

Some institutions in our state have some sort of basic needs program, but the college student basic needs landscape in Ohio is hodge-podged. There is not consistency on where the pantries live, the size, what is offered, what department they are under, and what you have to prove in order to utilize them. On a lot of campuses, especially public and community college campuses, the campus pantries and the quality of them depends on a dedicated staff member to carry the torch and support the funding and grant writing out of the kindness of their heart. Sometimes it's a single staff member going to the local grocer on their day off to buy things for the pantry.

H.B. 157 asks the Chancellor of Higher Education to establish the hunger-free campus grant and designation program. The Chancellor is empowered to establish criteria for state or private institutions of higher learning to earn the Hunger-Free Campus Designation, which can be used to market to prospective students, as well as award Hunger-Free Campus grants, which may include establishing an on-campus food pantry or partnering with a local foodbank, providing information to students about SNAP and other programs that reduce food insecurity, establish an emergency assistance program for students, or establish a student meal plan credit donation program, among other creative ideas, for example.

The Chancellor is to prioritize institutions with higher percentages of Pell grant-eligible students enrolled when awarding grants, while institutions must use the grants to support or leverage existing basic needs infrastructure, maximize federal programs, build strategic partnerships at the local, state, and national levels to address food insecurity among students, and raise awareness on resources available to address basic food needs. The bill also precludes recipients of the grant from supplanting the funds they may already dedicate to addressing food insecurity. It also includes a reporting requirement so that the Governor and General Assembly can measure the effectiveness of the program to inform future policy decisions.

A version of this bill has already passed in California, Washington, Oklahoma, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Massachusetts

In conclusion, establishing a Hunger Free Campus program is not just about providing meals; it is about supporting the holistic development of our students. It is about ensuring that every student, regardless of their financial background, has the opportunity to thrive academically and personally. By addressing food insecurity, we can build stronger, more resilient campus communities and empower students to achieve their full potential. HB 157 represent a hand-up, not a hand out, for hard-working Ohioans who want to climb the socioeconomic ladder.

I want to thank Sarah Kuhns and Hope Lane-Gavin and their staff at Ohio Foodbanks, as well as the folks from Swipe Out Hunger and Ohio Campus Compact for their instrument role in this legislation. I want to thank Michael and Chris with the Ohio Department of Higher Education for their collaboration with us on the bill. I also want to thank everyone in Ohio who helps feed our fellow residents, from generous donors, to volunteers, to those who work for our foodbanks and food pantries - you are all doing God's work. It is an honor to carry this important legislation with my joint sponsor, Representative Hoops, and I pray that the members of the committee will support it and, thereby, invest so many hard working Ohioans seeking to further their educations so that they can improve their lives, the lives of their families, and contribute even more to our fine state's economy.

Thank you Chair Young and members of the committee - students throughout our great state and we would be honored by your support.