



Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger and promoting well-being

**Testimony in Support of SB0723
Maryland Food System Resiliency Council
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
March 4, 2021**

Dear Chair Pinsky, Vice-Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

Maryland Hunger Solutions is a statewide, non-partisan, non-profit organization working to end hunger and improve the nutrition, health, and well-being of individuals, children, and families in Maryland. Maryland Hunger Solutions strives to overcome barriers and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods through education, advocacy, and outreach.

It is within that regard that we are testifying in support of SB0723, which would establish the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council within the Maryland Emergency Management Agency. Maryland Hunger Solutions is a part of multiple county and city level councils; the Montgomery County Food Council, the Prince George's County Food Equity Council, and the Baltimore City Food Policy Action Coalition. We also worked with the Howard County Food Task Force. Our work with these groups has shown that bringing together members of every aspect of the food system can produce astounding effects in mobilizing efforts to assist those struggling with food insecurity.

It would have been helpful to have had the various elements of the food system connected on a policy level prior to the pandemic. It would be a mistake of historic proportions to not use our pandemic experience to address challenges to the food system, especially the challenges of food insecurity for Marylanders all across our state.

When describing the food system, we don't simply mean buying groceries and using the food banks. We mean the entire system. This includes agriculture (farms and farmworkers), food processing (production, processing and shipping), retail food (grocery stores, farmers markets and corner stores), the charitable sector (food banks, food pantries, and meal services), restaurants, the non-profit sector, and the government (the state departments of human services, health, agriculture and education). This will include understanding the role of food deserts and food swamps as part of the food system, as well as federal anti-hunger programs. The food system as it exists is complicated and has many cross-cutting connections. The state of Maryland is the best entity to examine this system, to make connections, to share best practices, and to promote successful policies and to engage with partners.

Local county-based and regional collaborations already exist in our state. They are great examples of what needs to be upgraded to a state level, with an eye on supporting existing efforts. Our role as a statewide anti-hunger organization has enabled us to interact with numerous partners around the state. Their input into this legislation – and more importantly – with the proposed resiliency council – is critical in informing our processes and helping this council be successful.

We are aware that our work touches on part of the system, but it has been instructive how local councils have been integral in our work. For example, in September of 2020, Maryland registered the highest SNAP participation in the state's history – over 844,000 individuals. No local group can help share resources with each of these participants. How can we ensure that they are connected to other programs they might be eligible for in other state agencies – like school meals and WIC? Which Food Bank might provide them with resources – the Maryland Food Bank, the Capital Area Food Bank, the Howard County Food Bank, MANNA Food Center in Montgomery County, the Southern Maryland Food Bank – or are there local pantries? Our experience shows that local meal services pop up, but not all of them are sustainable.

It's important to acknowledge that local groups have been both successful and resilient in the face of overwhelming challenges. Our work with the Montgomery County Food Council helped to establish their Senior SNAP Program where we have trained over 50 staff and volunteers to visit nearly 20 senior residences and centers throughout the county to assist older Americans in applying for SNAP. The Prince George's County Food Equity Council immediately stepped up to provide resources and volunteers to assist in responding to our call line when the pandemic began. The Baltimore City Food Policy Action Coalition quickly mobilized stakeholders from government agencies and healthcare groups in response to a federal policy change affecting able-bodied adults without dependents. And the Roving Radish, a local meal kit service in Howard County which was a project which came out of the county-led Food Policy Task Force, remains an excellent example of public-private partnerships.

However, the work of these county and city councils is limited to their respective borders, and their efforts and coordination must be applied with a statewide lens. A connected group of organizations representing nonprofits, the charitable sector, agriculture, businesses, and government agencies is vital to short-term fixes and long-term solutions. Establishing this statewide council would ensure building the foundation needed to achieve these goals thoughtfully and creatively, in response to the current crisis and to be prepared for future ones.

Maryland would join multiple states throughout the country that have coordinated similar efforts. Delaware, Massachusetts, Colorado, and others have established statewide councils with the goals of increasing food security, expanding production and consumption of produce grown in-state, and strengthening relationships between community based organizations and state agencies. Our work with the Maryland Department of Human Resources as an official state SNAP Outreach partner has allowed us and other partners to have open lines of communication

with the state. This has proven to be an invaluable partnership, and ensures we are delivering correct information to the communities we serve.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has proven that these councils help. Each of the three coalitions were able to move swiftly and effectively in sharing resources and best practices with others in response to the pandemic. They may not have solved all of the problems of their local food systems, but they have provided thoughtful coordination at the time when it was most needed. It is beyond time that a similar coalition was brought together to coordinate the fight against food insecurity at the state-level, especially during times of crisis. The Food System Resiliency Council will help build a resilient, equitable, and sustainable food system in Maryland for years to come.

Thank you for your consideration, Maryland Hunger Solutions **urges a favorable report on SB0723.**