



## MEETING BASIC NEEDS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND SUCCESS

While occasional stress is a normal part of college for most students, the inability to meet *basic needs* can create significant hardship and prolonged negative stress. Basic needs, including regular access to nutritious food and secure housing, are essentials that must be in place before a person can effectively prioritize college, work, or other higher-order needs. For college students, **food and housing insecurity are strongly related to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, and other mental health issues.**<sup>1</sup> We now know that these issues are more common among college students than previously thought: in a recently completed survey of Los Angeles Community College District students, two-thirds reported some level of food insecurity and one-fifth reported being homeless.<sup>2</sup>

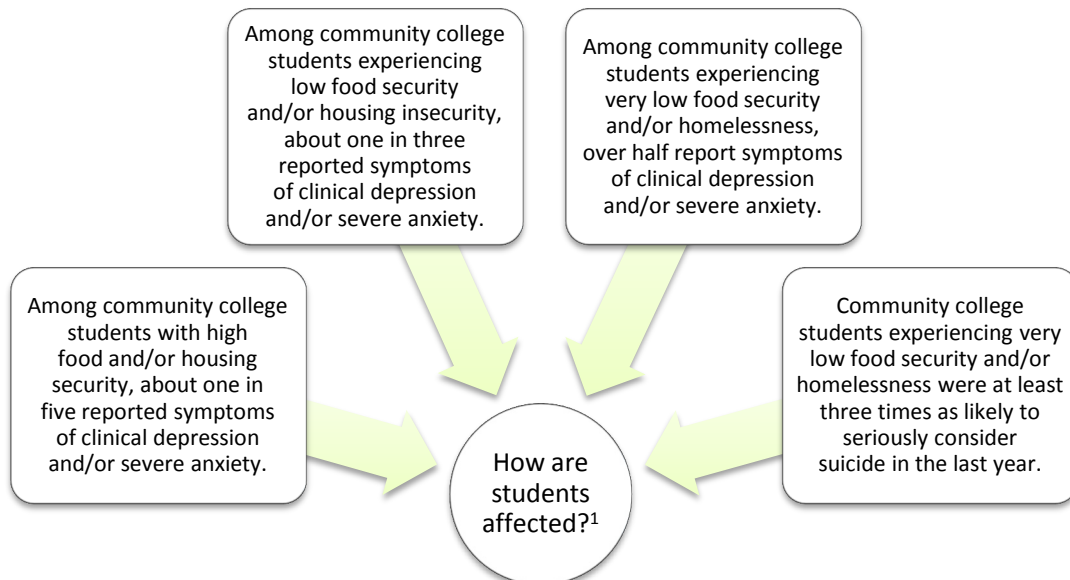
To help ensure the success of all students, many California Community Colleges (CCCs) are developing programs and employing strategies to support students' basic needs. This fact sheet explains how unmet basic needs are detrimental to students' mental health and academic success. It describes the extent of the problem in the CCCs and provides innovative strategies that campuses can implement.

### When Meeting Basic Needs is Stressful

Food insecurity means that someone is uncertain of having, or unable to buy, enough food because of lack of money. Housing insecurity refers to a range of unstable living conditions, from inability to pay rent and utilities to homelessness. All of these situations can cause significant stress and distress.

#### **How do food and housing insecurity affect student mental health?**

Lacking basic needs can have cascading effects on health and wellness. A survey of over 3,600 CCC students found that almost half of students who were experiencing food or housing insecurity were stressed or very stressed by it.<sup>3</sup> Food and housing insecurity can lead to constant worrying, difficulty prioritizing expenditures, and physical stressors that can be overwhelming for students. This stress is linked to mental health issues that can seriously impair students' success and quality of life. Students with food or housing insecurity are more likely to experience mental illness and physical health issues, including obesity and heart disease risk factors.<sup>4</sup>



## Spotlight On...

### Bakersfield College

Bakersfield College's Renegade Pantry is a student assistance program that provides monthly bags of groceries for students. In addition, Renegade Pantry partners with a local Panera Bread restaurant and Golden Empire Gleaners food bank to provide daily bread and weekly fresh fruits and vegetables. Renegade Pantry also offers clothing and hygiene supplies, and has information about community shelters and other resources on its website.

