



Dear Chair Livingstone, Chair Kennedy and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the following five bills:

- S.167/H.196: An Act Maximizing Participation in Federal Nutrition Programs and Improving Customer Service
- S.147/H.254: An Act to Replace Stolen Benefits
- S.117/H.207: An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance for Massachusetts Immigrant Residents
- S.104/H.222: An Act Relative to the Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program
- S.118/H.214: An Act to Lift Kids Out of Deep Poverty

We also thank the Committee for its past support and ongoing leadership in supporting children, families, immigrants, and people with disabilities in meeting their basic needs.

Project Bread is a statewide anti-hunger organization committed to ending hunger at its root. Through our FoodSource Hotline, we assist thousands of residents each year in navigating SNAP and other nutrition programs. In 2024 alone, we supported over 22,000 callers – nearly 8,000 of whom learned about their SNAP eligibility. We also work directly with healthcare providers, schools, and community organizations to connect people to food and advocate for systemic solutions to hunger.

Food insecurity in Massachusetts is at a crisis point. One in three households – approximately two million adults – reported food insecurity in 2024.¹ These increases are driven by the lasting impacts of the pandemic, surging food and housing costs, and the rollback of pandemic-era federal assistance.² The recent passage of the federal reconciliation bill known as “the One Big Beautiful Bill Act” has further destabilized families by slashing SNAP eligibility, expanding work reporting requirements, shifting 75% of SNAP administrative costs to states, and up to \$396M/year in state costs to cover SNAP benefits.

We know that when families have consistent access to food, they are better able to focus on work, education, and health. SNAP is proven to reduce poverty, and recent research shows that one year of continuous participation is associated with lower healthcare costs

¹ Greater Boston Food Bank and Mass General Brigham. (2025). *Food Access in Massachusetts: The Cost of Hunger*. https://www.gbfb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/GBFB_Food-Access-Report_2025_final.pdf.

² Ibid.

the following year.³ These investments pay off — not just for the families utilizing these programs, but for the greater good of the entire Commonwealth.

Massachusetts must respond to the federal cuts with urgency and clarity. These five bills are lifelines for food and other basic needs for millions of residents across the Commonwealth. Project Bread urges the committee to report the following five bills favorably:

An Act Maximizing Participation in Federal Nutrition Programs and Improving Customer Service (S.167/H.196)

At Project Bread, we view SNAP as the most effective and efficient response to food insecurity. But access to SNAP is only meaningful if the systems that administer it are functional. Currently, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) is overwhelmed and under-resourced. Nearly half of denied SNAP applications are rejected due to missed interviews or paperwork issues on DTA's end.⁴ Over 55% of calls to DTA are dropped due to high call volumes.⁵ We're not sharing these numbers to shame the DTA – DTA is a national leader and Commission McCue and his team take their work seriously. Rather, we want to highlight a system that is under-equipped and overwhelmed, and unfortunately, the consequences of this are growing. These breakdowns are administrative mishaps that translate into barriers to survival for many.

Our Hotline counselors hear daily from people caught in this administrative gridlock. A young mother in Brockton called after her husband's employer refused to provide pay stubs for their SNAP application. Though she tried to address this with DTA, she couldn't reach a caseworker. A senior woman called in tears after her SNAP benefits were terminated, reportedly without explanation, despite submitting the paperwork she was asked for. These stories reflect a system that is not equipped to meet the moment, and the consequences of this are only growing. ²According to USDA data, Massachusetts had a SNAP payment error rate of 14.10% in FY2024. Under the new federal law, states with high error rates will be required to contribute up to 15% of SNAP benefit allotments starting in

³ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2022, March 15). "SNAP is linked with improved health outcomes and lower health care costs." <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-health-outcomes-and-lower-health-care-costs>.

⁴ Massachusetts Law Reform Institute. (2025, March 12). *Fact Sheet: H. 196 & S. 167 – Maximize access to federal nutrition benefits*. <https://www.masslegalservices.org/system/files/blog/2025-03/FACT%20SHEET%20H196%20%26%20S167%20-%20Maximize%20Access%20to%20Federal%20Nutrition%20Benefits%203-12-25.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

FY2028.⁶ Without immediate investment in staffing and infrastructure at DTA, Massachusetts risks leaving families hungry while simultaneously absorbing significant financial penalties.

Massachusetts is rapidly approaching a threshold where administrative failure will carry both human and fiscal consequences. Investing in DTA is a strategic necessity. If we want to preserve access to federal nutrition dollars, reduce payment errors, and ensure that families aren't punished for systemic shortcomings, we must treat administrative capacity as core to our anti-hunger strategy.

