



April 28, 2026

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney, Chair
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island Statehouse
Providence, RI 02903

RE: TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL H7793 — HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL

Chair Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we express our strong support for House Bill H7793, which would establish a statewide “Healthy School Meals for All” program to provide breakfast and lunch at no charge to students in Rhode Island public schools. The bill would phase-in universal school meals over three years, beginning with elementary school students in the 2027–2028 school year, expanding to middle school students in 2028–2029, and reaching all elementary, middle, and high school students in 2029–2030. This is a practical, equity-focused investment in student well-being, family stability, and educational success.

United Way’s policy and advocacy work is guided by our strategic framework: **Strong Families, Strong Nonprofits, Strong United Way.** We prioritize policies that strengthen household stability, expand access to opportunity, and ensure public systems deliver measurable value. This includes centering ALICE households — Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed — families who are working and still priced out of stability by the high cost of living, including the basics, such as housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, and technology. In Rhode Island, 39% of households are below the ALICE Threshold, underscoring how many families have limited financial margin. For these families, the daily cost of school meals is not incidental; it is part of a larger affordability challenge.

H7793 recognizes that student hunger is both a family stability issue and an education issue. The bill’s findings note that in 2024, almost 40% of Rhode Island households with children were food-insecure, and that student hunger is associated with poor learning outcomes, absenteeism, and behavioral challenges. When students have reliable access to healthy meals during the school day, they are better positioned to learn, participate, and succeed. Universal school meals also reduce stigma, increase participation, and help ensure that no child is left out because of household income, paperwork barriers, or changing family circumstances.

We also appreciate that H7793 is structured to maximize federal resources while supporting implementation at the state and local levels. The bill directs public educational entities to participate in federal options such as the Community Eligibility Provision or other mechanisms that draw down the greatest possible federal funding. It also promotes meal quality by encouraging locally grown and produced food, scratch-cooked meals, culturally relevant menus, and student and family engagement in menu development. This approach strengthens the



impact of the program by connecting food access, student health, local agriculture, and family voice.

United Way of Rhode Island respectfully urges your support for House Bill H7793. Healthy school meals are a direct investment in children, families, and communities. By ensuring that every student has access to breakfast and lunch during the school day, Rhode Island can reduce hunger, improve educational conditions, and support stronger, more stable families across the state.

Sincerely,

Elijah McLean
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United Way of Rhode Island