



January 19, 2022

Mr. Chair and honorable members of the Environment and Transportation Committee. It is my honor to have the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of Maryland Hunger Solutions, a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit 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 possible effective use of systems to address hunger. I am here to testify in support of HB 147

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. Even today, there are more than 800,000 Maryland families, representing seniors, veterans, children, disabled residents and 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. We have made policy changes, system improvements and learned important lessons that have helped us 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 community activists in local communities.

Today, I am here to testify in support of the HB 147, the Farm to Food Security Act, which is intended to enhance resiliency and to address food insecurity. The essential elements of the legislation are to pilot a Farm to School grant program, to create the Maryland Food and Agricultural Resilience Mechanism, and to increase the funding for Maryland Market Money. Taken together, they will provide additional resources for schools, local Maryland Farms, and to low-income Marylanders who have been deemed eligible for SNAP, WIC and School meal programs through pandemic-EBT.

I would like to focus the essence of my remarks on increasing Maryland Market Money, and it's potential to address the food insecurity and the health of low-income Marylanders by expanding their ability to choose local farm products by investing in Maryland Market Money.

Our farmers markets are not just places to shop. They are literally the physical place where rural Maryland, suburban Maryland, and urban Maryland come together. When we add additional funding to Maryland Market Money, we can make sure that those markets also include SNAP participants. These critical investments not only encourage farmers market shopping, they also provide additional dollars to farmers who sell their products at the markets. It's not just a two-fer – these dollars are spread throughout the Maryland food system. We have communicated with the program administrators and they have not only reiterated their commitment to ensuring that the increased dollars flow to SNAP customers, but have also updated the Farmers Market MOU to ensure that the existing \$10 match is a minimum and not a maximum. This will ensure that as the funding for Maryland Market increases, the increases will be shared with low income participants.

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. Will adding more dollars to Maryland Market Money end historic discrimination and inequities in our food system? No. But it is a small step in the right direction. It's also important that we recognize the inequities and work to address them.

We still have a long way to go. And it is entirely appropriate this week while many of us celebrated the federal holiday celebrating the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

In 1964, in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said, "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits."

It is in that spirit that I urge your support for this legislation.

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