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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: 3/18/2025

Thank you to the committee and Chair for reading my testimony. My name is Paige Wheeler and I am the Basic Needs Lead Coordinator at Normandale Community College, where I have worked for 12 years. I am testifying on the impact that the Emergency Grant and Hunger Free Campus Grant funding has had on the students I support.

I coordinate Normandale's campus food shelf and our basic needs support office. I witness daily our students' struggles to meet their basic needs. 48% of Normandale students are food insecure in the last 30 days. 20% of Normandale students are housing insecure in the last 12 months. We have stark disparities in basic needs insecurities by race/ethnicity. For instance, 63% of Black or African American and 61% of Hispanic or Latinx Normandale students are food insecure compared to 39% of white students. We have seen a huge increase in demand for our basic needs students supports. For example, we have had a 359% increase in number of student food shelf visits 2021/2022 to 2024/2024. We now have an average of 440 student visits per week. So far this school year we've served over 1,500 unique students, have distributed 45,000 pounds of food, and given out nearly 10,000 meals. In our student basic needs center we've had an over 50% increase in the number of students served last year compared to this year. It is a struggle to keep up with this growing level of student need.

None of us can learn and thrive when we are hungry. In 2023 Normandale received a \$5,000 Hunger Free Campus grant. We used \$1,000 of the grant for SNAP outreach and \$4,000 for culturally-inclusive food for our food shelf. Culturally-inclusive food allows students to get food that they know how to prepare and makes them have a sense of belonging. For instance, we purchased dates during Ramadan and one student who is Muslim commented that it made her feel seen and valued by her school. Another student upon coming into the food shelf and seeing our grant-funded food started crying. He said he hadn't been eating some days; he's HIV+ and so having enough to eat is critical to his health. Students share with us that the food shelf increases their food security and helps them stay and be successful in school:

- *It saved me from not eating anything most days because of a lack of time and resources.*
- *There are more than a few times that if I hadn't had the option to use the food shelf my family would have had to go without a meal for dinner and I can't thank you enough.*
- *The money I saved on meals had a snowball effect and the money saved on food also helped with car repairs and rent.*
- *It makes me feel like I am home and in a safe place.*

Emergency grants for college students are the most impactful ways to help students stay in school when faced with unexpected finances and situations. I have met students without enough money to take the bus to get home, let alone enough savings to deal with financial emergencies. For students who are already financially vulnerable a \$500 emergency grant can

keep them and school and in some cases be literally life-saving. Examples of Normandale students who have benefitted from Emergency Grant Funding:

- An international student was kicked out of a family member's home unexpectedly. The student slept in a park for days before asking for help. They used the emergency grant for temporary housing, so they had time to find permanent housing.
- A single parent leaving their abusive partner. They used the funding to get food and clothes for their kids, as well as a new phone as their partner broke their phone.
- A student working 5 jobs was able to avoid being evicted by paying rent and back payment on utilities.

The Emergency Grant funding is especially critical as it can support students not eligible for public benefits, such as undocumented and international students.

Currently, Normandale has a Department of Education Basic Needs Grant funding aspects of our basic needs student supports. However, with Federal grant cuts and the anticipated dismantling of the Federal Department of Education state-level supports like Emergency Grant and Hunger Free Campus Grant funding is even more critical.

In my job I sometimes feel disheartened that I cannot help each student more. I tell myself to do for one student what I wish I could do for all students. Through the Hunger Free Campus Grant Program and Emergency Grant Program you have the chance to make a widespread impact for students. Thank you for your time and consideration!

Take care,

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