



February 11, 2021

Senator Dolores G. Kelley, Chair
Senator Brian J. Feldman, Vice Chair
Senate Finance Committee
3 East Miller Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Subject: SB –322– Health Standards Plant-Based Meals in Prisons & Hospitals

Dear Chair, Vice Chair and Committee:

The Farm to Prison Project was founded in 2018 in order to address the egregiously poor quality of food provision in Maryland’s state-run correctional facilities. Over the past two years, we have conducted IRB approved, in-depth research on food conditions in prisons throughout the state of Maryland, focusing on all aspects of food service such as the availability of fresh produce; the impacts of food on currently and formerly incarcerated individuals’ short- and long-term physical and mental health; the quantity and quality of meals; how poor food conditions create forms of violence; changes in food service over time; and the oftentimes abusive, hostile, and rodent-infested kitchens and eating environments themselves. Our research involved speaking with both currently and formerly incarcerated individuals as well as correctional staff in various facilities across Maryland.

The issues with food provision and industrial food production in Maryland’s prisons are structural, multi-faceted, and ultimately rooted in larger systems of racial and economic oppression. One of the most common themes to arise from our research was that the food served to incarcerated individuals is, at its core, **not fit for human consumption**. Our research uncovered how individuals receive meal portions not enough to feed a child, much less an adult; the almost complete scarcity of fresh produce; the ways in which storage and preparation practices deplete the already-poor nutritional value of food; instances of large groups of people falling sick after consuming spoiled or contaminated foods; and consistent testimonies from individuals who consistently observed cockroaches, mice, rats, insects, and maggots in cooking equipment, the prison dining hall, and even in their own meal trays.

Beyond the incredibly dehumanizing aspects of food service, our research also uncovered the impacts of food on currently and formerly incarcerated individuals’ short- and long-term physical and mental health. Generally speaking, food service in Maryland’s prisons is not nutritious. Meals remain high in sodium, consist primarily on starches and empty calories in order to keep individuals full, and rely almost exclusively on canned produce as opposed to fresh fruits and vegetables. As a result, individuals detailed how food provision not only exacerbates any pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and chronic heart disease, but **instead serves as their root cause**. The

implications of this are profound – the food that the state of Maryland is serving to individuals in their custody induces chronic health conditions that can last for the rest of a person’s life. Significantly, due to this invisible “collateral consequence” of incarceration, **food provision in Maryland’s prison is a form of slow and premature death.**

Furthermore, as the “average length of stay” at a DPSCS-run facility is about 7 years, the implications of such long-term impacts on health extend far beyond the walls of prison to the communities where formerly incarcerated citizens return – many of which again are deprived access to fresh produce due to the material conditions of food apartheid.

In sum, food provision in Maryland’s prisons constitutes a public health and human rights crisis. Instead of serving as a source of nourishment, food is weaponized as a form of control and dehumanization; a tool of violence; and ultimately a means to cut short a person’s life. Truly improving food service in Maryland’s correctional facilities must necessarily include a complete overhaul of the ideologies, material conditions, food systems, policies and procedures, and nutritional guidelines currently shaping the experience of eating in confinement, as well as interrogating the larger oppressive role of prison in our society. One step in this direction would be to increase the availability of plant-based meals available in prison, which bill SB-322 aims to do.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kathuria", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kanav Kathuria
Founder and Executive Director
The Farm to Prison Project