



Ashley Black, Staff Attorney
Public Justice Center
201 North Charles Street, Suite 1200
Baltimore, Maryland 21201
410-625-9409, ext. 224
blacka@publicjustice.org

SB 913

Human Services – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Heat & Eat Program

Hearing of the Senate Finance Committee

February 18, 2021

1:00 PM

SUPPORT

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a not-for-profit civil rights and anti-poverty legal services organization which seeks to advance social justice, economic and racial equity, and fundamental human rights in Maryland. Our Health Rights Project supports policies and practices that promote the overall health of Marylanders struggling to make ends meet, with the explicit goal of promoting strategies that work to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes. PJC strongly supports SB 913, which would establish the Heat and Eat program within the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP) of the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS). It would also require DHS to adopt regulations to implement the program.

In Maryland, 1 in 9 individuals experience food insecurity.¹ SNAP is a lifeline that helps address hunger in low-income households by enabling them to access healthy and nutritious food. Prior to the pandemic, approximately 10.4% of Marylanders participated in the SNAP program during FY 2019.² It is estimated that households who experience food insecurity in Maryland need a total of \$361,501,000 more per year to address their food needs.³ As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many families are now facing unemployment, housing insecurity, and continue to struggle in affording food.

The need for additional food assistance is greater now than ever in Maryland as evidenced by the significant spike in SNAP applications between March and June 2020. In April 2020, DHS received nearly 150,000 SNAP applications, a record level for this program. The declarations of federal and state public health emergencies have allowed DHS to make temporary programmatic changes to address the pandemic, such as developing the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer Program (P-EBT) and changes to allow SNAP recipients flexibilities in applications, interviews, and

¹ Feeding America, Hunger in Maryland, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maryland> (last visited on February 7, 2021).

² Marylanders Against Poverty, 2020 Maryland Poverty Profiles (2020), http://mapadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Maryland-Poverty-Profiles_2020-FINAL.pdf.

³ Feeding America, Hunger in Maryland, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maryland> (last visited on February 7, 2021).

recertification. However, at its current level, the SNAP benefit is still inadequate to address the impact of the pandemic on food insecurity in low-income households.

The Heat and Eat program is a simple and targeted solution that would enable households that receive energy assistance to receive additional SNAP dollars. In December 2019, DHS issued a report to the Maryland General Assembly regarding the Heat and Eat program, stating that approximately 32,690 Marylanders could receive the additional SNAP funding, and that the average increased benefit would be \$59 per household per month according to a 2016 randomized sample.⁴ SB 913, if passed, would hold DHS accountable for finally taking the steps necessary to implement the Heat and Eat program, which would address food insecurity experienced by households that are already struggling to provide for their basic needs, specifically food and energy.

It is time for Maryland to join over a dozen other states that have already implemented the Heat and Eat program. For these reasons, the Public Justice Center urges the committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** report for **SB 913**. If you have any questions, please contact Ashley Black at 410-625-9409 x 224 or blacka@publicjustice.org.

⁴ Maryland Department of Health & Human Services, *Restaurant Meals Program and "Heat and Eat" Program Report - MSAR #12137* (December 1, 2019).