

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 213

Human Services – Food Supplement Program (Summer SNAP for Children Act)

Senate Finance Committee

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My name is Dr. Susan Gross. I am a nutritionist and an associate practice professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in regards to Senate Bill 213- Human Services – Food Supplement Program (Summer SNAP for Children Act), which increases the state budget mandate to Summer SNAP from \$200,000 to \$5 million. This legislation allows Maryland to meet the 50% federal administration match which is \$9 million.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, 9.5% of households in Maryland experienced food insecurity (FI) between 2020 and 2022.¹ Although low-income families with children are partially protected from FI during the school year through the availability of free- and reduced-price meals (FARMS) provided by the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program, FI increases significantly during out-of-school times. Free meals are provided to children in low-income areas during the summer through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Participation in SFSP is much lower than participation in NSLP and SBP for a variety of reasons, including lack of transportation, limited meal site availability, low program awareness, and administrative burdens that limit SFSP sponsors' ability to serve meals.² Since 2018, I have been collaborating with Maryland Hunger Solutions (MDHS) to investigate the impact of changes in federal policies on food access during the summer for public school students in Maryland.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, flexibilities were introduced in SFSP, including allowing meals to be provided in a “non-congregate” manner and during more flexible time windows and allowing parents/guardians to pick up meals. The research team found that the COVID-19 flexibilities for SFSP were associated with a 200% increase in SFSP participation in Maryland.²⁻³

In addition to SFSP flexibilities, the introduction in March 2020 of Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) led to improved access to food during the summer months of 2021-2023 for over 400,000 children in Maryland.⁴ During 2023, federal nutrition programs, including SFSP, underwent policy changes related to the end of the COVID-19 federal emergency and many of the COVID- related flexibilities in SFSP expired. The expiration of SFSP flexibilities resulted in few SFSP sites in Maryland and reduced meal participation due to lack of transportation, meal times restrictions and need for children to eat the meals at a congregate meal site, a barrier to food access for students not participating summer recreational and education programming.

In 2024, a new Summer EBT (S-EBT) program will permanently replace P-EBT. SEBT could reach at least 500,000 children. SEBT will be a step toward reducing food insecurity and increasing nutritional equity among children in MD during out of school time. Maryland has the opportunity to reduce food insecurity Maryland students during the summer and expand access to food through SB 213. However, more details about whether the \$5 million dollars will be used for administrative costs or funding of food assistance for students is still unclear to me.

The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts.

¹ Rabbitt MP, et al. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.32747/2023.8134351.ers>

² Gross J, et al. Maryland Hunger Solutions Policy Brief. 2021. <https://www.mdhungersolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SFSP-Waivers-Policy-Brief-August-2021.pdf>.

³ Lu, S.V., et al. J School Health, 92: 429-435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13145>

⁴ Maryland Department of Human Services. <https://news.dhs.maryland.gov/reports/that/usda-approval-maryland-provide-food-approximately-427000-children-affected-covid-19-school-closures/>