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February 16, 2021

The Honorable Assemblymember Lisa Calderon
Chair, Assembly Human Services Committee
Legislative Office Building, 1020 N Street, Room 124
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: AB 221 (Santiago) – Emergency Food Assistance for All – SUPPORT

Dear Chair Calderon:

On behalf of Nourish California, I am writing in support of AB 221 (Santiago). This bill would establish a one-time fund to provide emergency food assistance for persons negatively impacted by COVID-19, regardless of legal status. The bill also requires the Department of Social Services (DSS) to conduct a study to inform a set of recommendations for a permanent food assistance program that meets the needs of all food insecure Californians.

COVID-19 has devastated California's economy and has led to more job losses and in a far shorter period of time than during the Great Recession. Since the beginning of the statewide Stay at Home Order in March 2020, over 7 million Californians have applied for unemployment insurance and as of early January 2021, 2.8 million Californians were receiving regular unemployment benefits.¹ However, many residents have expressed they are still struggling to pay for rent, mortgage, food, and other basic needs. There are hundreds of thousands of Californians who have experienced job loss or reduced work hours, but who do not qualify for unemployment benefits due to their status as a "gig" employee or as an undocumented immigrant.

This crisis has also disproportionately affected certain groups, particularly our community of over two million undocumented immigrants who live and work in California. As of January 18, 2021, overall food

¹ Legislative Analyst's Office, Alamo, C. (2021, January). *California Economy & Taxes*.
<https://lao.ca.gov/LAOEconTax/Article/Detail/613>

insecurity is 22.5 percent of all California households. That is equivalent to approximately nine million people and is 2.3 times higher than before COVID-19. Beyond that, there are deep racial and ethnic disparities, with 33.1% of Latinx and 24.4% of Black households without enough food. The rates of food insecurity are even more stark for households with children: an overall rate of 27.8%, and, much worse, 38.1% Latinx families and 33.8% of Black families are facing irreparable harm from hunger.²

Currently, some citizens are eligible for CalFresh, a federally funded program which provides monthly food benefits to low-income individuals and families. However, undocumented immigrants are ineligible for CalFresh. In a recent survey of 90,000 undocumented immigrants who received one-time state disaster assistance last year, 54% indicated that they are facing food insecurity. California's undocumented immigrants are an integral part of our society who pay taxes and are risking their lives to perform essential services that keep the state running and put food on our tables. Ironically, however, there are no food resources to support them should they or someone in their family contract COVID-19 or lose their job. It is imperative that California extend food assistance to undocumented immigrants.

In order to provide eligible California residents with enough support to withstand this crisis, AB 221 would establish an emergency food assistance fund. To minimize costs to the state, and maximize the privacy of community members, the bill would use proven practices from programs administered by food banks and other non-profits to safely and efficiently distribute this benefit via pre-loaded food cards.

As the state with the country's largest population, and the largest immigrant and refugee population, providing its residents with necessary resources and protections during this crisis is the right and urgent action to take. For these reasons, Nourish California supports AB 221 (Santiago) and urges your 'aye' vote.

Sincerely,



Betzabel Estudillo
Senior Advocate

² Northwestern University, Schanzenbach, D. S., & Tomeh, N. T. (2020, July). *Visualizing Food Insecurity*. <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/state-food-insecurity.html>