<http://www.bakersfieldcollege.edu>

### San Diego Mesa College

San Diego Mesa College's Student Success and Equity Department (SS&E) oversees The Stand, a food pantry and professional clothing closet. The SS&E Department also provides information and direct support to students, such as backpacks filled with supplies, money to buy textbooks, and café and copy/print center gift cards. San Diego Mesa College also has H.O.S.T. (Hope Offered to Students in Transition), a program of the Associated Student Government. H.O.S.T. holds food and hygiene drives each semester, as well as a Thanksgiving dinner event.

<http://www.sdccd.edu/newscenter/articles/homeless-hungry-students-support-2016.asp>



Students who cannot afford adequate food or housing are unlikely to spend time or money on mental health services. In one basic needs study conducted by the University of California, 15 percent of food-insecure students reported having to choose between paying for food or medical care.<sup>5</sup> Mental illness can also render students less equipped or motivated to complete paperwork and other requirements for receiving aid. This can perpetuate a cycle in which students are unable to pay for basic needs, which puts them at greater risk for mental health issues, which further impairs them to pay for basic needs.

## Distracted and Dropping Out

The physical and mental stresses of food and housing insecurity, and the financial insecurity that causes them, contribute to lower likelihood that students will succeed in college.

### *How can food and housing insecurity affect students academically?*

In the short term, food and housing insecurity can create a cognitive and physical burden that interferes with students' ability to learn. Students experiencing food insecurity in particular are less likely to feel engaged or valued by faculty or staff, and feel less confident and in-control of their studies.<sup>3</sup> In a hunger study of almost 3,800 students at 34 colleges, one-third of students who were food insecure said that hunger or housing problems had affected their education. Consequences included not performing as well as they could have, not buying required textbooks, or missing classes or study sessions.<sup>6</sup>

These immediate barriers can have long-term effects on student success. Multiple studies of community colleges, four-year colleges, and the University of California system have found a strong relationship between food insecurity and lower GPA.<sup>7,8</sup> Students who cannot meet their basic needs, especially low-income students, often cope with these issues by dropping classes, working more hours, or skipping semesters. All of these factors put these students at greater risk for disengaging, dropping out, and not transferring.<sup>9,10</sup>

## Social Determinants of Student Health

The *social determinants of health* (SDOH) are a result of the complex interplay of social, environmental, and economic forces that influence a wide range of health outcomes at the population level.<sup>11</sup> Access to nutritious food and secure housing are SDOH that disproportionately impact some communities. For example, African American, Latino, and first-generation college students – groups that make up the majority of the CCC population<sup>12</sup> – are at greater risk of unmet basic needs.<sup>2,6</sup> Other social and cultural groups are also disproportionately affected by basic needs challenges. A Wisconsin HOPE Lab study of 33,000 students at 70 community colleges found that 29 percent of former foster youth were homeless, more than double the rate of other community college students.<sup>13</sup> People with disabilities, people who identify as LGBTQ, and students with children are also at higher risk for unmet basic needs.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

Educational attainment is a key SDOH that can have far-reaching effects on a person's life. Regardless of income or race, people who graduate from college make better health decisions, live longer, have better health, and have children who are more likely to survive and have good health during childhood.<sup>16</sup> As described above, food and housing insecurity contributes to lower education attainment, which perpetuates a

cycle of harmful SDOH. For CCCs, this means that improving student success, retention, and graduation rates is deeply tied to supporting students' basic needs.

The community college student population is more vulnerable to food and housing insecurity than students at four-year colleges for other social and demographic reasons as well, such as:

- Community college students are much less likely to receive financial aid or sufficient aid, in spite of their greater estimated financial need.<sup>17</sup>
- Community college students are more likely to be parents or family providers, and often report putting their families' basic needs above their own. For young fathers, there can be additional stigma against asking for help.<sup>3</sup>
- Community college students are more likely to be older and juggling multiple responsibilities while living independently.<sup>18</sup>

## Defining Basic Needs

The stereotype of the "starving college student" who subsists on a diet of cheap packaged noodles may overshadow the severity of food and housing insecurity. It is important to understand the scope of basic needs in order to address these issues effectively and systemically.

### ***What does food insecurity look like?***

Someone experiencing food insecurity often has to choose between buying food and paying for rent, child care, health care, tuition, or other essentials. A person experiencing *low* food security might have to reduce the quality, variety, or desirability of their diet, or rely on supports such as food pantries. They are generally able to get enough food, but they are more likely than a food-secure person to choose fast food and other unhealthy, less expensive options. A person experiencing *very low* food security has these issues, but will also go hungry: they will skip meals, sometimes for entire days, often multiple times within a month.

