



**TESTIMONY OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES FORUM: ADVOCACY FOR SOCIAL
JUSTICE AND MANNA FOOD CENTER OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD
MARCH 9, 2021
BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE
IN SUPPORT OF SB767 Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program**

Honorable Chair Paul Pinsky, Vice-Chair Cheryl Kagan and Members of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee:

The Critical Issues Forum: Advocacy for Social Justice (CIF) and Manna Food Center (Manna) provide this testimony in support of SB767, the Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program.

CIF is a coalition of three synagogues, Temple Beth Ami, Kol Shalom, and Adat Shalom, with over 1,750 households and three denominations of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. CIF serves as a vehicle for our congregations to speak out on policy issues that relate to our shared values, including the Jewish traditions that emphasize the sanctity and primary value of human life.

Manna Food Center ("Manna") is Montgomery County, Maryland's designated food bank, with a singular mission of eliminating hunger in our county. Through food distribution, education and advocacy, we are making strides on behalf of an estimated 100,000 county residents who experience food insecurity. There were approximately 50,500 participants who received supplemental food and services from Manna in FY20 including 3.3 million pounds of food distributed at more than a dozen locations. During the pandemic and resulting economic crises, Manna has met the substantial increase in demands while staying safe and committed to a vision of Food for All.

While Maryland has established several programs to address food insecurity for students from elementary to high school, it is less well-known that food insecurity is a significant and growing issue on many college campuses. In a current nationwide survey sent to 1.5 million students at 123 colleges and universities, based on 86,000 responses, it was shown that 48% of community college students and 41% of four-year university students were food insecure. (***College and University Basic Needs Insecurity: A National Real College Report, April 2019***).

A study at the University of Maryland found food insecurity is a pervasive concern demonstrating adverse effects on academic performance and physical and mental health. About 20% of UMD students surveyed were food insecure at some point in the last year.

UMD has the second -lowest percentage of low-income students of all public higher education institutions in the state. Yet one out of 5 students at UMD are food insecure. ***(Maryland Today, Survey Finds Food Insecurity Among Terps. Sept. 25, 2019)***

We are privileged to include the real-life experiences of Odessa Davis, a volunteer on the Manna Food Center Advocacy Task Force, and also representing The Critical Issues Forum. Odessa's reflections provide valuable insight into the entire issue we are addressing. Here is Odessa's story:

I know that hunger challenges students of any age to both learn and concentrate. As a recent graduate of Montgomery College (proudly with honors) and the mother of a son in Montgomery County Public Schools, I have experienced personally the struggles involved. My story began at Kennedy High School and Thomas Edison High School of Technology where I followed my dream of becoming a chef. I then studied and graduated from the Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts-Miami and returned with my son to the Rockville area and a changed dream. My new goal required careful discipline and lots of support. I was a single mom with an AA degree and hoped to move forward to a 4-year degree in Business Management. I had to start all over again. With the help of the Director of the Education Opportunity Center (EOC) at Montgomery College, a supportive family and friend network, and local financial help through scholarships, I have graduated and will be starting at the UMD Global Campus this fall. What challenges did I have during this journey?

My son and I were financially limited despite holding down four jobs at one point, including working in MCPS. While my salary was small, I was over the benefit level that allowed for Federal support (SNAP) so I had to depend on the MC Food Pantry as well as snacks provided in the Writing Center to help out. My son received breakfast and lunch at school except on holidays, weekends, and the summer months. Montgomery College also would periodically hold group events where produce and/or clothing would be available for those in need. I was a single parent stressed by several issues: finances, food insecurity, and academic challenges. I started a club at Montgomery College called "Back on Track" to bring a small group of similarly challenged adult students together. This year, 50% of our group was successful in graduating. During the pandemic, the challenge has become harder and the needs greater.

With the encouragement of the EOC at Montgomery College, I provided testimony to the County Council and became a volunteer on the Manna Advocacy Task Force. The issue of food insecurity that I have experienced and witnessed among my peers is only growing as costs escalate. I would never have succeeded without the help of the MC Food Pantry, group produce opportunities and the snacks provided at the writing center. The Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program recognizes this vital need.

