

March 7, 2022

**2022 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
HB1352: Health and Wellness
Standards – Correctional Facilities**

BILL: HB1352: Health – Health and Wellness Standards – Correctional Facilities
COMMITTEE: Health and Government Operations
POSITION: Testimony of Support of House Bill 1352

Honorable Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record in support of H.B. 1352. This letter is submitted by Chloe Waterman, Senior Program Manager at Friends of the Earth and member of the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council (MD FSRC) and Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC), Co-Chair of the MD FSRC. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Council, and do not necessarily represent the views of Friends of the Earth, MCFC, or the State of Maryland. The Food System Resiliency Council was established by the Maryland General Assembly during the 2021 legislative session to bring together 33 appointed council members from across the state, all with different points of entry and expertise to work toward a more resilient food system and address the food insecurity crisis due to COVID-19.

HB 1352 would require nutrition standards to be established for correctional facilities, require religious meal options and plant-based food options for people who request them, and conduct a pilot program in four facilities to offer a plant-based meal option at each meal one day per week.

The FSRC believes this legislation will advance several of our priority goals, including:

- **Addressing and eliminating diet-related public health disparities**

People who are incarcerated in Maryland disproportionately suffer from diet-related chronic diseases. Yet, right now, Maryland does not have meaningful nutrition standards for meals served in correctional facilities, and people who are incarcerated are not always able to access foods that are nutritionally appropriate or that meet their religious, ethical, personal, or other dietary needs. As documented in a [2021 report from the Maryland Food and Prison Abolition Project](#), the carceral food environment in Maryland constitutes a human rights crisis. Their research found that food unfit for human consumption was routinely being served, that food was regularly used as a tool for violence, and that the quality and nutritional content of meals was unacceptably poor. This legislation is only one small part of what is needed to reform the carceral food environment in Maryland, but at the very least, the state must establish health and wellness standards consistent with current scientific nutrition guidelines and ensure people who are incarcerated have access to meals that are consistent with their religious, ethical, personal, and dietary needs.

This legislation will also establish a pilot program in four facilities where plant-based meals will be served at least one day per week to everyone, and at every meal for those who request it. An analysis of two weeks of menus provided by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) showed that people incarcerated are being given twice as much meat, poultry, and eggs as the maximum recommended by the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGAs) for a 2,000 calorie diet. This legislation

calls for one day a week to be plant-based for all people incarcerated, which will bring DPSCS closer to compliance with the dietary guidelines. The DGAs identify low-meat, Mediterranean style and no-meat, vegetarian diets as viable options for a healthy nutritious diet. The American Cancer Society has long recommended “a diet that limits processed meat and red meat, and that is high in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains,” and the American College of Lifestyle Medicine states that “eating more unrefined, plant-based foods is an important strategy in prevention of chronic disease, management of chronic conditions, and promotion of overall health.”

The FSRC would like to note that ideally people who are incarcerated would always have multiple choices for meals, including both a plant-based option and an option including animal products. We hope to see future legislation that not only improves the nutritional quality of meals but also expands options for people who are incarcerated. Until then, we believe this bill will strike a more nutritionally appropriate and desirable balance between animal-based and plant-based meals served by the pilot facilities.

- **Addressing and eliminating racial inequities in the food system**

As of 2019, Maryland shamefully has the [largest rate](#) of incarceration for African Americans (70 percent) compared to the state population (30 percent). This means that African Americans are disproportionately harmed by the poor quality of food in prisons. Improving prison food can help to mitigate the racial health disparities in the state, as well as between incarcerated and non-incarcerated people.

- **Reducing food waste, increasing recycling, and encouraging other relevant environmental impacts.**

The provisions in the legislation to create a plant-based pilot project in four facilities will also benefit Maryland’s climate goals since plant-based foods tend to be [significantly less carbon-intensive](#) than animal-based foods. As we note in our [interim report](#), “Because agriculture is and will be so acutely affected by the impacts of our changing environment, it behooves Marylanders to fully engage in seeking ways to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and focus production on climate-friendly crops, such as those that support plant-based diets.”

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support of H.B. 1352. This bill would benefit Maryland’s incarcerated population by improving the nutritional quality of meals offered and accommodating religious, ethical, and other dietary preferences.

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