



March 9, 2021

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 767

### Higher Education - Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program - Established

*Senate 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 in that vein that we strongly support SB 767, which aims to create a state-funded matching grant program to support anti-hunger programs and initiatives at 2 and 4-year public higher education institutions across the state of Maryland.

Through our work, we have partnered with multiple colleges and universities to provide SNAP outreach to food-insecure students. We have assisted students from University of Baltimore, Prince George's Community College, and Montgomery County Community College. We have also provided SNAP outreach training at the Community College of Baltimore County and consulted with administrators at the University of Maryland. Many students at these institutions are balancing classes, jobs, internships, as well as families of their own and other personal life demands. However, those facing food insecurity have increased challenges of determining what and when they'll be eating next, as well as potential stigmatization of their circumstances.

Food insecurity on higher education campuses is not a new phenomenon and can be found on even the most well-resourced campuses, however this need often goes unseen and unaddressed. Traditional views that stereotype college students as recent high school graduates have created a belief system that often normalizes food insecurity because it is seen as temporary. Higher education is often viewed as a steppingstone to career success for young, middle class individuals supported by their parents. These societal constructs are not only harmful but often lead to internalized stigma that prevents students from seeking help. We know that Maryland's student body is diverse, and our higher education system includes a variety of individual working toward their educational and career goals, including veteran, parents, grandparents, in addition to those facing unique life struggles such as homelessness. For some college students, especially those with higher risk, such as first generation students, students of color, older students, former foster youth, parenting students, students who experienced childhood food insecurity, among many others, being food insecure is a reality they face every day at home and at school. As higher education students struggle to balance rising cost of tuition, living expenses, other expenses associated with their education, they often find themselves with limited resources left for food.

A recent pre-pandemic nationwide survey by the Hope Center found that among 167,000 students surveyed from 171 two-year and 56 four-year institutions, 39% were food insecure in the prior 30 days.<sup>1</sup>



In fact, research analysis from the [Food Research & Action Center \(FRAC\)](#) has found that most studies done on college hunger have concluded that food insecurity rates among U.S. college students are higher than the national average for adults.<sup>ii</sup> This struggle impact more than just physical health. Another can cause more than just damaging health impacts, also physical, mental strain, lower grade and higher dropout rates. Another study at the University of Maryland found that the constant stress of food insecurity has adverse effects on academic performance and mental health, leading to increased risk of dropping out of school altogether.<sup>iii</sup> Additionally, we know that students are not the only population on campus that struggle with food insecurity. There are many low-income faculty and staff members that also benefits from on-campus resources.

The Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program looks to raise the awareness of the issue of campus hunger and provides both short-and-long term solutions. The grant dollars outlined in SB 767 would be administered by the Maryland Higher Education Commission and go towards efforts to address food insecurity on campuses. The recipients of this grant would work to establish a Hunger-Free Task Force that would set goals and actions towards eliminating hunger among the campus community through designating staff to connect eligible students with SNAP application assistance and local SNAP retailers; establishing a system for stigma-free access to community food resources; raising awareness for food insecurity through campus events in order to reduce stigma; and creating a meal plan swipe sharing program that allows students to donate unused swipes to fellow students in need.

While campus and community pantries are great resources, there are those who do not access it due to fear of stigmatization or due to not knowing that those resources even exist. Having a dedicated staff member at each campus with the knowledge of existing programs will help put students at ease, as well as quicken their ability to access needed programs. In particular, having staff on campus who can help students navigate the SNAP application process or refer eligible students to organizations who can help with application assistance, will be critical for ensuring that eligible students are not prevented from using this critical lifeline that so many Marylanders rely on during times of need.

For college students, SNAP eligibility is based on meeting 20+ hours a week of work, work-study, and/or volunteering. Even though this requirement has been temporarily waived due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP eligibility can still be complicated and difficult for students to navigate on their own. Many of the students we've assisted with applying for SNAP meet the work requirement, though were unaware of their eligibility for SNAP. The Hunger-Free Campus Program includes notifying students who participate in work-study of their eligibility for SNAP and could greatly increase participation among students in accessing a program that is proven to assist low-income households.

For students that are unable to access SNAP due to not meeting work requirements, having additional food resources on campus is essential. The creation of a food pantry that all students and campus community members, such as low-income faculty, staff, and contract workers, can access discretely not only reduces stigma, it can be a lifeline for those facing difficult situations. One such student approached us at Prince George's Community College, where a fire had unfortunately destroyed her apartment. She was thankfully able to find housing with a friend, but her SNAP dollars had run out and she needed food immediately. The campus pantry was able to meet those needs. While her situation is rare, having an



**Maryland Hunger Solutions**

*Ending hunger and promoting well-being*

on-campus pantry, as well as knowledgeable staff, creates more support systems for students and other food insecure campus community members when they need them.

While this bill won't solve the issue of hunger completely, it is taking a huge step in the right direction by providing an important investment by the state in our higher education system. Hungry students can't learn, and we know college students are no exception. The Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program will assist in de-stigmatizing food insecurity by allowing students to maintain their dignity during a time in their life where they should be focused on learning, not worrying about where their next meal is coming from.

Additionally, by enacting SB 767, we can ensure that no Marylander is deterred from achieving their full educational dreams because of the threat of hunger or its harmful effects, nor will they be forced to suffer disproportionately from food insecurity because of their pursuit of higher education.

Thank you for your consideration. Maryland Hunger Solutions **urges a favorable report on SB 767.**

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<sup>i</sup> #RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity: [https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019\\_RealCollege\\_Survey\\_Report.pdf](https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_RealCollege_Survey_Report.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> FRAC Research Wire: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/researchwire-summer-2018.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://studentaffairs.umd.edu/sites/studentaffairs.umd.edu/files/food\\_access\\_student\\_well-being\\_study\\_report\\_september2019.pdf](https://studentaffairs.umd.edu/sites/studentaffairs.umd.edu/files/food_access_student_well-being_study_report_september2019.pdf)