

## House Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Proponent Testimony: House Bill 157

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Sophie Gephardt

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio and members of the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for hearing my proponent testimony today on House Bill 157, the Enact the Hunger-Free Campus Act. My name is Sophie Gephardt and I am a graduate social work student at The Ohio State University, as well as an intern with The National Association of Social Workers, Ohio Chapter.

College food insecurity is an incredibly important issue facing students across the country. Students are lacking access to enough nutritious food for an active, healthy lifestyle. Food insecurity disproportionately affects minoritized populations and is impacted by many sociodemographic variables. Food insecurity can negatively impact students' academic performance, financial stability, mental health, and social life. Recent studies have shown that social work students, in particular, are at a high risk for food insecurity. Social work has a diverse student population, as there are often more non-traditional age students, more students with kids/dependents, more first generation students, diverse LGBTQIA+ identities, diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

At The Ohio State University, a Student Life survey found 32% of all Ohio State students were considered food insecure in 2024, which is nearly three times the national average (Dawson, 2024). I conducted a study for my undergraduate honors research thesis in 2024 on food insecurity experiences of social work students at Ohio State, and found that 42% were considered food insecure. This is 10% higher than the average Ohio State student. Half of these social work students (21%) were in the very low food security category, which in the past was referred to by the USDA as food insecure with hunger.

In my study, I surveyed over 250 social work students across all five of OSU's campuses (Columbus, Marion, Mansfield, Lima, Newark) and across social work degree programs (BSSW, MSW, PhD). There were statistically significant disparities by race and varying experiences by campus and program. The campus with the highest food insecurity rate was Mansfield at **57.9%**. The social work degree program with the highest food insecurity rate was the undergraduate BSSW program at **52%**. The racial/ethnic groups with the highest rates of food insecurity included Black or African American students at **75%**, Hispanic/Latino students at **66.6%**, and Multi-Racial/Other students at **52.1%**.

Through the survey, students shared in-depth experiences of food insecurity negatively impacting physical health, mental health, school and work performance, and social life. Some common themes included poor diet quality impacting energy and health, concerns about rising food costs, and overall constant stress and mental health concerns due to food insecurity. Social work students struggle to balance the demands of full time school schedules, working paid jobs, and working between 400 and 900 unpaid hours of field placement. Additionally, social work

students are in unique positions as they work with vulnerable populations and clients who may be experiencing similar situations as their own lived/living experiences. A student stated, **"I wouldn't want my clients who use these services to see their provider is also struggling."**

Some quotes from students regarding their experience with food insecurity,

**"I often feel physically unwell due to lack of food or unbalanced food. I don't feel as mentally sharp as I could be."**

**"It's a constant weight on my mind and feels like something I have no control over."**

**"I'm always thinking about how I can save as much money as possible and how little I can eat in a day in order to make food stretch."**

Many students described not being aware of programs that existed on or off campus, were unaware that they may qualify for programs like SNAP, were unsure of how to access programs, and/or were overwhelmed by application processes. Food insecurity is a serious issue, and students shouldn't have to experience it at such high rates when completing their degrees. In addition to the implementation of new programs, it is important to raise awareness about the severity of the issue and work toward destigmatizing food insecurity and the utilization of resources, so that students feel empowered to get the help they need. Especially for students who are more vulnerable and at risk for experiencing food insecurity, programs and funding like HB 157 are absolutely necessary. The Enact the Hunger-Free Campus Act would be incredibly beneficial to getting students connected to resources that they so desperately need.

I ask that you vote YES on House Bill 157. Thank you again for allowing me to testify today, and I would be happy to answer any questions the committee has.

Thank you,  
Sophie Gephardt

Dawson, E. (2024). *Running on empty: Food insecurity at Ohio State and beyond*. The Lantern.  
[www.thelantern.com/projects/project/running-on-empty-food-insecurity-at-ohio-state-and-beyond/](http://www.thelantern.com/projects/project/running-on-empty-food-insecurity-at-ohio-state-and-beyond/)

Gephardt, S. (2024). *Exploring and Understanding Food Insecurity in Social Work Students* (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, The Ohio State University). <https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/104281>