### ***How widespread is food insecurity in college?***

College students today are as much as **four times more likely to experience food insecurity** than other Americans. The USDA estimates that just under 13 percent of U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2015.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, about half of college students report past 30 days food insecurity, with one in five experiencing the lowest level of food security. Although food insecurity is only an occasional problem for some students, it can have serious adverse consequences. The study of 3,800 college students found that about 1 in 7 respondents who had experienced food insecurity in the last 30 days had lost weight as a result.<sup>6</sup> Food insecurity is also associated with progressively severe effects on GPA, energy, and concentration,<sup>8</sup> and some evidence suggests it is also associated with lower cognitive performance.<sup>20</sup>

### ***What does housing insecurity look like?***

Housing insecurity can include inability to pay the rent, mortgage, or utility bills, or paying less than the full amount; borrowing money from friends and family to cover essential bills; moving in with others due to financial hardship; and/or having to move multiple times because of cost. These forms of housing insecurity can lead to *homelessness*, the most extreme kind of housing insecurity. Homelessness can refer to not having a home, being evicted or kicked out due to financial hardship, staying in a shelter, "couch surfing," sleeping in a car or other place not meant for habitation, or

## Spotlight On...

### Orange Coast College (OCC)

The OCC Food Riders Club was established in 2010 and has recently joined the Food Recovery Network. Founded by OCC librarian Carl Morgan, the Food Riders Club volunteers collect excess food from the OCC cafeteria and deliver it via bicycles and trailers to local food pantries. OCC Food Riders have recovered over 60,000 pounds of food in six years. A handbook for program replication is available on the website.

[www.foodriders.org](http://www.foodriders.org)  
<http://www.facebook.com/occfodriders>

### Skyline College

Skyline College (San Bruno, CA) hosts a SparkPoint Center, part of a regional United Way of the Bay Area network of financial education centers. SparkPoint services are bundled and sequenced to support students, and integrated within the network of Student Services provided by the college. Services students can access through Skyline's SparkPoint Center include a food pantry; tax preparation assistance; financial coaching; assistance with applying for CalWorks, CalFresh, and Medi-Cal; and more.

<http://skylinecollege.edu/sparkpoint>



## Spotlight On...

### College of Marin

Student Services at College of Marin provides an access point to a wide array of services and benefits, including targeted services for youth exiting foster care, families on public assistance, and veterans. The Student Services website includes prominent links to College of Marin's food pantry, COM Cupboard, and CalFresh eligibility information. In addition, through its Student Activities and Advocacy - Community Resources page, College of Marin provides information regarding homeless shelters, food pantries, and other community supports.

<http://ss.marin.edu>

not knowing where you will sleep at night. Often, individuals experience multiple forms of housing insecurity in the same period.

### ***How widespread is housing insecurity in college?***

Although there has been more research on food insecurity, recent studies on basic needs have found that approximately **one-third to one-half of students** are experiencing some form of housing insecurity within a year. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students who experience food insecurity are more at risk for housing insecurity, and vice versa. As with food insecurity, community college students are at greater risk than four-year college students: 13-14 percent of community college students reported experiencing homelessness in the last year, compared to only 7 percent of four-year college students.<sup>6,13</sup>

These needs are especially pressing in California, where 39 percent of the nation's chronically homeless persons reside, as well as the largest number of unaccompanied homeless children and youth in the nation.<sup>21</sup> To address this urgent issue, several pieces of legislation have recently passed focusing on supports for college students experiencing homelessness. These include:

### **Hunger Free Education Opportunity Act**

*SB 1930 - Passed in 2014*

Ensures that students participating in a college program to increase employability are no longer required to work 20 hours per week/80 hours per month to receive CalFresh benefits. In 2017, the CA Department of Social Services issued All County Letter 17-05 with explicit guidance to County Welfare Departments regarding these changes. The letter provided an expanded list of programs that qualify a student for exemption.

### **College Student Hunger Relief Act of 2016**

*AB 1747 - Passed in 2016*

Requires campuses located in counties that participate in the Restaurant Meals Program to apply to become approved food vendors, which would mean that homeless students could use food benefits (CalFresh) on campus.

### **Community College Showers Access Bill**

*AB 1995 - Passed in 2016*

Requires CCCs to allow students experiencing homelessness to use campus showers, even if they are not enrolled in physical education classes.

### **Success for Homeless Youth in Higher Education Act**

*AB 801 - Passed in 2016*

Requires all 114 CCCs to designate a liaison to support foster youth and homeless students. Liaisons must inform these students about the availability of financial aid and other campus support services. AB-801 also provides priority registration for enrollment to foster, former foster, and (until January 1, 2020) homeless youth.

