



**TESTIMONY OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES FORUM:
ADVOCACY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND**

**BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
ON SB 121, THE “FARM TO FOOD SECURITY ACT”:
MARYLAND FARMS AND FAMILIES FUND,
MARYLAND FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL RESILIENCY MECHANISM GRANT PROGRAM,
MARYLAND FARM-TO-SCHOOL MEAL GRANT PILOT PROGRAM -
ALTERATIONS AND ESTABLISHMENT
JANUARY 25, 2022**

FAVORABLE

The Critical Issues Forum: Advocacy for Social Justice (CIF), provides this testimony in support of SB 121. CIF is a coalition of three synagogues, Temple Beth Ami, Kol Shalom, and Adat Shalom, with over 1750 households affiliated with three denominations of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. For the past six years, CIF has advocated for effective solutions to food insecurity in Maryland. We urge the Senate to pass SB 121, to effect a more integrated, sustainable food system in Maryland.

The production of sustainable, locally grown foods is a key element to providing long-term food security in our communities. Ready access to such foods will not only benefit the people consuming them, but will also benefit local farmers and the environment. And local food production reduces the economic impact of transporting food from distant locations.

Food insecurity rates nearly doubled in Maryland during the pandemic. Data from Maryland Hunger Solutions show that more than 1 in 10 households in Maryland suffered food insecurity in 2020, or about 700,000 individuals. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) dashboard indicates that food insecurity in Maryland currently among women is 9.7%, among Blacks is 10.8%, and among Latinx is 23%. Such rates and disparities of food insecurity are unconscionably high in one of the wealthiest states in the country.

Food insecurity particularly during the pandemic has been aggravated by the lack of a sustainable, localized food system. In the last two years, the over-reliance on supply chains that extend for thousands of miles adversely impacted not just grocery stores, but also food banks

and emergency providers of food to low-income individuals. Agriculture represents Maryland's largest commercial industry, employing more than 350,000 residents including 6,000 full-time farms, and contributing more than \$8 billion annually to the State's economy. More needs to be done to promote a strong, resilient "farm-to-table" food system that, at any given time, can provide a reliable source of affordable, nutritious food to Maryland residents.

The Farm to Food Security Act invests in three programs to enhance a local, integrated food system: (1) Increases Maryland Market Money, (2) Creates the Maryland Food and Agricultural Resiliency Mechanism, and (3) Pilots a Farm-to-School Meal Grant program.

First, this bill would increase the annual State allocation to the **Maryland Farms and Families Program (Maryland Market Money)** from \$100,000 to \$300,000 in FY 2024 and subsequent years. Maryland farmers markets use Maryland Market Money to match SNAP and WIC benefits (typically in amounts from \$20 - \$50), thus increasing access to local, fresh, healthy foods, diversifying the customer base of farmers markets, and improving the economic viability of Maryland farmers who are vendors at the markets. Since its inception in 2013, this program has provided more than \$1 million in matching funds to alleviate food insecurity.

Second, this bill would create the **Maryland Food and Agricultural Resiliency Mechanism Fund (MD FARM Fund)** to mitigate the economic hardships and supply chain issues experienced during the covid-19 pandemic. This program is modeled after successful programs in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, New York, and Virginia. The purpose of the Fund is to provide grants to food banks and charitable emergency food providers for the procurement of local surplus, seasonal, or contractual agricultural food products; the processing and preparation of such agricultural food products for distribution and; the transportation of such agricultural food products. The Governor's budget would include \$1,250 million for FY 2024 and each year thereafter for the Fund.

Third, this bill would launch the **Farm-to-School Meal Grant Pilot Program**, which would authorize Maryland school districts to apply for grants of 20 cents for every meal served that includes a Maryland food component. The pilot program aims to incentivize the production, procurement, and provision of local foods in school meals. In awarding grants, school districts that demonstrate arrangements that support minority or socially disadvantaged producers shall be prioritized. The governor's budget would include \$500,000 for FY 2024 and FY 2025 for the Farm-to-School Meal Grant Fund.

HB 147 provides sensible, proactive programs that would utilize Maryland farms to assure a more reliable food supply, thus bringing more availability and equity to Maryland consumers.

The Critical Issues Forum: Advocacy for Social Justice respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 121.

