



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 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 1352, Health and Wellness Standards – Correctional Facilities. 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 approximately 871,410 Marylanders currently utilizing SNAP. Those Marylanders are seniors, veterans, children, disabled residents, unemployed and underemployed folks who are our neighbors, friends and relatives.

The challenges faced by the people who are incarcerated is also severe. And the proposal to update standards for their food services is welcome. In addition, mandating vegetarian options gives greater choice and opportunities for intentional nutrition for a population that has very little choice in their food selection. That is a step forward and we support it.

However, the proposed mandatory meatless Mondays is a step back. Incarcerated Marylanders should not have choices taken away, which is what this part of the legislation does. If the first part of the bill successfully offers vegetarian options, then this provision should be unnecessary. But when a population that has no voice, no opportunity to choose, and no ability to vote has this imposed on them, it is not an option; it's simply another rule that is forced on the incarcerated population. In addition, it's quite clear given the racial composition of the population, that making choices are being made for a population that is overwhelmingly Black and Brown, and denying them an opportunity to make choices for themselves.

It is our hope that the mandate will be dropped, and that the option will go forward. That will provide nutrition and choice to folks who are lacking in both.

Once again, in summary, we support HB 1352 with amendment, the proviso being that the mandated meatless Monday not be included.

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