



**Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony in Support of HB323
Social Services Programs - Eligibility and Enrollment
February 16, 2023**

TO: The Honorable C.T. Wilson, Chair; The Honorable Brian Crosby, Vice Chair; and Members of the Economic Matters Committee

FROM: Dr. Jeffery Johnson, Chair, Montgomery County Community Action Board

The Montgomery County Community Action Board, the County's local, state, and federally designated anti-poverty group, supports HB323. This bill provides for what is often referred to as "categorical eligibility" for both SNAP and energy assistance programs, allowing for automatic enrollment in SNAP for those who are eligible for SSI and automatic enrollment in fuel and utility assistance programs for those who are eligible for SNAP, TANF, SSI, or Means-Tested Veterans Benefits.

Access to services is an important priority for our board. Montgomery County residents, and lower-income Marylanders across the state, face numerous challenges applying for and receiving critical services. We regularly hear from participants in our advocacy training program for lower-income County residents, the Community Advocacy Institute, about how complex our human services system is and how difficult it is to access important programs. For those who lack reliable transportation, child care, access to technology, or paid time off from work, and especially for those who do not speak English as their first language, the challenges are particularly great. Opportunities to simplify application processes, like those proposed in this bill, are therefore extremely beneficial for residents.

In response to the challenges noted above, our own Community Action Agency helped to create a navigation program within the County's Department of Health and Human Services. Residents work with a highly trained navigator to access a wide range of public and private resources, including food and nutrition programs, housing assistance, energy assistance, Medical Assistance, and child care support. Culturally competent staff work with all members of household to assess their needs and link them with services, thus utilizing a whole family, 2Generation approach that is considered a best practice in the human services field. Categorical eligibility can make the navigation model even better by eliminating the need for multiple, repetitive applications and extensive documentation to prove eligibility.

Lower-income County residents already face so many challenges struggling to afford the basic necessities in an area with such a high cost of living. The Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Standard for a household with two working adults, one preschooler, and one school-age child is an astounding \$122,943, over four times the federal poverty level.¹ County families therefore need better supports in place, including easier access to services like SNAP and energy assistance. We ask the Committee for a favorable report for HB323 and to consider other policy changes that would allow for categorical eligibility for important programs and services.

¹ <https://maryland-cap.org/the-maryland-2023-self-sufficiency-standard-calculator/>