



February 13, 2023

2023 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
HB0323: Eligibility and Enrollment for Social Services Programs

BILL: HB0323: Social Services Programs - Eligibility and Enrollment
COMMITTEE: Economic Matters
POSITION: Testimony in Support of House Bill 0323
BILL ANALYSIS: Requiring the Department of Human Services enroll individuals, who meet financial eligibility requirements, in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); requiring the Office of Home Energy Programs to enroll individuals, based on eligibility, in Office of Home Energy assistance programs; and altering the eligibility requirements for the electric universal service program to provide assistance to customers with annual incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.

Dear Chair Wilson and Members of the Economic Matters Committee:

The Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC) urges you to **SUPPORT** this bill to require the Department of Human Services to automatically enroll eligible individuals into the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other social services programs, to reduce the burden on Maryland families who have a right to these benefits, as well as easing the administrative burden for the state and benefitting the state's economy.

This bill comes at a critical time for Maryland families experiencing poverty. The hunger crisis that developed during the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in record-setting SNAP enrollment rates throughout the state, an over 40% increase in demand amongst regional food assistance providers, and significant supply chain challenges that left grocery store and food bank shelves empty. Families experiencing food insecurity face an even greater challenge with SNAP emergency allotments set to expire in mere weeks, and the sky-rocketing price of food due to inflation. It is critical that people have easy access to all available services and benefits.

The Montgomery County Food Council is a state-funded SNAP Outreach Organization that helps people navigate the difficult process of applying for SNAP. Our SNAP Outreach Team speaks to SNAP recipients every day who are not taking advantage of other benefits, such as energy assistance, because they are unaware of the programs or are intimidated by the time and effort it would take to apply. Categorical eligibility for other benefits will help ease the burden of applying for those



P.O. Box 32212 | Bethesda, MD 20814 | 310-637-7071
mocofoodcouncil.org | info@mocofoodcouncil.org

benefits, and provide Maryland residents with greater support so that they do not have to choose between feeding their families, heating their homes or seeking medical care.

The implementation of categorical eligibility will save the state of Maryland both time and money while allowing resources to be dedicated elsewhere. Automatic enrollment will eliminate the time-consuming process of determining eligibility and verifying application information. Furthermore, programs like SNAP and Energy Assistance bring federal dollars into the local economy and spur further economic growth. Every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates as much as \$1.80 in local economic activity. It is important that this process is undertaken immediately so that the state of Maryland can maximize the potential economic benefits this bill will provide and navigate future emergencies.

We strongly support this bill to establish categorical eligibility for social services programs. The SNAP program, as well as many other social service programs, are a vital part of the Maryland economy. As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, the state's most vulnerable residents need these programs more than ever. The implementation of categorical eligibility is an opportunity to help Maryland's most vulnerable residents, boost the Maryland economy, and continue to create safety nets for any future issues the state might face. **For these reasons, the Montgomery County Food Council supports HBo323 and urges a FAVORABLE REPORT for this bill.**

The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for the over 100,000 at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County's farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources

For more information, please contact Massa Cressall, Interim Executive Director, at the email and phone number below.



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mocofoodcouncil.org | info@mocofoodcouncil.org