Testimony to Legislative Budget Board re HHSC

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Honorable Chair and Members of the Legislative Budget Board:

Good morning.

My name is Nayeli Medina, and I am a bilingual Social and Emotional Learning Coordinator working with high school students in Travis County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about food insecurity and access to resources for secondary students and young people transitioning into adulthood.

Through my work, I have seen how challenges outside of the classroom can directly affect a student's ability to focus, participate, and succeed in school.

Recently, I became aware of a student who had previously received food support through Hungry Souls, an Austin-based organization that partners with schools to identify students experiencing food insecurity and connect students and their families with food assistance.

This is where I believe Texas Health and Human Services can play an important role.

For secondary students, schools are often one of the places where needs can first become visible. That creates an opportunity to connect students and families with resources before a crisis becomes more severe.

HHSC has supported SNAP outreach and application assistance designed to educate potentially eligible Texans about SNAP, help them navigate the application process, and connect them with other resources. Unfortunately, HHSC's Legislative Appropriations Request eliminates past years' funding for SNAP outreach and education. Now, only SNAP application assisters are funded. Since the funding for outreach is going away, strengthening school outreach and assistance is more important than ever.

The state also allows community-based organizations to play a role in SNAP outreach and application assistance. I believe we should strengthen that connection specifically for secondary students and transition-age youth.

My recommendation is to expand school-based food assistance and resource-navigation partnerships for secondary students and transition-age youth, while strengthening connections to:

- SNAP

- Summer EBT
- Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and how it helps schools increase their reimbursement for full and reduced price lunches, especially since we've already lost 71 schools due to the decreased SNAP participation.
- And other available resources.

I am requesting the legislature invest $1.7 million to replace lost federal SNAP outreach and nutrition education funding, supporting bilingual outreach, SNAP application assistance, connections to Summer EBT and other nutrition resources, and school- and community-based referral systems that connect students and families to available food assistance.

The goal is not to create a separate system for every student.

The goal is to connect the systems we already have.

A student should not have to know the difference between a school food program, SNAP, Summer EBT, a community organization, or another public benefit program in order to receive help.

And a student should not lose access to support simply because they graduate from high school.

So I encourage us to think beyond the question:

"Does this student qualify?"

And also ask:

"Does this student know where to go, does someone help them get there, and what happens when they transition out of the school system?"

By investing in school-based partnerships, outreach, resource navigation, and stronger connections to existing HHSC nutrition programs, we can help close the gap between identifying a need and actually accessing support.

Thank you.

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This advocate participated in programming that equips Texans most impacted by state budget decisions with the knowledge, skills, and support to advocate for policies that strengthen our communities.