



February 18, 2021

**2021 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
SB0913: Heat and Eat Program**

BILL: SB0913: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Heat and Eat Program
COMMITTEE: Finance
POSITION: Testimony of Support of Senate Bill 0913
BILL ANALYSIS: Establishing the Heat and Eat Program within the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the Department of Human Services; providing that the purpose of the Program is to expand food access to households that are receiving or eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits; requiring the Department to make a certain determination for a household to receive certain benefits; and requiring the Department to adopt certain regulations.

Dear Chair Kelley and Members of the House Finance Committee:

The Montgomery County Food Council urges you to **SUPPORT** this bill as it seeks to enhance food access for food-insecure Maryland residents and families that rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The “Heat and Eat” program is an existing Federal program that allows certain SNAP-eligible residents to qualify for additional benefits. Through this program, SNAP eligible households that pay utility costs in their rent can receive an annual Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP or MEAP in Maryland) benefit. This benefit automatically qualifies recipients for a “standard utility allowance,” which increases the likelihood that they will be eligible for greater “shelter deductions,” that in turn can give the household access to additional SNAP benefits. In essence, this program supports households with lower incomes by providing both energy and food assistance.

The hunger crisis that has developed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in record-setting SNAP enrollment rates, a 40%+ increase in demand amongst food assistance providers, and supply chain challenges that have left grocery store shelves empty. While food banks and pantries have mobilized to meet the rising need, SNAP continues to be a critical and essential tool for residents to directly purchase culturally appropriate, nutritious food in flexible, dignified, and efficient ways. According to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), on average, nearly 43 million people participated in SNAP in September 2020, up from nearly 38 million in September 2019. It is clear that food access challenges are more prevalent now than ever before, and this legislation, which will bolster food security by increasing a family’s likelihood to qualify for greater SNAP benefits, is critical to addressing hunger in Maryland.

FRAC research shows that each dollar in SNAP benefits spent during an economic downturn generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity, thereby supporting the entire food system and supply chain. Expanding the impact of food supplement program benefits through SB0913 will effectively enhance the economic and food security of our communities, at a time when both businesses and residents are facing ongoing financial hardships.

This bill also addresses the inequities that low-income, Black, Hispanic, and Native American households all face in regards to “energy burdens.” The American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy found that these groups



consistently spend a greater percentage of their income on energy bills, as compared to the average household.¹ These same low-income, Black, Hispanic, and Native American households are at the greatest risk of food insecurity.² Maryland residents--including seniors, families with children, veterans, and people with disabilities-- should not have to choose between keeping their lights on, or keeping their families fed. This bill will simultaneously boost SNAP benefits and address energy assistance for families experiencing food insecurity.

The “Heat & Eat” provision has already been implemented with success in more than 15 states and the District of Columbia to increase the benefits that SNAP recipients can put towards food purchases each month. New York, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania boosted their LIHEAP benefits in 2014 by leveraging federal and state dollars, and effectively increased SNAP benefits for thousands of residents. A 2016 analysis conducted by the Maryland Department of Human Resources found that implementing the Heat & Eat Program could provide nearly 32,000 Marylanders with an average of \$59 per month in additional SNAP benefits.

The passage of SB0913 is an important opportunity for Maryland to connect millions of dollars in Federal funding to our local economy while enhancing food security and providing energy assistance to struggling households. For these reasons, the Montgomery County Food Council supports and urges you to vote **FOR** this bill.

The Montgomery County Food Council is an independent council formed and led by individual community members and representatives of local businesses, government, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions. Our mission is to bring together a diverse representation of stakeholders to improve the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of Montgomery County, Maryland through the creation of a robust, local, sustainable food system. Our vision is to cultivate a vibrant food system in Montgomery County that consciously produces, distributes, and recycles food, making it accessible to all residents while promoting the health of the local food economy, its consumers, and the environment.

For more information, please contact: Heather Bruskin, MCFC Executive Director at the email and phone number below.

¹ American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, 2020. “*Low-Income, Black, Hispanic, and Native American Households Face High Energy Burdens.*”

² Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020. “*Food Insecurity.*”

