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January 26, 2023

The Honorable Kumar P. Barve
Chair, House Environment and Transportation Committee
Room 251, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: HB 8: Counties and State Legislative Districts- Food Environment Reports

Dear Chair Barve and Committee Members:

The Maryland State Advisory Council on Health and Wellness (the Council) respectfully submits this letter of support with amendments concerning House Bill 8 (HB 8), titled “Counties and State Legislative Districts- Food Environment Reports.”

HB 8 requires the Department of Housing and Community Development, in partnership with other agencies, to produce Food Environment Reports for all of Maryland counties and state legislative districts every two years. These reports will utilize metrics to determine food insecurity zones within each jurisdiction, including a healthy food availability index, information on grocery stores selling fresh produce, and information about participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

As the statewide advisory body on issues related to chronic disease prevention and management, the Council is encouraged by the potential benefits of HB 8. Healthy eating is crucial for maintaining good health and reducing the risk of chronic diseases.¹ The Food Environment Reports will consolidate information on equitable access to healthy foods throughout the state of Maryland, considering access for all residents, including SNAP and WIC recipients. Just 8.6 percent of Maryland adults eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables per day.² Adults and children who experience food insecurity are even less likely to eat sufficient servings of fruits and vegetables.³ Food insecurity is also associated with greater risk for developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and arthritis.^{4,5}

The Food Environment Reports resulting from HB 8 will provide public and private agencies with crucial information they need to target resource and service delivery to ensure healthy food access for all and reduce health disparities across the state. Given the great potential of HB 8 to improve healthy food access in Maryland, the Council suggests the following amendments to ensure the Food Environment Reports have maximum utility and impact.

¹ Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025

https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf

² BRFSS 2021 <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/fvcombo/state/MD>

³ <https://academic.oup.com/tbm/article/10/6/1297/6075148?login=true>

⁴ Gregory CA, Coleman-Jensen A. [Food Insecurity, Chronic Disease, and Health Among Working-Age Adults](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84467/err-235.pdf?v=653.9). U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. 2017 Jul. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84467/err-235.pdf?v=653.9>

⁵ Mancino, L., Gregory, C.A. Food-Insecure Households Score Lower on Diet Quality Compared to Food-Secure Households. 2020 Mar.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2020/march/food-insecure-households-score-lower-on-diet-quality-compared-to-food-secure-households/>

Food Environment Reports should include information regarding:

- Population demographics, density, and transportation access in the jurisdiction to provide a more complete picture of healthy food access.
- Healthy food pricing, as availability of healthy foods in the jurisdiction may not guarantee such foods are affordable.
- Farmer's markets and farm stands in the jurisdiction, and whether those outlets accept SNAP and WIC.

In addition to the amendments listed above, the Council recommends Food Environment Reports be posted publicly on the Department of Housing and Community Development website, release of reports be publicized to ensure the general public and interested agencies are aware of the information, and information about how the reports are being used to improve healthy food access.

The Council respectfully asks this Committee to approve HB 8 with the proposed amendments to improve access to healthy foods statewide and contribute to better health outcomes for all Maryland residents.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jessica Kiel". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Jessica Kiel, M.S., R.D., Chair, State Advisory Council on Health and Wellness