

**March 15, 2022**

**SB 971**

**Education – Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program – School Lunch**

**Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee**

**Senate Budget and Taxation Committee**

**Position: Support**

Senate Bill 971 provides no cost lunch for all students enrolled at schools which receive a per pupil grant under the Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program. The Maryland Food Bank would also support the inclusion of free breakfast, as well. Additionally, it aims to continue no cost meals for all Maryland students during the 2022-2023 school year in the absence of any federal waiver to provide the same. It also encourages county school systems to apply for the federal Community Eligibility Provision and any other federal meal reimbursement programs.

The Maryland Food Bank estimates that 1 in 3 Marylanders are at risk of food insecurity. A person who is food insecure does not have consistent access to healthy and nutritious food on any given day, and this problem persists in every area of the state. There are also communities and populations who are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, such as families with children.

The Maryland Food Bank knows the importance of providing nutritious and consistent meals to students, particularly those whose families may be considered food insecure. We participate in USDA programming to provide after-school meals through our Supper Club and meals over the summer to students who receive free- and reduced-price meals through our Summer Club, totaling over 530,000 meals between the two programs in FY 21. We also served the equivalent of almost 2.3 million meals to students through our School Pantry program in FY 21, providing a reliable source of healthy foods to families and food insecure communities through partnerships with local schools. In support of these efforts, we found that 87% of Marylanders are motivated by our work to address childhood hunger. SB 971 is a tangible way for the State to tackle this issue, as well.

Reducing barriers to accessing healthy food for children in particular is critical to their developmental and academic success. Providing meals to all students at no cost to families, many of whom were economically unstable prior to the pandemic and for whom the pandemic exacerbated their needs, reduces any perceived stigma around receiving food assistance, increases health outcomes, and supports students' ability to concentrate and learn in the classroom. The Maryland Food Bank feels strongly that no child should have uncertainty around where their next meal will come from. With 3 out of 4 Marylanders recognizing that hunger exists in their communities and 74% wanting the State to invest more dollars to address hunger, there is clear support and an urgent need to pass a bill like SB 971 to provide all children with access to healthy meals on a regular and predictable basis.

The Maryland Food Bank appreciates your consideration and respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 971.