

House Interim Committee on Higher Education Public Hearing

Thursday, February 8, 2024 at 3:00 PM

Testimony in support of HB 4162 by Susan Watson, Statewide Director of STEP and Pathways to Opportunity

- Chair Lively, Vice-Chair McIntire, Vice-Chair Ruiz, and members of the Committee, for the record, my name is Susan Watson. I am the Statewide Director of STEP and Pathways to Opportunity, housed at Portland Community College. This is the statewide consortium that represents all 24 public post-secondary institutions for Basic Needs Oregon, the program that Benefits Navigators are part of. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of HB 4162: The Student Emergency Basic Needs Bill.
- In 2021, the Oregon State Legislature took a critical step in addressing student basic needs insecurities by passing HB 2835, the Benefits Navigator Bill. Over the past year the college Benefits Navigators have connected with over 11,000 students across the state, referring them to resources and benefits such as SNAP, food pantries, emergency grants, and community-based organizations that assist with housing and utilities. The original legislation only provided funding to cover a benefits navigator's salary and benefits, resulting in a timely and urgent need we see now for programmatic funding and resources. Benefits navigators, especially those at smaller institutions in rural areas, cannot best serve our students without programmatic budgets.
- Hiring benefits navigators to help students connect with resources is not enough; Benefits Navigators need more tangible resources and funding to be truly successful.
- Due to the prevalence of basic needs insecurity among BIPOC students, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities, the Joint Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education (JTUSHE) recommended continued support for this program as a key support for underrepresented students in higher education.

- Colleges across the state, particularly those in rural areas, need funding now to help students from low-income backgrounds, those who are undocumented, those who have children, first-generation college students, and former foster youth.
- The Student Emergency Needs Package allocates \$5 million that colleges and universities can tailor to strengthen student basic needs programs and infrastructure on their campuses. Please support HB 4162 so we can help students in public postsecondary institutions across the state. Thank you for your time and consideration.