

Testimony in Support of HB 831 (2021)

Maryland Food System Resiliency Council

House Environment and Transportation Committee, February 17, 2021

Dear Chair Barve and Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee:

My name is Netta Squires, I work for the Montgomery County Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. I helped create and now help lead the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force. I have over 13 years of experience in Emergency Management and specialize in mass care services and public health. I am a Certified Emergency Manager (CEM) by the International Association of Emergency Management. I am writing in support of HB831, Maryland Food System Resiliency Council.

The Pandemic Triggered a Food Insecurity Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic impacts triggered a food insecurity crisis. The existing decentralized food security framework struggled under the weight of the grave and rapidly expanding need, triggering a need for governments to step in to help support critical feeding response efforts. As economic impacts continue to take their toll, people remain out of work, and health disparities continue to prevail, there remains a continued need for food assistance. Coordination and execution of these efforts requires strategic and careful planning.

Montgomery County Food Security Task Force (FSTF)

In Montgomery County, the Food Security Task Force (FSTF) was created by the Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS) to facilitate coordination and collaboration among government and non-governmental agencies, community organizations, and residents working to address the unique food security challenges created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Adapting the Incident Command System framework, the Food Security Task Force is led by a leadership team with representatives from the Montgomery County Food Council, Health and Human Services, and OEMHS. This close collaboration was essential to the successful imagination and implementation of food assistance programs and services. I would like to share an anecdotal experience to emphasize the importance of nesting food security coordination within emergency management.

Leveraging Emergency Management to Aid the Food Crisis

As my office's liaison to Emergency Support Function (ESF) #6 (Mass Care Services), in March 2020, I sat on a Montgomery County Food Council call in which 80 plus organizations were trying to figure out how to quickly shift their operations and adapt their response to meet the growing need for food as the-economic impacts of the shutdown began to take their toll. In a time where none were available, these organizations needed hand sanitizer, gloves, paper bags, and eventually masks to conduct their operations. As an Emergency Manager with knowledge of and access to the WebEOC (Web Emergency Operations Center) platform, I put in resource requests for these supplies. Within the next couple of days the supplies arrived, and we began

disseminating them to providers who were desperate for them. From there, our journey as the FSTF developed.

In addition to providing emergency Food Assistance Providers (FAPs) with PPE, we leveraged these relationships to write a COVID 19 Food Security Response Strategy with input from more than 110 representatives of County government and nonprofit agencies, philanthropists, food assistance providers, the Food Security Community Advisory Board, regional food system experts, entrepreneurs, farms and food producers, community organizations, and residents. Based on the strategy, we provided food and capacity building funding to FAPs so that they could continue to do their critical and lifesaving work. The success of the task force lays in the close and ongoing coordination between the Montgomery County food council, HHS, and Emergency Management.

Food Councils are Critical for Long Short- and Long-Term Response and Recovery

Task forces are temporary. Food councils are permanent and foster stability. While hunger predated COVID, the pandemic has exacerbated it to unprecedented levels. The economic impacts of the pandemic will be felt long after the public health impacts subside. There is no time more vital than now to build the frameworks and invest in the infrastructure that will help us alleviate hunger in MD in the short and long term. We have an opportunity to create a system that can help bring together the efforts and expertise of all Food Councils throughout the state and coordinate a cooperative and resilient network. The nature of this pandemic has caused many jurisdictions to have to recreate the wheel in their response efforts. While each local Food Council will be the sustaining future of food security and equity past the pandemic in their jurisdiction, the proposed Maryland Food System Resiliency Council can be the umbrella organization that helps avoid redundancy, combine efforts, and promote best practices across the state.

Coordination at the State Level is Key

I cannot think of a better place for a Maryland Food System Resiliency Council to sit than within the Maryland Emergency Management Agency. Similar to Food Councils, the role of Emergency management is that of collaboration, coordination, and communication. Having direct access to MEMAC, EMAC, and the expertise that Emergency Management brings to the table, will ensure that this new Council has all the tools it needs for success, and by extension, will alleviate the current hunger felt by hundreds of thousands in MD.

Respectfully, I ask for a favorable report on HB831.

Netta Squires, JD, MSL, CEM, MDPEM, CHEC

Senior Law & Policy Analyst| NCR Emergency Preparedness Specialist
Montgomery County Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security¹
netta.squires@montgomerycountymd.gov
703-981-3808

¹ This letter is not being written on behalf of my organization.