

Department of Legislative Services
 Maryland General Assembly
 2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 353
 Finance

(Senators Salling and Watson)

Food Deserts Workgroup - Establishment

This bill establishes the Food Deserts Workgroup to conduct an analysis of food deserts in the State. The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) must provide staff for the workgroup. Workgroup members may not receive compensation but are entitled to reimbursement for expenses, as specified. By November 1, 2025, the workgroup must report its findings and recommendations to the Governor, the General Assembly, and specified committees of the General Assembly. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2025, and terminates June 30, 2026.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: General fund expenditures increase by \$75,000 only in FY 2026 for a consultant to support the workgroup. Expense reimbursements for workgroup members are assumed to be minimal and absorbable within existing budgeted resources. No effect on revenues.

(in dollars)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030
Revenues	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
GF Expenditure	75,000	0	0	0	0
Net Effect	(\$75,000)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0

Note: () = decrease; GF = general funds; FF = federal funds; SF = special funds; - = indeterminate increase; (-) = indeterminate decrease

Local Effect: None.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary: The analysis must include (1) a discussion of the overall concept of food deserts and the location of food deserts in the State; (2) an examination of the health impacts of food deserts on the local population, including any related environmental concerns, and the impacts of food deserts on the economy; (3) an assessment of strategies to attract grocery stores and supermarket retailers to identified food deserts and any associated costs, including a review of existing incentives and available financing programs in the State and in other states; and (4) any other topic, as determined by the workgroup, related to food deserts.

Current Law:

Interagency Food Desert Advisory Committee and Food Desert Designations

The Interagency Food Desert Advisory Committee must, among other things, make recommendations to the Secretary of Housing and Community Development on applications for designating an area as a food desert and make recommendations for interagency coordination to reduce the number of food deserts and promote health food access for Maryland neighborhoods. The committee is staffed by DHCD.

The Secretary of Housing and Community Development, on the recommendation of the Interagency Food Desert Advisory Committee, is authorized to designate an area as a food desert after considering the following factors: (1) availability of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthy foods in the area; (2) income levels of local residents; (3) transportation needs of local residents and the availability of public transportation; (4) comments from local governments; and (5) any other factors that DHCD considers relevant. Generally, the designation is considered only after a local government submits an application to DHCD to designate an area as a food desert.

Maryland Food System Resiliency Council

Chapters 724 and 725 of 2021 established the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council and required it to meet regularly for a period of at least two years to address food insecurity in the State. Chapters 573 and 574 of 2023 established the council as part of the Office of Resilience within (and staffed by) the Maryland Department of Emergency Management. The council must pursue specified goals, including addressing the food insecurity crisis in the State resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis by, among other things, (1) tracking and analyzing data to create a comprehensive map of food insecurity across the State and identify the gaps in service; (2) developing specified equity and sustainability policy recommendations to increase the long-term resiliency of the food system; (3) expanding the impact of existing food council organizations by providing

coordination and facilitation of knowledge exchange at the State level and supporting identification and application of grants to operating funds to support existing and new food council organizations; and (4) developing a strategic plan to increase the production and procurement of Maryland certified food. The council’s [fourth annual report](#) includes a discussion on “food access priority areas,” which is another term for food deserts.

State Expenditures: DHCD advises that it needs additional support to assist the workgroup with collecting data regarding food deserts, conducting research on the health impacts of food deserts and any related environmental impacts, and producing the workgroup’s final report. DHCD advises that although it is required by statute to staff the Interagency Food Desert Advisory Committee, the committee is not active; it met once – in November 2014 – and has not met since. As a result, existing DHCD staff does not have any technical expertise regarding food deserts.

Based on comparable study costs, such as the Housing Needs Assessment conducted in 2020, DHCD anticipates costs of approximately \$75,000 to hire a consultant to conduct research and assist with the workgroup’s final report; the Department of Legislative Services concurs. Therefore, general fund expenditures increase by \$75,000 only in fiscal 2026 for DHCD to hire a consultant to provide expert technical support for the workgroup.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Maryland Department of Health; Department of Housing and Community Development; Department of Legislative Services

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