

Written Testimony IN SUPPORT of

Senate Bill 322 for Health and Wellness Standards in Correctional Facilities and Health Care
Facilities

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The finance committee is undoubtedly aware that the dietary choices we make have lasting impacts for our health and our economic wellbeing. From the lessons we learn through our parents, to the lessons we pass down to our children, we try and instill the virtues of healthy, nutritious meals so that we can live long and fulfilling lives. The state has a similar obligation for those under its care. People in correctional and health care facilities deserve access to healthier, more nutritious options, both for their personal dignity and for the state's long term financial benefit.

Good food nourishes and sustains the body and soul. What we cook and eat affirms who we are as individuals. However, this positive relationship with food—an essential part of being human—is denied every day to people in correctional and health care facilities. Typical meals, which are high in salt, sugar, and harmful fats, have immediate and long-term impacts to those in these facilities and the state entities responsible for their care. Lack of access to quality food sends a message to those eating it that the state does not care about them. Cost-cutting measures that sacrifice food quality in the short-term inevitably creates burdensome long-term costs when the state pays for the medical care of preventable food-related illnesses and other chronic conditions.

As the preamble of Senate Bill 322 notes, there is ample evidence that the state will save money in the long-term by improving its nutritional standards in correctional and health facilities. There is strong and increasing evidence that incorporating plant-based foods into our diets lowers the risk of coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes. By decreasing future spending on medical care for diet-related illnesses and disease, the investment in higher nutritional standards will pay for itself and strengthen communities through positive health outcomes long after people leave the state's care.

Over 95% of people who serve time in incarcerated facilities will return to society, and their health upon release will have lasting impacts for themselves and our communities. Addressing nutritional deficiencies, satiating hunger, and restoring human agency by giving incarcerated people some choice in what they eat can profoundly improve physical and mental health. This will prepare people to become fully engaged parents, family members, neighbors, and work

colleagues after release. These outcomes will spur larger improvements in public health and safety, reducing costs in terms of public state health expenditures and private insurance premiums.

In nation-wide surveys,[1] incarcerated people indicate that the food served to them is degrading and inadequate. Less than one-in-six said that they had consistent access to fruits and vegetables. Three-fourths reported receiving trays with spoiled food. Nine-in-ten stated that their meals neither tasted good nor looked appetizing. Over 90% responded that they did not have enough food to feel full. And many inmates who were assigned to work prison kitchens reported serving packages of chicken and beef marked “not for human consumption.” Maryland can, and should, be better than these national trends.

Lack of access to health and nutritional food is also a symptom of a larger systemic malady: our dependence on a dehumanizing criminal justice system to address harm. Lower-income communities of color, who live in areas where affordable healthy food is scarce, disproportionately lose members to prison and then struggle to support them when they return home in worse health. Correctional and health care facilities function as out-of-sight food deserts, perpetuating patterns of poor health in communities that already experience profound inequities.

Senate Bill 322 gives people the fundamental human right to healthy food. Cutting costs by punishing people through inadequate and unhealthy food is short-sighted and costs the state, and our society, more in the long run. These standards should not be viewed as an unearned luxury, but simply a restoration of the basic food needs that every living person deserves. Establishing healthier standards and offering plant-based foods will also help restore the dignity necessary for people to properly rehabilitate or recover in our taxpayer funded facilities. We have the opportunity this session to envision what our facilities are capable of, and we must not allow the inadequate and self-defeating food policies of the past to continue. I urge you to vote yes on Senate Bill 322.

[1] Impact Justice, *Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison*, November 2020, <https://impactjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/IJ-Eating-Behind-Bars-ExecutiveSummary.pdf>.