

New York Governor Cuomo proposes band-aid for student hunger

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New York Governor Andrew Cuomo recently announced a program calling for all campuses of the State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY) to set up food pantries for students in need. Recent studies on the living conditions of American college students show a devastating reality, with more than one in three students facing food insecurity—the lack of reliable access to enough food.

SUNY and CUNY are together the largest higher education system in the United States, with 64 campuses and more than 430,000 students enrolled in a degree program.

Cuomo proposed a \$1 million annual budget as “seed money” for starting a campus food pantry program throughout the state. This program was announced back-to-back with the passing by SUNY’s Board of Trustees of another \$200 increase in annual tuition for all four-year SUNY/CUNY schools, raising in-state tuition (which does not include the approximately \$10,000-20,000 in student fees, room and board, books and supplies, and transportation) to \$6,870. The only vote against this increase came from the student representative on the Board. SUNY and CUNY tuition costs have more than doubled since 2000.

Before the start of the current semester, CUNY students held a rally opposing the tuition hike, as well as recent SUNY/CUNY budget cuts. Maxwell, a CUNY student attending the rally, spoke to WPIX News saying, “\$200 can really just mean choosing between that or rent, or choosing between that and the groceries that month.”

The sobering truth of this statement is reflected in a 2018 report by Wisconsin HOPE Lab titled, “Still Hungry and Homeless in College”—its third study assessing basic needs insecurity among US college

students, and the largest national survey of its kind to date. Containing responses from 43,000 students at 66 institutions in 20 states, the findings showed that 36 percent of four-year college students were food insecure in the 30 days preceding the survey, and 42 percent of two-year (community college) students were food insecure.

The study also showed that 36 percent of university students and 46 percent of community college students were housing insecure (unable to regularly pay rent or utilities) in the last year, and 9 percent of university students and 12 percent of community college students were homeless in the last year—meaning 1 in 10 students experience homelessness every year.

One-quarter of university students and one-third of community college students said that they skipped meals or cut down the size of their meals because of a lack of money, with 18 percent of university students and 22 percent of community college students doing this at least three days in the previous 30 days. Six percent of university students and 9 percent of community college students reported going at least an entire day during the last month without eating because of a lack of money.

The Wisconsin HOPE Lab report says of the food and housing insecurity facing US college students: “It is more common to endure them during college than to have all of one’s needs met.” This is a sad and revealing fact in the 21st century.

The WWSW spoke with Rev. Dr. Dianna Smith, the director and founder of the SUNY New Paltz Food Pantry, on the conditions facing students and staff at SUNY schools.

In response to our question of why such levels of food insecurity are so common, Dr. Smith said, “I think costs. Look at what off-campus students are dealing

with for rents. They're just through the roof. And then I think a lot of people think, 'I'll come, and I'll get a job and that will help.'

"But they're low paying, if they are available, and you wind up with eight hours, 10 hours, and how very quickly that can get eaten up. For the off-campus students, so many come in [to the pantry] and go, 'This is my lifeline. This is how I get through the week.' And I think that's telling. Cost of tuition has gone up, cost of books is going through the roof. If you're off campus, maybe you have some financial aid, and you use it up for everything you need for school—then what do you do for food? And I've just seen such an increase."

In the last two semesters, there were 795 visits to the SUNY New Paltz food pantry from students and 80 from staff, mainly Sodexo employees who work serving food to others, but are paid so little they sometimes cannot afford to feed themselves. Sodexo is a massive French food service company with over 400,000 employees operating in 80 countries, valued at over \$126 billion.

Smith explained that Sodexo workers were "all the people that you see serving all the food on campus. Most, I think all, are part-time employees. When school isn't in session, they don't have work, so I think a lot of them are constantly playing catch up."

Smith spoke about one of these workers. "One of the staff people that comes, he is raising all of his grandchildren alone. You know, he's a Sodexo worker. They make next to nothing. So, he survives by using the food pantry."

Smith also talked about the damaging health effects of food insecurity on younger people. "I mean, think about it—you're hungry, how do you concentrate? You're in some biology class, your stomach is rumbling. Then it begins to snowball. Your stress level goes up so you're not doing well, you're hungry, and it becomes a real crisis."

Smith summed up the broader issues facing food pantries today: "I'd like to see us go out of business, that students don't need us anymore. I don't think that is the reality of our world today and our country today. I just see the need being greater and greater. Is this a long-term solution? Well no. It's a stop gap."

Demonstrating that Cuomo's proposal to combat widespread student hunger is little more than cheap

publicity, experts at CUNY's School for Public Health estimated the annual budget needed to meet SUNY students' food insecurity needs to be \$55 million—nowhere close to the \$1 million allocated in the state budget.

The school also released a study earlier this year showing that New York City food pantries are an unreliable resource for those who are food insecure. The report, "Unreliable and Difficult-to-Access Food for Those in Need," found that food pantries are not reliably open, and when they are open have limited and unpredictable inventories which do not meet the demands of those in need.

The social anger that these living conditions have inevitably produced among students, especially working-class students, have forced the Democratic governor to make a meager gesture. The program is entirely inadequate to deal with hunger on campuses and students in New York will continue to be forced to choose between a meal, a home, and a degree.



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