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Testimony submitted to: Senate Higher Education Committee

In support of Emergency Grant Fund appropriations (SF 2406) and Hunger Free Campus Grant appropriations (SF2481)

Date: 3/17/2025

Thank you Chair Fateh and members of the committee for reading my testimony. My name is Dr. Becky Kaarbo and I serve as the Director of Student Life and Diversity at Saint Paul College. I am testifying to the invaluable impact both the Hunger Free Campus Grant and Emergency Grant Fund programs have on student success and persistence in higher education.

Saint Paul Community and Technical College enrolls over 8,000 students across 54 academic programs and over 70 certificates. Our programs range from trades and service programs such as Pipe Fitting, Culinary Arts and Practical Nursing to 2 year pathway degrees across science, business and liberal arts curriculum. Our students are not only diverse in academic interest but 65% of our students identify as BIPOC which makes us one of the most diverse college campuses in the state of Minnesota. While our students are diverse in many ways there is a common barrier many of them face regardless of field of study, race or ethnicity, age, or other commonly used identifiers in the field. In our most recent Hope Center Survey (2024) 57% of respondents were experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness while attending college. Additionally, 40% of our students have limited availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food and 46% experience one or more challenges that prevented them from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is an often referred to framework in higher education because it succinctly points out that at the very core of humanity and development is a human's demand for physiological needs. Maslow points out that, our basic needs- such as food, water, shelter, and sleep are as core to our being as the very air we breathe. Let me say that again, at our core, we as humans need food, water, shelter and sleep as essentially as we need air to breathe. When these very basic needs are not met we are severely impacted. On a college campus this means we do not persist in our classes, we do not graduate, and we do not join the workforce in ways that provide self-sustaining wages. Wages that can impact access to generational wealth in fields that unequivocally have a positive impact on the larger economic infrastructure of our communities.

I began my work at Saint Paul College in December of 2021, just as things were "returning to normal" on college campuses like mine across the country. At that time we did not have a food pantry and had very limited access to basic needs support. Through the Hunger Free Campus Grant we were able to open our campus Food Pantry on November 18th, 2022 and within the first 2 months of being open we provided 6,776 pounds of food to 496 "shoppers." Since then we have served 11,289 "shoppers" and provided 128,263 pounds of food to date.

While the Hunger Free Campus Grant has been instrumental in supporting our campus food pantry I must also acknowledge the important impact Emergency Grants have had on our students. These grants allow us to support students with emergency payments so that when the unexpected happens their schooling does not need to be derailed. As noted earlier 46% of Saint Paul College students experience one or more challenges that prevent them from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live. In the summer of 2024 our campus was lucky enough to expand our basic needs resources by becoming an Ampact Heading Home Corp site for a Housing Navigator. What our Housing Navigator has seen is that, while yes- we do have students attending college while unhoused, many of our students are impacted by housing issues that can oftentimes be easily mitigated through programs such as the Emergency Grant.

The average age of Saint Paul College student is 25. They are working adults, oftentimes with families they are providing for while also attending college. When the unexpected happens they do not have the time, energy or resources to pivot and oftentimes the first to be sacrificed is their education-because if your choice is a roof over your family's head or your college tuition students will choose their family every single time. However, their college education is also choosing their family in a more systemic and long lasting way. That is why programs like the Emergency Grant Program are so important. Through the Emergency Grant Program our campus is able to provide funding and student support at times when our students most need it. This program allows our students to pivot without losing momentum toward their degree.

Through my two-decade career in higher education I have worked at 4-year public and private schools and now a 2-year technical and community college. At each campus and in each position my work has involved active engagement and being in community with the students I serve every single day. They are the lifeblood of why I do what I do, but more importantly they are the lifeblood to our future. These students will become our mechanics and nurses. They will cook our food, cut our hair, and go on to get bachelors, masters, and doctorates in order to positively impact our community socially and economically. I urge you to think about the ripple effect on the fabric of our state supporting things like the Hunger Free Campus Grant and Emergency Grant could have. If we do not provide ways for our students to pivot, we as a state will not be able to pivot, and if anything is constant it is that change is inevitable thus so is the need to pivot.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I wish you all a day which fulfills your needs as easily as the air you breathe.

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