### **College Student Hunger Relief Act of 2017**

*AB 214 - Passed in 2017*

Expresses the intent of the Legislature to reduce the incidence of college student hunger and homelessness. Requires the California Student Aid Commission to notify Cal Grant recipients of eligibility for CalFresh benefits, and increases student eligibility for CalFresh via employment and training exemption.

### **Post-Secondary Education: Student Hunger**

*AB 453 - Currently in the legislature*

Encourages colleges to establish campus food pantries and to provide support for students to enroll in CalFresh benefits.

## Strategies – What Can CCCs Do?

There are many actions that CCC campuses can take to better support students experiencing food or housing insecurity. Although making policy changes and providing food and housing resources are key ways to support students, there are also opportunities for outreach, education, and collaboration activities to help students learn what services are available and feel engaged with their school.

### **Mental Health Services**

- Cross-promote available food and housing resources with campus mental health services. For example, post information on mental health services in food pantries and other resource areas; send email announcements about mental health services and supports to students who are signed up for benefits; and promote awareness of basic needs issues during campus mental health awareness events and activities.
- Include food and housing security questions in mental and behavioral health screening tools.
- Provide targeted training on trauma-informed principles, sensitive communication, and mental health referrals to financial aid administrators and other student support services staff.
- Educate health services staff about available on-campus and community food, housing, and financial resources in order to help students meet basic needs, which will increase the likelihood they receive health treatment. Distribute resource lists and contact information to staff.



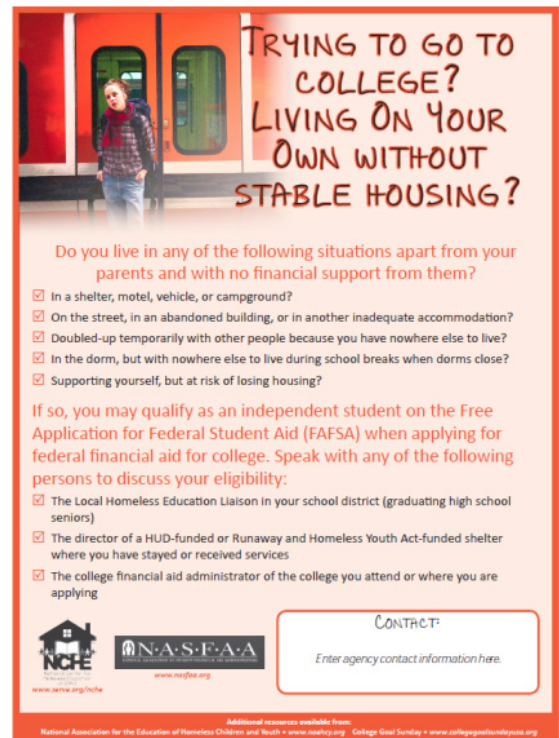
### **Food and Housing Resources**

- Provide a food pantry, preferably on campus – students may be more likely to use food banks if they view them as a student resource instead of a community resource. Organizations such as College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA; [www.cufba.org](http://www.cufba.org)) can help with launch.
- Offer essential non-food items through campus food pantries, such as hygiene products.
- Implement food recovery programs such as the Food Recovery Network ([www.foodrecoverynetwork.org](http://www.foodrecoverynetwork.org)) or the Campus Kitchens Project ([www.campuskitchens.org](http://www.campuskitchens.org)), which collect unused dining hall food to create ready-made meals for campus food pantries or off-campus programs.
- If your campus uses meal plans or points, allow students to donate unused credits at the end of the term through programs like Swipe Out Hunger ([www.swipehunger.org](http://www.swipehunger.org)). The University of California Global Food Initiative developed a best-practice guide to help campuses implement the program: [www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/files/Swipe Out Hunger Guide Final.pdf](http://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/files/Swipe%20Out%20Hunger%20Guide%20Final.pdf).
- Partner with rental assistance programs and local housing authorities to offer housing vouchers and similar opportunities for homeless students who remain enrolled and meet GPA requirements.
- Food and housing insecurity are usually indicative of more general financial hardship. Some campuses institute textbook scholarships or encourage faculty to use free, open-source textbooks.

### **Outreach and Education**

- Help students find information about available on-campus resources. Create a centralized, easy-to-find webpage on your campus website that links to all relevant campus resources and contact information. Post information in physical spaces, including multiple locations (e.g., student services building, food pantry, campus gymnasium, day care center, financial aid office).