An Act to Replace Stolen Benefits (S.147/H.254)

Electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems have streamlined benefit distribution, but they have also introduced new vulnerabilities for low-income households utilizing this system – particularly, through card skimming during in-person transactions. Since June 2022, over \$13 million in SNAP benefits have been stolen from 27,000 Massachusetts households due to EBT card skimming and cloning⁷ – skimming refers to the use of hidden devices to steal card data during transactions. Due to the lack of chip-enabled EBT cards (a security feature of modern-day debit and credit cards), these tactics exploit outdated technology and disproportionately impact those already facing food insecurity. These systemic vulnerabilities undermine the integrity of our anti-hunger infrastructure.

We thank the Legislature for providing funding to upgrade EBT card with new security features. However, as Massachusetts transitions to more secure chip-enabled EBT cards, S.147/H.254 ensures that families are not left hungry and defenseless during the interim. It is critical that the state makes our vulnerable residents whole when they have been victims of SNAP-theft and replace their benefits to ensure they put food on the table.

Project Bread's Hotline counselors have seen the fallout from households harmed by these new vulnerabilities firsthand. A mother in Worcester lost her entire monthly SNAP allotment within hours of deposit. A senior in Springfield discovered his EBT card had been drained at a store he had never visited. A single mother in Boston had her benefits stolen twice in three months, an experience she described as "humiliating" and "terrifying." All of these stories reveal yet another structural failure within our systems to protect access to

⁶ Roberson, E., & Martin, D. (2025, July 24). "How new SNAP and Medicaid provisions will impact basic needs insecurity and state budgets." The Institute for College Access and Success. <https://ticas.org/anti-poverty/reconciliation-2025-snap-and-medicaid/>.

⁷ Massachusetts Law Reform Institute. (2025, February). "Sign-on letter: MA SNAP Coalition organizations and replacing stolen SNAP." <https://www.masslegalservices.org/system/files/blog/2025-02/Sign%20on%20letter%20-%20MA%20SNAP%20Coalition%20organizations%20%26%20replacing%20stolen%20SNAP%20%281%29.pdf>.

food. When benefits are stolen and not replaced, the credibility of SNAP itself is undermined. The program's promise of consistent, reliable access to food for low-income families should never be conditional, and certainly not dependent on whether or not the system can protect what it delivers.

Passing this legislation would affirm that no one should lose access to food because of a system failure. By restoring stolen benefits, this bill protects the integrity of SNAP and ensures that families can rely on the support they've been promised.

An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance for Massachusetts Immigrant Residents (S.117/H.207)

Massachusetts has long positioned itself as a leader in welcoming immigrant communities. Yet our safety net, or in this case, lack thereof, tells a different story. Thousands of legally present immigrants – including Dreamers, TPS holders, asylees, refugees, and survivors of violence -- are excluded from SNAP and cash assistance solely because of their immigration status. These exclusions do not align with the values that Massachusetts prides itself in. They are policy decisions that leave working families without access to the most basic support.

Our FoodSource Hotline counselors regularly hear from immigrant households who are doing everything right – they're working, paying taxes, raising children in hopes of giving them a better life – and still cannot afford enough to eat. One family of six was receiving SNAP for only one U.S.-born child, leaving the rest of the household with no support. Their total benefit was just \$281 per month -- \$1.56 per person per day. Another caller, recently diagnosed with breast cancer, had to stop working and rely on her husband's income to feed their family. Although both parents had work authorizations, they did not have green cards or citizenship. Work authorization alone does not qualify someone for SNAP. As a result, they were denied SNAP benefits.

We cannot continue to penalize families for their immigration status while ignoring their economic reality. This leaves entire communities more vulnerable to hunger, instability, and long-term harm. The urgency of this issue has only grown under the federal bill, which further restricts eligibility for immigrants and expands work reporting requirements that many cannot meet due to legal or logistical barriers. Based on DTA data, an estimated 9,600 legally present immigrants in Massachusetts are expected to lose SNAP eligibility

under the new federal rules.⁸ Under this outcome, the state is expected to lose approximately \$20 million per year in federal food benefits.⁹

Massachusetts has the opportunity and precedent to do better. From 1997 to 2002, the Commonwealth provided state-funded nutrition and cash assistance to immigrant households excluded from federal programs. That policy recognized that exclusion from federal programs based on immigration status created real harm, and this bill would renew that leadership by once again stepping in where the federal government falls short. In a state where 1 in 3 households already experience food insecurity,¹⁰ we cannot afford to exclude thousands more based on immigration status alone. Equity demands more; human decency demands more.

