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DEPUTY MAJORITY WHIP

Economic Matters Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates  
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

January 26, 2023

**Testimony of Delegate Marlon Amprey in support of HB 8  
Counties and State Legislative Districts – Food Environment Reports**

Dear Chairman Barve and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

Healthy food priority areas (formerly called “food deserts”) in low-income, predominantly Black and Brown communities contribute to malnutrition and perpetuate the cycle of chronic disease. These areas are defined as regions with the following characteristics: Distance to the supermarket is more than ¼ mile, median household income is at or below 185% federal poverty level, no vehicles in over 30% of households, and low average Healthy Food Accessibility Index (HFAI). In Maryland, 1 in 3 people face food insecurity. Approximately 167,020 out of 543,650 Marylanders facing hunger are children. These numbers are devastating, and serve as an urgent call for action for a multitude of reasons.

Citizens that live in healthy food priority areas suffer from higher rates of poverty and malnutrition. It is important to recognize that the term malnutrition does not just refer to undernutrition, but also refers to obesity. Populations that do not have access to healthy, nutritious food options can suffer the devastating health effects of both ends of the malnutrition spectrum. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, obesity has been associated with a 50% increased chance of death. Meanwhile, undernourished people have weakened immune systems, which could make fighting off infection and disease much harder. Food insecurity has been linked to higher incidences of chronic disease such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, kidney disease, and depression. This is associated with increased healthcare costs and utilization—in Maryland alone, food insecurity is estimated to incur over \$925 million in excess healthcare costs annually. By failing to provide our communities with basic access to healthy food for themselves and for their families, we are failing their future health outcomes and effectively their ability to thrive as members of society. Food and nutrition is fundamental to our well-being, and we need to invest in policies that promote food equity.

According to the USDA, as policymakers consider interventions to increase food access, it is important to understand the characteristics associated with these areas, such as income, vehicle availability, and access to public transportation. Detailed food environment reports conducted in conjunction with the Baltimore City Department of Planning and the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future have provided this kind of invaluable information so that

policymakers can identify potential solutions to inequities in food access. As an example of the detail provided in these reports, the Baltimore City's 2018 Food Environment Report found about 23.5% of residents live in Healthy Food Priority Areas, children are the most likely of any age group to live in a Priority Area (28%), and black residents are the most likely of any racial or ethnic group to live in a Priority Area (31.5%). Since 2015, about 5,000 fewer residents live in Healthy Food Priority Areas, as a result of a new supermarket opening. The report also offers an updated and more comprehensive description of other elements of the food environment, including nutrition assistance programs and urban agriculture, to highlight additional points of access to healthy food. This information is critical in creating policy that may incentivize grocery stores or other community-based food vendors to establish locations in areas with the most need.

As we attempt to tackle the problem of inequity in terms of access to nutritious food, we must take a step back and remember that this is an immensely complex problem rooted in a variety of systemic issues. From structural racism to inequities in the transportation system, the food access issue in Maryland is multifaceted and requires deep investigation of the current issues at hand. This is impossible to do without a substantial investment in research. Data points are critical in informing effective policy, and if we truly want to make a difference in our communities, we must take an evidence-based approach. The reports offered by the Baltimore City Department of Planning and the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future offer invaluable insights into the ground-level needs of the community. This type of research must be replicated throughout all districts in Maryland so that we can begin the critical journey of improving access to nutritious food for all using a systems-based approach. It is important to consult the necessary stakeholders in order to make recommendations on cost-effective methods for creating similar food environment reports at the county level. Access to healthy food is a basic human right, and we must act now to advocate for our communities.

**I urge a favorable report on House Bill 8.**

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marlon Amprey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Marlon" and last name "Amprey" clearly distinguishable.

Delegate Marlon Amprey  
40<sup>th</sup> Legislative District of Maryland