



March 9, 2022

Chairman and Honorable members of the Appropriations Committee. It is my honor to have the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of Maryland Hunger Solutions, a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to end hunger in the state of Maryland. We work with partners, state agencies, schools and school districts, local community organizations, advocates and activists to improve systems, to utilize local, state and federal programs and to ensure the most effective possible use of systems to address hunger. I am here to testify in support of HB 1352, Food Supplement Benefits - Students - Eligibility (SNAP for Students). We are in favor, with amendment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not just exacerbated the food insecurity issues our state, but it has revealed the systemic gaps and challenges that already existed. In February of 2020 there were nearly 600,000 of our neighbors utilizing SNAP, and even more who were likely eligible but not participating. That was one in ten Maryland residents at a time when the economy seemed to be operating well. In May of 2020, mostly because of the pandemic, that number jumped to the highest number of participants in the state's recorded history; more than 855,000. According to the most recent data from the state Department of Human Services, there are currently 871,410 Marylanders currently utilizing SNAP; another record. Those Marylanders are seniors, veterans, children, disabled residents, unemployed and underemployed folks who are our neighbors, friends and relatives.

Covid-19 has been a disaster in every way; a health disaster, an economic disaster, and a personal disaster to tens of thousands of Marylanders. And while no one would ever want a worldwide pandemic, we have proven to be resilient. At the state and federal level, we have made policy changes, system improvements and learned important lessons that have helped us, not to move back, but to move forward.

Those lessons have been learned in local communities across our state, from other states, from institutions of higher education, from hard-working government employees, and importantly, from people in local communities. One of the policy changes that was made was to ensure that eligible college students can access SNAP. These changes were simple and straightforward. In essence, the USDA stated that the existing ban on SNAP participation for college students does

not apply to students eligible to participate in federal or state work-study programs, or students with an expected family contribution of \$0 – which we all know happens in some families.

According to the Maryland Department of Human Services, approximately 8,513 students took advantage of this temporary expansion of SNAP. In a food system that has more than 871,000 people, it's not a big number, but it contributes to our food system and educational system. Multiplying the current monthly SNAP benefit (which includes the emergency allotment) times this number of participants adds up to \$1.7 million dollars – a month. These are federal dollars that get spent in our grocery stores, at our farmers markets, and in food retailers all across the state of Maryland. These dollars only get spent on food; not on diapers, which some families need, not on aspirin, which is sometimes needed, not even on toilet paper, which everyone needs. SNAP dollars can only be spent on food. SNAP is an investment in the health and the nutrition of our community.

An important point must be noted; college students are not just 17 – 21 years old. They are parents, veterans, and can be of any age. This is especially true at the sixteen community colleges in our state, where many students begin their studies, return to their studies, or are working to improve their skills and education to increase their opportunities in the workplace.

We support this legislation. As an official outreach partner, we provide SNAP application assistance all across the state. Our toll free number is accessed by hundreds looking for help in completing an application, responding to requests regarding their applications, as well as for folks who don't have internet access or need assistance in a language other than English. We know that the important changes that were made during the pandemic are helpful to college students, and we believe that they should be continued.

We also know that the food insecurity that exists on college campuses is not relegated only to students. One student once said to me that her favorite visitors to the campus pantry were the security guards. The low-income folks on campuses aren't just guards. They work in food services, as contractors, in maintenance, even some adjuncts, who are part-time, don't have health care and are financially eligible. This is why we supported HB 891, the Hunger Free Campus program, which was enacted last year. This legislation created a matching grant program, so that campuses who developed campus-wide initiatives anti-hunger initiatives could apply for and be considered for a matching grant.

The problem is that the program was underfunded and reduced during consideration. The \$150,000 that was approved is not much, not when you consider that there are 55 colleges in the state of Maryland. I won't list them all here, but each and every Member of this committee knows of local universities and community colleges in your community. We believe that when considering the SNAP for Students Act, it is also timely to increase funding for the Hunger Free

Campus program. This is an opportunity to ensure that we invest in our campuses – and not just in our students – by making sure that the matching grant program is fully funded and can support programs across our state. We believe that making the matching grant program fully funded at \$300,000 will ensure that every campus that can devise a program and put their own dollars in, should have an opportunity to apply for matching funds.

It's important to understand that as we make systemic changes to our food system, that we are intentional about ensuring equity in the system. Equity doesn't happen by accident, and historic inequities have built into our food system for generations. Should we ensure that eligible college students have access to the SNAP program. Yes we should. But shouldn't also make sure that we are addressing food insecurity on the campus in a comprehensive way? Yes we should.

It is in that spirit that I urge your support for this legislation, with additional funding for the Hunger Free Campus Grant Program

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to responding to your questions.