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Extending SNAP Benefits to Students Would Provide Relief to Struggling Young Marylanders

Position Statement Supporting House Bill 1027

Given before the House Appropriations Committee

In an unparalleled time of uncertainty, it is vital that we ensure that students in Maryland have access to the nutrition that they need to survive and thrive. Currently federal waivers have given college students increased access to SNAP benefits amidst the pandemic by removing long standing barriers to eligibility. As the state of emergency, and likewise the waivers, come to an end, there is an effort to dedicate state funding to ensure that the Maryland students who have been relying on this change don't lose access to the nutrition resources that they are relying on. House Bill 1027 proposes that the current federal exemptions (that are temporary as a result of the state of emergency caused by COVID-19) are made permanent by the state of Maryland.ⁱ This would uphold the current expansion of SNAP eligibility to more students who are food-insecure and struggling with hunger, as they face the impending benefit cliff, rising costs of food, and the continued hardship of the COVID-19 pandemic. For these reasons, **the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 1027.**

Most SNAP eligibility rules apply to all households, but there are some special rules for students. Students are considered to be those who are enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education. Under normal SNAP rules, only students who actually participate in a state or federally funded work study are eligible to receive snap benefits. However, the new, temporary federal expansion includes students who are eligible to participate in work study, without the requirement that they actually participate in it. Additionally, the temporary expansion also includes students who have an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of 0.ⁱⁱ EFC considers the taxed and untaxed income, assets, and benefits of the student's family. The issue is that these expansions will only be in effect until 30 days after the federal government lifts the nationwide COVID-19 public health emergency. After that point, the students who have been relying on this current expansion to meet their nutritional needs, will suddenly be without the resources necessary to do so.

Although SNAP is one of the most effective tools to combat hunger, there are a number of food-insecure college students who are excluded from SNAP's benefits. Even before the pandemic, there have been increasing reports of students going hungry on campuses across the country.ⁱⁱⁱ In Maryland, one of the richest states in the country, nearly 100,000 college students were fighting food insecurity even before the pandemic brought additional financial hardship.^{iv} Even in good economic times, too many Maryland students struggled to provide enough food for themselves. A Hope Center study found that, of Maryland's 167,000 two- and four-year students at institutions of higher education, prior to the pandemic, 39% had experienced food insecurity in the previous few weeks. During COVID-19, rates of food insecurity surged, reaching between 42% to 56% among students at two-year institutions and 33% to 42% among those at four-year institutions.^v

In addition to the added financial stress caused by the pandemic, the price of food has risen at rates that have not been seen before in recent history. Reports show that average annual food prices rose by 3.5% between 2019 and 2020. To put this figure in context, over the last 20 years the level of retail food price inflation has been 2% per year. This means that in 2020 the increase was 75% higher than the expected increase.^{vi} While these numbers can be attributed, in part, to the supply-chain issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of rapidly rising food costs is showing no signs of dissipating. This highlights the great need for the current federal student eligibility to remain the way it is going forward in Maryland, as it will be essential in limiting the number of students who experience food insecurity.

Past economic downturns have demonstrated that increased rates of hunger last long after the country goes back to “normal.” This has shown to be especially true for college students, who are often trying to pay for tuition and housing costs without having the time to work full-time. As a result of this, students often don't have the resources to feed themselves.^{vii} When students are food-insecure, they are statistically more likely to drop out of school.

No one should be forced to go hungry because they are pursuing higher education.^{viii} Instead, there should be a special focus on ensuring that students’ nutritional needs are met, as they are often in situations in which they are unable to meet those needs themselves. Studies have shown that hungry students can’t learn if they are distracted by hunger in the classroom. In the same vein, they can’t thrive if they are forced to deal with the stress and anxieties of living with food insecurity. Maryland needs to take this vital step to ensure that college students receive the nutrition support they need to achieve both their educational goals their goals beyond.^{ix}

House Bill 1027 is an important step in ensuring that there are fewer students with food insecurity, allowing them to focus on their education and future. SNAP has proven to be successful in creating more economic security and reduced food insecurity for students in need and can continue to be effective by making sure students receive the food assistance that they need once the state of emergency inevitably comes to an end.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Appropriations Committee give a favorable report to House Bill 1027.

Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 1027

Bill summary

House Bill 1027 proposes that the current federal exemptions (that are temporary as a result of the state of emergency caused by COVID-19) are made permanent by the state of Maryland. This would require the Department of Human Services to provide food supplement benefits to students enrolled in an institution of higher education who are eligible to participate in work study, without the requirement that they actually participate in it, as well as students who have an Expected Family Contribution of 0.

Background

Under normal SNAP rules, only students who actually participate in a state or federally funded work study are eligible to receive snap benefits. However, under the new, temporary expansion, as outlined in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, eligibility is expanded to students who are eligible to participate in work study, without the requirement that they actually participate in it. Additionally, the temporary expansion also includes students who

have an EFC of 0. The issue is that these expansions will only be in effect until 30 days after the federal government lifts the nationwide COVID-19 public health emergency. After that point, the students who have been relying on this current expansion to meet their nutritional needs, will suddenly be without the resources necessary to do just that.

Requiring the Department of Human Services to provide food supplement benefits to the students who meet these less restrictive eligibility requirements would continue to limit food insecurity among Maryland students beyond the pandemic and would prevent the massive reduction that looms for many Maryland students when the public health emergency eventually ends.

Equity Implications

Students of color, first-generation students, low-income students, and students at community colleges are the most likely to experience food insecurity. Approximately 75% of indigenous, 70% of Black, and 70% of American Indian or Alaska Native students reported experiencing hunger, housing insecurity, or homelessness. Breaking down the barriers to higher education in Maryland extends far beyond making college affordable for students of color and first-generation students. If the hunger crisis is ignored on college campuses, we are setting the current and future generations up for failure.^x

House Bill 1027 is a vital step in providing a more equitable, healthy learning environment for those who will shape Maryland's future.

Impact

House Bill 1027 would likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

ⁱ “MDHS Legislative Priorities,” Maryland Hunger Solutions, 2022, <https://www.mdhungersolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MDHS-Legislative-Priorities-2022.pdf>

ⁱⁱ “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Students,” U.S. Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students>

ⁱⁱⁱ Kate, Lisa, “Proposed House bill to expand food stamps for college students,” Hudson Valley 360, 2021, https://www.hudsonvalley360.com/news/nystate/proposed-house-bill-to-expand-food-stamps-for-college-students/article_66aac579-395a-5584-a4fa-c20f6e8a4c81.html

^{iv} “Maryland Could Become Just Third State To Establish Fund Against College Food Insecurity,” Swipe Out Hunger, 2021, <https://www.swipehunger.org/mdhfc/>

^v “New Maryland Law Dramatically Expands Access To SNAP Assistance, Anti-Hunger Services For College Students,” PR Newswire, 2021, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-maryland-law-dramatically-expands-access-to-snap-assistance-anti-hunger-services-for-college-students-301302884.html>

^{vi} “Food Prices and Spending,” The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending/?topicId=1afac93a-444e-4e05-99f3-53217721a8b>

^{vii} “New Maryland Law Dramatically Expands Access To SNAP Assistance, Anti-Hunger Services For College Students,” PR Newswire, 2021, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-maryland-law-dramatically-expands-access-to-snap-assistance-anti-hunger-services-for-college-students-301302884.html>

^{viii} Julia Gross, “Passing a Hunger-Free Campus Bill in Maryland”, Food Research & Action Center, 2021, <https://frac.org/blog/hungerfreecampusmd2021>

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.