

Education Committee
Public Hearing: February 26, 2025

In Support of **H.B. 7013**: An Act Concerning Enhancements to the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program

Dear Senator McCrory and Representative Leeper, Senator Berthel, Representative Zupkus, and esteemed members of the Education Committee,

My name is Elizabeth Quiñonez, Senior Director of Child Care Initiatives at United Way of Coastal and Western Connecticut (UWCWC).

I am submitting testimony in support of H.B. 7013: An Act Concerning Enhancements to the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program (CTG4CTK). This legislation not only strengthens our state's local food incentive program but also provides crucial funding for the continued expansion of farm-to-school initiatives through CTG4CTK. In doing so, it supports vital programs that enhance educational quality, improve access to healthy, locally sourced food for low-to moderate-income families, and reinforce our state's agricultural economy.

At United Way of Coastal and Western Connecticut, we serve 27 towns across Fairfield and Southern Litchfield County. Here, 42% of households—more than 336,000 individuals—live at or below the **ALICE** (**A**sset **L**imited, **I**ncome **C**onstrained, **E**mployed) threshold. These families struggle daily to pay for essentials such as housing, food, transportation, child care, healthcare, and utilities. Many are just one crisis away from financial instability, yet they often do not qualify for public assistance programs such as SNAP or WIC.

In 2018, we launched Cora's Kids' Early Childhood Care and Education Initiative to expand access to home-based child care by supporting providers with licensing assistance and professional development. Serving families and providers across Greater Danbury and Greater New Milford, the initiative builds equitable pathways out of poverty by ensuring that working parents have access to quality, affordable care and that children receive a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

Many providers offer meals but struggle with the complex federal Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP) system, which provides limited reimbursement for low-income children under five. Meanwhile, our families face food insecurity and limited access to fresh, healthy produce, impacting children's ability to thrive in their critical early years.

With CTG4CTK's support, Cora's Kids launched *Seedlings to Sprouts*, our first farm-to-school initiative, enhancing early childhood education by increasing equitable access to fresh, local produce and integrating nutrition-focused learning for low- to moderate-income families. The program empowered providers to maximize federal funding, strengthening businesses and improving meal quality.

In just one year, we saw significant impact: 75% of 25 providers and 150 families reported better nutrition knowledge, 50% experienced improved food security with farmers market vouchers, and six child care gardens served 54 children with fresh produce and hands-on learning.

IMPROVING LIVES IN

Greater Bridgeport

10 Middle Street, Suite 1101 Bridgeport, CT 06604
Tel: 203.334.5106 Fax: 203.334.3297

Northern Fairfield County

301 Main Street, Suite 2-5 Danbury, CT 06810
Tel: 203.792.5330 Fax: 203.967.9507

Southern Litchfield County

24 Bank Street, P.O. Box 29 New Milford, CT 06776
Tel: 860.354.8800

Stamford and Greater Norwalk

1150 Summer Street Stamford, CT 06905
Tel: 203.348.7711 Fax: 203.967.9507



Due to overwhelming demand, *Seedlings to Sprouts* returns this summer, expanding to 150 providers and families. With continued CTG4CTK support, we'll enhance services and ensure even greater impact.

A small investment with a big impact—CTG4CTK strengthens the early childhood care and education ecosystem, enhancing educational quality and family well-being both at school and home. Support H.B. 7013 to fund the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program and ensure the best care for Connecticut's children. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Quinonez", written in a cursive style.

Elizabeth Quinonez

Senior Director of Child Care Initiatives
United Way of Coastal and Western Connecticut

IMPROVING LIVES IN

Greater Bridgeport

855 Main Street, Floor 1 Bridgeport, CT 06604
Tel: 203.334.5106 Fax: 203.334.3297

Northern Fairfield County

301 Main Street, Suite 2-5 Danbury, CT 06810
Tel: 203.792.5330 Fax: 203.967.9507

Southern Litchfield County

24 Bank Street, P.O. Box 29 New Milford, CT 06776
Tel: 860.354.8800

Stamford & Greater Norwalk

1150 Summer Street Stamford, CT 06905
Tel: 203.348.7711 Fax: 203.967.9507