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**Testimony of Danielle Dooley, MD, MPhil
Medical Director, Community Affairs and Population Health
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before
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 579: Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal
Expansion**

February 14, 2024

Chairman Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in favor of Senate Bill 579. My name is Danielle Dooley, MD, MPhil, and I am a Pediatrician and Medical Director of Community Affairs and Population Health at Children's National Hospital. Children's National has been serving the nation's children since 1870. Nearly 60% of our patients are residents of Maryland, and we maintain a network of community-based pediatric practices, surgery centers and regional outpatient centers in Maryland.

Every week in my health center, I see patients who are Maryland residents and whose families are struggling to put food on the table. Parents are working 2 or 3 jobs to make ends meet. I have heard from many families that the pandemic-era waivers that provided school meals at no cost to all students were essential for their child's functioning in school and their family's financial wellbeing.

Hungry kids cannot learn, grow and thrive. Students experiencing hunger in the classroom cannot concentrate, have lower academic performance and are at a higher risk of negative health outcomes, such as behavior issues, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and high cholesterol.¹

Universal expansion of school meals has benefits for both schools and students. On the school side, universal access to free meals reduces the administrative burden of determining student eligibility for free meals. For students, universal access to school meals has many benefits. First, it eliminates the stigma of “lunch-shaming” that students experience when they receive a free or reduced price lunch, and are noted by their peers or administrators to be different from other students. This experience and fear of stigma prevents children who are eligible for free or reduced price meals from accessing them and getting the vital nutrition they need.² In Maryland, prior to the pandemic, less than half of low-income students accessed school breakfast and school lunch daily due to barriers like cost and stigma.³ Studies have shown that implementation of universal school meals can lead to increased participation in school meals programs, improved academic performance, reduced absenteeism, and improved perceptions of the school environment.⁴ Research also shows that universal school meals also helps to lower suspension rates in schools.⁵

Children, especially those residing in Maryland that I care for in my health center, have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical that we implement policy solutions to help mitigate the negative health effects and learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Children need and deserve every support to help them recover from the pandemic. An important step in this direction is to universally expand school breakfast and lunch programs throughout Maryland, so that all children can grow up stronger.

I applaud the Maryland General Assembly for introducing this important legislation, which will benefit Maryland’s youngest residents and their families, and request a favorable report on Senate Bill 579. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.

¹ <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/136/5/e1431/33896/Promoting-Food-Security-for-All-Children?autologincheck=redirected>. Accessed February 6, 2024.

² <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/free-school-meals-stigma/#:~:text=The%20stigma%20around%20free%20school,was%20free%20for%20all%20students>. Accessed February 6, 2024.

³ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1me25VJtghg3Jf_1A0rsk9qjZ7Nfc4q6s/view. Accessed February 6, 2024.

⁴ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/content/forefront/case-universal-free-meals-all-permanent-solution>. Accessed February 6, 2024.

⁵ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/universal-free-school-meals-might-improve-discipline-rates-heres-how/2024/01>. Accessed February 7, 2024.