

Testimony of Rachel Sumekh

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Ending Hunger in America: Hunger on College Campuses

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STUDENT HUNGER IS REAL. WE CAN HELP END IT.

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Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished members of the Committee,

I'm speaking to you today on behalf of Swipe Out Hunger and the nearly 1 in 3 American college students who despite experiencing chronic food insecurity show up to class every day¹. Who take placement exams on empty stomachs, write essays and study for finals with minds that work twice as hard to stay focused because as Maslow taught us, there's a hierarchy to our most basic needs. Who despite all the odds and challenges, choose to show up and seek a better life by pursuing their degree. I thank you for this opportunity to help tell their story and to discuss how we can end the crisis of college student hunger once and for all.

For the past 11 years, since the age of 18, I've served as the CEO of Swipe Out Hunger, a national nonprofit founded while I was a student at UCLA.. We began as a group of friends who had excess dollars on our meal plans and after months of negotiating, convinced our campus administration to allow students to donate their extra meal points to hungry individuals around our Los Angeles community. It was less than one term before we became aware that our very own peers were struggling with hunger. We began channeling the tens of thousands of dollars in meal points we were collecting into our on campus food bank and in a new program we started— a meal voucher program which gave food insecure students dining hall credits. Now, every student could enter and have a warm, nutritious meal just like everyone else. For us, it was simple – If I have access to incredible dining so I can show up to class able nourished and able to focus why shouldn't my food insecure peers? From its beginnings as a grassroots movement at UCLA in 2010, Swipe Out Hunger has since served 2.5 million nourishing meals across 41 states and more than 142 campuses.

During this time, I've crossed the country visiting campuses and speaking with students at every level of higher education institution our nation offers. From large state schools such as Pennsylvania State University to urban campuses like California State East Bay, to community colleges such as Mass Bay Community College. While I meet with uniquely individual students, staff and faculty on every campus, I have come away with a few universal lessons.

First, despite media narratives to the contrary, our current generation of college students are brighter, more innovative and equipped with a higher level of work ethic than any generation before. According to a 2019 report from the Hope Center, 70% of students who had a basic needs insecurity also were employed². Few stories better illustrate this than Suraiya, a recent graduate from Monroe College in Bronx, NY - Suraiya dropped out of high school, raised three

¹ Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). STILL HUNGRY AND HOMELESS IN COLLEGE. Wisconsin Hope Lab. <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>.

² Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Goldrick-Rab, S., Looker, E., Richardson, B., & Williams, T. (2020). #RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity. The Hope Center . https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_RealCollege_Survey_Report.pdf.

beautiful children while struggling with poverty, food insecurity and domestic violence. Yet despite those challenges and the responsibilities she had to raise her family, Suraiya got her GED, enrolled in college and continued to pursue her dream of one day becoming a homicide detective. During the pandemic, Swipe Out Hunger helped Suraya successfully enroll in SNAP, receiving \$300/mo to support her family while she pursued her degree. I'm so proud to say that just this year, Suraya has been accepted into the NYPD detective academy.

The second truth I have witnessed is that these challenges existed for college students well before the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated them to an unfathomable level. According to pre-pandemic reports, nearly 1 in 3 or 6.5 million college students experienced food insecurity, while 1 in 5 experienced homelessness or housing insecurity³. When I visited the University of Maryland College Park, just 8 miles from the US Capitol building, I heard first hand the severity of the issue. One student Tania said to me "[Before going to school,] I made sure that I drank a lot of water because it's free and makes you feel fuller. I'm used to powering through the pain."

We know that the level of need has only grown since the pandemic. According to a report by Swipe Out Hunger and Chegg.org, more than half of all college students nationally (52%) visited food pantries during the pandemic to meet their needs and nearly a quarter (24%) have had to take out a loan to cover food costs.⁴

Third, I learned that dedicated staff and administrations are endlessly innovating on nearly every campus nationwide to serve their students in this time of need - despite a lack of governmental support and funding. More than 1,000 campuses from the smallest community colleges to the largest state schools are operating food pantries on their campuses. Staff use a toolbox of direct service and public benefit programs to serve students immediate and long term needs. For example, California State University East Bay (CSUEB) helps more than 1,000 students with SNAP pre-screenings, applications, and reporting each year. The University of Pittsburgh works with a neighboring church to run a food pantry and provide fresh produce, meat and dairy to students; Bucks County Community College students can receive a \$50 grocery store gift card and help from a case manager on accessing other resources.

One such staff member is Waleek Boone, a Student Life Specialist at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, NY who has worked around the clock with a team of only three student volunteers to keep the pantry open throughout the pandemic and its darkest days in New York. They distributed thousands of bags of groceries to students, many of whom recently lost their jobs and are struggling with housing insecurity.

³ Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). STILL HUNGRY AND HOMELESS IN COLLEGE. Wisconsin Hope Lab. <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>.

⁴ Chegg.org and Swipe Out Hunger. (2020). 2020 state of the STUDENT: Covid-19 & food insecurity. Swipe Out Hunger. <https://www.chegg.org/covid-19-food-insecurity-2020>.

To cite the Hope Center again, 1 in 3 students lost their jobs during the pandemic⁵. Waleek reiterated to us that “They know we’re risking our lives to help serve them. Without the goodwill of these volunteers, however, this lifeline for hundreds would have been forced to close.”

Despite groundbreaking programs, institutions are too underfunded and understaffed to address the level of need on their campus. Pantries struggle with finding space, acquiring refrigeration and purchasing food. Restricted SNAP eligibility makes it burdensome and too time consuming for enrollment assistance. When so many of the support teams on campuses are working for free, there is only so much you can ask of your students or part time staff.

This leads me to my last and most important lesson learned, with the right combination of priorities - college student hunger can truly be solved. How often do we get to say something like that? Despite the challenges that lay ahead, the solutions to ending this crisis and building back a stronger, healthier and more thriving nation are right in front of us. We believe that there are three initial steps that Congressional members can take today to begin this process.

First, we can make the most powerful and effective tool in our arsenal (SNAP) more available and accessible to low-income college students. For too long outdated and draconian eligibility rules made millions of American college students ineligible to access this critical program.

Generally, college students must work 20 hours a week to be eligible for SNAP benefits. For many, meeting this burdensome requirement while also attending school full-time, studying for classes and so on is near impossible. The recent changes by Congress in the Emergency Coronavirus Relief Act, temporarily expanded eligibility to SNAP for more than 3 million students by waiving the onerous work requirement for students with either a \$0 expected family contribution or eligible for work study⁶. These additional dollars have an enormous impact on a student's ability to provide for themselves and their families while performing academically.

Rep. Jimmy Gomez (D-CA) and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) have introduced the EATS Act, legislation that would make permanent the added eligibility for low-income college students. I would like to personally ask each of you and your colleagues to pass the EATS act today and help bring this essential resource to millions of new students in a time of great need.

Our second recommendation is to learn from our state legislatures across the country for how we can tackle these challenges. Over the last 4 years numerous states have introduced, passed and invested in a program known as Hunger Free Campus. Hunger Free Campus, originally developed and written in the hallway of the California state capitol on the very laptop I’m speaking to you through today, sends funds to public colleges who are already taking action on student hunger on campus. Hunger Free Campus is an incentive bill that has proven to add

⁵ Goldrick Rab, S., Coca, V., Kienzl, G., Welton, C. R., Dahl, S., & Magnelia, S. (2020). *#REALCOLLEGE DURING THE PANDEMIC*. RealCollege. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Hopecenter_RealCollegeDuringthePandemic_Reupload.pdf.

⁶ Granville, P. (2021, February 3). Congress made 3 million college STUDENTS newly eligible for SNAP food Aid. Here's what must come next. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/congress-made-3-million-college-students-newly-eligible-snap-food-aid-heres-must-come-next/>.

additional ability of campuses large and small to serve their student communities in need. Rather than creating a new program, Hunger Free Campus is built on the foundation that each of our campuses have the answers on how to solve basic needs insecurity, they just need the added capacity and support.

First passed in California in 2017, the Hunger Free Campus Bill was then passed in New Jersey in 2019, and Maryland and Minnesota in 2021. It is currently in the legislative process in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, North Carolina and states across the country such as Colorado have enacted portions of the program within their departments of higher education.

To date the Hunger Free Campus grant program has distributed more than \$70 million dollars in the last four years to campuses. Our state legislatures have shown that they are willing to heed the call during this emergency and stand by their most vulnerable students. The success of Hunger Free Campus programs have prevented thousands of students from being subject to food insecurity and its impacts. We call on this committee and your colleagues in Congress to create a national Hunger Free Campus program that provides investments to our campuses and their staff working to end hunger.

Lastly, any funding we pass to end college student hunger will simply be a bandaid to the greater crisis which is our severely underfunded financial aid system. We must double pell and provide students, up front, with the dollars they need to succeed academically through a reformed financial aid program and more funding for emergency grants.

When we began Swipe Out Hunger, universities were reluctant to acknowledge and actively denied having food insecure students on their campus. Today, universities from rural community colleges to ivy league institutions are boasting their available pantries and basic needs services. There is no better moment for Congress to take action and finally end the extremely solvable problem that is college student hunger. Thank you for your time and leadership on this critical issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rachel Sumekh', written over a horizontal line.

Rachel Sumekh
CEO Swipe Out Hunger