



February 4, 2022

**2022 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
HB0456: Supplemental Nutrition
Assistance Program – State Supplement**

BILL: HB0456: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – State Supplement

COMMITTEE: Appropriations

POSITION: Testimony of Support of House Bill 0456

BILL ANALYSIS: This bill aims to: lower from 62 to 60 the minimum age that a member of a household must be for eligibility for a State-provided supplemental benefit under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; increase the amount of the supplemental benefit that the State must provide by increasing the minimum total monthly benefit from \$30 to \$45.

Dear Chair McIntosh,

The Montgomery County Food Council is strongly in favor of HB456 and encourages your support. This bill requires the state to provide a supplemental benefit to adults aged 60 and over who receive less than \$45 through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to a minimum monthly benefit of \$45 a month. The General Assembly has in the past made a similar commitment in 2015 when it enacted legislation to increase the minimum SNAP benefit to \$30 for older Marylanders. In 2017, the Montgomery County Food Security Strategic Plan identified seniors as one of the populations most at risk for food insecurity. With the continued burden of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted readily apparent issues in the food system, it's time to raise it again to protect one of Maryland's most under-resourced populations. In addition, the introduction of the online SNAP program in 2020 enabled benefit recipients to buy groceries online, and the soon to be implemented Restaurant Meals Program allows senior SNAP recipients to use SNAP dollars at restaurants. It is clear that SNAP dollars are increasingly becoming an important source of revenue for local food retailers in addition to being a critical source of funding for food budgets.

Since its establishment in 2012, the Montgomery County Food Council has assisted with SNAP outreach to Marylanders. Prior to the pandemic, our outreach focused largely on increasing the capacity of local programs, knowledge building and resource awareness, and fostering food system leadership, while strengthening a values-based food system. More recently, our initiatives include direct support including through our Food Security Community Advisory Board, who assisted 556 people in finding and utilizing their SNAP benefits in 2021 alone.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen food prices rise at startling rates. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) released that average annual food-at-home prices rose 3.5% from 2019 to 2020 and again at that same rate from 2020 to 2021, exceeding historical records. USDA ERS estimates this trend will continue with 1.5-2.5% increases in food-at-home costs in 2022. While pandemic-caused supply chain issues are causing some of these price increases, it is unclear when and if this trend will end. It is imperative that we provide increased assistance to older adults in step with the rising costs of food, as it is critical toward maintaining their capacity to access a diet that meets their nutritional needs.

Even though individuals utilizing SNAP benefits have been able to receive the maximum allotment for their household during the pandemic, the ill effects of COVID-19 have still led to record high rates of food insecurity, something that will be felt for years to come. Federal public health emergency funds for SNAP benefits are expected to end soon and families will likely see a decrease in their benefit allotments. An older adult household could see their SNAP benefits drop from \$250 to as low as \$30 per month once the emergency allotments end. Older households are at the greatest risk to see their benefits dramatically reduced, as they often have steady sources of income through social security or pension payments. However, many still rely on SNAP to supplement their food budgets and increasing the minimum benefit can soften the sharp reduction many older adults will experience when the public health emergency is declared over.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the critical importance of SNAP, as record numbers of Marylanders benefited from its assistance in the face of rising food prices and rates of food insecurity. As we move toward recovery from the pandemic and look for ways to create a more resilient food system, it is important that the state provide supplemental benefits to this program to make sure older adult Marylanders are not left behind when emergency funding is cut.

Thank you for your consideration, the Montgomery County Food Council urges a favorable report on HB 456.