Food insecurity has the greatest impact on: first-generation college students, racial/ethnic minority students, international students, those with an immigrant background, transfer

students, single parents, those who identify as transgender/gender non-conforming, students with a disability, students who were divorced or separated, and those from a lower socioeconomic background as well as students who worked longer hours and were financially independent. This group is large and the impact of the pandemic has exacerbated the situation. (***UMD Food Access & Student Well-being Study, A Report by the UM Counseling Center Research Unit, Sept. 26, 2019 and <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/college-hunger-research>***).

Food insecurity has pervasive impacts on student well-being, academic performance, and professional/career development. Multiple studies including the UMD and the CSES (APA's Committee on Socioeconomic Status) emphasize the broad impact of food insecurity on students' ability to remain in college and complete their degree (***American Psychological Association, Reducing Hunger on Campus, Heather Stringer, March 1, 2020, vol.51, No. 2***)

This is a real issue for Maryland colleges including in Montgomery County. Manna Food Center regularly works with students and staff at the Universities of Shady Grove and Montgomery College to support the functioning of campus-based pantries.

In an article published by Maryland Food Bank, 3,800 students at 34 community and four-year colleges across 12 states were surveyed. In the study, almost half (48%) of the respondents reported food insecurity and 22% admitted very low levels which would qualify them as hungry. Most of these students are working, received financial aid, and many were on meal plans. However, only 25% were using SNAP. In this same article, the interviewers reported on a visit to Towson University where they spoke with a student experiencing food insecurity as well as an administrator who suspected issues when multiple students eagerly ate the trail mix on her desk. The 19-year sophomore said:

Being food insecure is hard, embarrassing, and comes with so many emotions . . . FoodShare* has allowed me to focus more on my studies and not where my next meal is coming from

**FoodShare and FISF (Food Insecurity Support Fund) are a two-pronged plan at Towson that provides immediate financial assistance to students in need through meal cards and allows those in need to take up to 10 food or personal care items from the food pantry at a time. (<https://mdfoodbank.org/news/college-hunger-101-food-insecurity>).*

SB767, by establishing in Maryland a Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program, will help address this growing issue of food insecurity at our State public two and four-year college institutions. Although Maryland campus communities are beginning to address these issues by providing access to nutritious food through food pantries, expanding SNAP enrollment, drive-by no contact meal kits and CSA boxes, swipe sharing programs, and allocation of food gift cards, these efforts are stretching their limited resources. Financial support from the State linked with appropriate guidelines will greatly assist in this effort (***GAO report 19-95, Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Assistance Benefits, Dec. 2018***).

In recent studies from the UMD, student comments have been revealing on their reaction to food insecurity. These individual quotes are real-life commentary on the impact of food insecurity. (***UMD Food Access & Student Well-being Study – UMD Student Affairs, 2019***).

I was ‘so stressed because you have to always think about the budgeting ... how to get food, where to get it cheaper ... rather than spending time studying’; or a graduate student who remarked ‘I definitely felt guilty . . . I’m in graduate school . . . I should be able to handle this ... I failed at being an adult because I wasn’t able to pay for my own groceries ... like a feeling of shame and stress’; a student commented on the social implications ‘It’s hard for me to tell my friends I don’t have enough money, and sometimes embarrassing that you don’t have enough money to participate ... it feels like you’re being an outcast.’ .

It’s vital to invest in Maryland’s future and this grant program achieves that goal. Food insecurity is a widespread issue on Maryland’s College campuses and this program will address:

1. Student hunger in an equitable manner for those who may not be able to afford both adequate food and higher education. Provide on-campus food resources, such as a food pantry, or establish a stigma-free system for accessing community resources
2. Leverage more sustainable solutions to address basic food needs on public campuses
3. Raise awareness of services currently available but not widely known (SNAP & WIC) and connect students with these resources
4. Build strategic partnerships at the local, state, and national levels to address food insecurity among students. Use campus media to both inform students and reduce stigma.
5. Establish a campus-level Hunger-Free Task Force and work with local community food banks, grocery stores, restaurants and other resources to address the need.
6. Develop and maintain a meal-sharing program that allows students to donate their unused meal plan credits to those in need
7. Provide emergency assistance.

The CIF and Manna strongly support SB767 allowing the State of Maryland to create the Hunger-Free Campus Program. It will improve all college students’ ability at both two-year and four-year public schools to graduate and become productive citizens of Maryland.