



**May 18, 2026**

The Honorable Louis P. DiPalma, Chair  
Senate Finance Committee  
Rhode Island State House  
Providence, RI 02903

**RE: TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 2083 — Federal Aid**

Chair DiPalma and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, I write in strong support of **Senate Bill 2083**, 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. This 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.

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 and individuals who are working, yet remain priced out of financial stability by the high cost of living. The ALICE framework recognizes that basic household needs include housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and technology.

For ALICE families, already breaking point, the cost of a school meal is never just a meal, it’s a choice between a child’s lunch and keeping the lights on. Healthy school meals ease that impossible pressure, ensuring every child is fed and every family has one less unbearable decision to make.

The **2026 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook** reinforces the importance of this issue. In Rhode Island, **one in seven households with children — 15% — experienced food insecurity between 2021 and 2023**. KIDS COUNT also notes that in September 2025, **32,069 Rhode Island children participated in the School Breakfast Program and 68,872 participated in the National School Lunch Program**, showing the significant role school meals play in supporting children’s health, learning, and daily stability.

S 2083 recognizes that student hunger is both a family stability issue and an education issue. The bill’s findings note that student hunger is associated with poor learning outcomes, absenteeism, and behavioral challenges. KIDS COUNT similarly reports that hungry children may struggle with concentration, memory, and problem-solving skills, and are more likely to miss school, experience behavioral challenges, receive suspensions, and repeat a grade.



We also appreciate that S 2083 is structured to maximize federal resources while supporting implementation at the state and local levels. The bill directs public educational entities to use 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.

Healthy school meals are not just food; they are an investment in every child's chance to learn, grow, and thrive. When students are fed, they show up ready. When families are relieved of that burden, they are stronger. When communities prioritize the wellbeing of their youngest members, everyone benefits.

Rhode Island has the opportunity to make that difference for every student, in every school, every single day.

United Way of Rhode Island respectfully requests the Committees to support Senate Bill 2083 – and to stand with the children and families who need it most.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration.

Sincerely,

**Elijah McLean**

Manager, Government Relations & Policy  
United Way of Rhode Island