- Create a list of local resources, such as rent assistance programs, dental and primary care clinics, discounted transit fares, emergency cash grant programs, and young adult drop-in centers. Provide copies of this list through your website and at in-person sites.
- Provide information to students about state and federal assistance for which they may qualify, such as CalFresh (SNAP outside of California), Medi-Cal, or WIC. Provide support to students to enroll in these benefits.
- Specifically alert students who might qualify for benefits. For example, send a targeted email message about CalFresh enrollment assistance to students who report living independently, with an Expected Family Contribution of \$0-\$3,000, who do not currently receive state benefits.
- Students may not seek out resources because they do not recognize that their situation represents food or housing insecurity. Research indicates that male students may be even less likely to ask for help. Educate students about what insecurity looks like. For example, the National Center for Health Education created an explanatory poster (see image on this page) about the living situations that qualify as homelessness: [http://nche.ed.gov/pr/he\\_poster.php](http://nche.ed.gov/pr/he_poster.php).
- In promotional materials, avoid stigmatizing language or images that imply students are not trying hard enough or are less deserving of an education than others. For example, refer to “grocery help” rather than “food stamps” and “benefits” rather than “welfare.” Most students with food and housing insecurity work, and many are juggling multiple responsibilities and adult roles.
- Host workshops on how to cook simple, healthy meals on a budget; how to plan and make time for grocery shopping; and how to balance budgets. Many food-insecure students say this is information they would like to receive from their colleges.



### Policy and Processes

- Assist students with completing paperwork for state or federal assistance. Through programs such as Single Stop, personnel support students’ financial capability by helping them access unclaimed federal benefits, tax credits, tax preparation assistance, legal counseling, and more.<sup>10</sup>
- Hire or designate a single point of contact. This is a supportive staff member who can help students experiencing homelessness apply for financial aid and other campus, state, and federal benefits. He or she may also coordinate with other campus and community resources to identify, outreach with, and support these students. CSU students who have access to a single point of contact have reported feeling more connected, supported, and able to stay in college.<sup>22</sup> Read the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) tip sheet for “Higher Education McKinney-Vento Single Points of Contact (SPOCs)”: <http://naehcy.org/sites/default/files/dl/spoc-tips.docx>.
- Reduce documentation barriers to financial aid. Students can now apply as unaccompanied homeless youth or at-risk of becoming homeless on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) through age 23. For comprehensive guidance on how to help them apply, including case studies and recommendations for sensitive language, view the Foster Youth Success Initiative’s *Providing Effective Financial Aid Assistance to Students from Foster Care and Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: A Key to Higher Education Access and Success*: <http://extranet.cccco.edu/Portals/1/SSSP/FYSI/ProvidingEffectiveFinancialAidAssistancetoFosterVersion2.pdf>.
- Make financial aid more easily available for non-tuition costs. If possible, make financial aid disbursements prior to the start of the semester or in the first week, or provide micro-grants or loans.<sup>23</sup> This way, students are not as likely to have to choose between rent, food, and textbooks.

## Collaboration and Coordination

- Partner with local farmers markets, grocery stores, and other venues to provide students with fresh food in addition to canned and nonperishable food pantry goods.
- Generate buy-in by educating faculty and staff about the prevalence of food and housing insecurity and how to discuss these issues with students in a non-stigmatizing way. Give faculty and staff information about resources that are available for students, including websites and contact information. Faculty and staff can then provide specific guidance to students if approached, instead of simply sympathizing with students or advising them to look into resources.
- Promote collaboration between administration, financial aid administrators, health services staff, and student services staff around these issues and supporting low-income students.
- Engage the student government to address basic needs issues with the input of multiple stakeholders. Research on food insecurity has found that robust campus programs are often lead by and/or heavily involve student body representatives.
- Help students feel connected to their campus through peer programs and homeless student clubs or unions. Engage these student groups as advocates and lived-experience experts in planning, implementing, and evaluating services.



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## California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program (CCC SMHP)

Toll free: (855) 304 1647 | [www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org](http://www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org)

The California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program (CCC SMHP) is dedicated to increasing the capacity of the CCC system to provide student mental health services. Funded by the California Mental Health Services Authority, this program offers cost-free training and technical assistance (TTA) to California's community college campuses.

The California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) is an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families and communities. Prevention and Early Intervention programs implemented by CalMHSA are funded through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop 63). Prop 63 provides the funding and framework needed to expand mental health services to previously underserved populations and all of California's diverse communities.

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