An Act Relative to the Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program (S.104/H.222)

The Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) is an effective tool to address food insecurity while also supporting local agriculture. HIP has facilitated over \$83 million in direct produce purchases from state farmers by more than 210,000 SNAP households since 2017.¹¹ These purchases generate an estimated \$166 million in local economic activity, strengthening small farms and regional food systems.¹²

We routinely hear from clients who rely on HIP not just to access and enjoy local, fresh produce, but also to aid in managing chronic health conditions. One caller shared that while SNAP helped her put food on the table, it wasn't sufficient to afford the healthier foods her doctor recommended. HIP enabled her to shop at a local farmers market and purchase the fruits and vegetables necessary to support her health.

HIP's current structure – funded annually through the budget process – limits strategic planning and leaves gaps in access, particularly in the winter and in communities underserved by vendor recruitment. Farmers from historically marginalized communities, including BIPOC growers, remained underrepresented, often due to structural barriers such as limited proximity to HIP-authorized vendors, lack of culturally appropriate crops at farmers markets, and feeling unwelcome or out of place in market environments. These challenges make HIP inaccessible for many, turning what should be a powerful tool for

⁸ Ciurczak, P. (2025, September 2). "Meeting the moment: SNAP cuts and the local fallout." Boston Indicators. <https://www.bostonindicators.org/article-pages/2025/september/mtm-snap>.

⁹ Massachusetts Law Reform Institute. *SNAP Cuts Passed by Republicans in Congress and President Trump: Harm to Massachusetts*. June 2025. Updated August 29, 2025. <https://www.mlri.org>.

¹⁰ Greater Boston Food Bank and Mass General Brigham. (2025). *Food Access in Massachusetts: The Cost of Hunger*.

¹¹ Massachusetts Food System Collaborative. (2025, February). *Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) fact sheet*. <https://mafoodsystem.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HIP-2025-fact-sheet.pdf>.

¹² Ibid.

food equity into a missed opportunity. In the context of the oncoming federal SNAP cuts, HIP stands out as a state-level solution that delivers public health and economic benefits. Codifying HIP would allow the DTA to expand access, recruit equitably, and treat the program as permanent infrastructure. It's a win for families, farmers, and the Commonwealth.

An Act to Lift Kids Out of Deep Poverty (S.118/H.214)

Massachusetts families receiving cash assistance are living far below the threshold of survival. Deep poverty — defined as income below 50% of the federal poverty level (FPL) — is not just a statistical benchmark. Even with recent increases, the maximum Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) grant for a family of three (two adults both working and one child) is just \$861 per month — well below the deep poverty threshold of \$1,110.¹³ To put that into even more context, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, in Bristol County -- one of the most food insecure counties in the state -- for the same family of three, a living wage for their household would be roughly \$4,485 a month. That's a \$3,624 difference. Emergency Aid to Elders, Disabled and Children (EAEDC) grants are even lower, leaving older adults and people with disabilities in similarly dire conditions.¹⁴

Nearly 70,000 children in Massachusetts live in deep poverty.¹⁵ Their families are forced to make decisions that no one should have to face, and ultimately, when push comes to shove, between rent, childcare, and groceries — food is often the first thing to be cut.

This bill would raise cash assistance grants by 20% annually until they reach 50% of the FPL and then index them to inflation. It is a strategic and humane response to the compounding pressures families face, especially now, as federal cuts to SNAP and Medicaid deepen the crisis. This legislation is a critical safeguard against worsening poverty and a necessary step toward ensuring no child in the Commonwealth grows up hungry.

A Call to Action

Massachusetts has a history of leading on anti-hunger policy, and now, more than ever, is the time to reaffirm that leadership and set the standard. With federal cuts to SNAP and Medicaid threatening the stability of low-income households, our state must act decisively

¹³ Lift Our Kids Massachusetts. (n.d.). *Policy priorities*. <https://www.liftourkidsma.org/new-page-2>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Massachusetts Association for Community Action (n.d.). "MA Commission on Poverty tackles historic wealth gap." <https://www.masscap.org/ma-commission-on-poverty-tackles-historic-wealth-gap/>.

to protect access to food and basic needs. These bills offer systemic solutions rather than temporary relief and reflect the values of equity, dignity, and care for all.

Taken together, these five bills represent meaningful support for children, families, immigrants, and people with disabilities across Massachusetts. Project Bread is grateful to the Committee for taking up these critical proposals, and we urge you to report all five out favorably.

We also encourage any individual struggling with food insecurity to contact our FoodSource Hotline at 1-800-645-8333 to begin a SNAP application and to be connected to nearby community food resources.

Sincerely,

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