



## CARE BRAVELY

HB152 - Department of Agriculture – Urban Agriculture Grant Fund

House Environment and Transportation Committee – February 8, 2023

Testimony of Martha D. Nathanson, Esq., Vice President, Government Relations and Community Development LifeBridge Health

Position: **SUPPORT**

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I am writing in SUPPORT of HB152. LifeBridge Health is a regional health system comprising Sinai Hospital of Baltimore, an independent academic medical center; Levindale Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore; Northwest Hospital, a community hospital in Baltimore County; Carroll Hospital, a sole community hospital in Carroll County, and; Grace Medical Center in Baltimore (formerly Bon Secours Hospital).

Every three years, hospitals conduct Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNA) to glean their communities' priorities for health care. In 2021, our communities identified, among more traditional health issues such as diabetes, heart disease and health insurance, access to affordable, healthy food as one of their major challenges to achieving positive health outcomes. In addition, during the CHNA process, our communities identified jobs as a key challenge. As part of our CHNA response to our communities' identified needs, we developed an implementation plan for enhancing food access.

Our plan focuses on identifying ways to make healthy food more affordable and accessible for the many residents in our hospital service areas who live in low-income census tracts and/or designated food deserts. The lack of access to healthy food contributes to multiple poor health outcomes and to the inability to effectively manage chronic diseases. Incidence rates of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity are significantly higher in Baltimore City than in Maryland overall. This fact contributes to potentially avoidable hospitalizations and poorer quality of life for members of our communities. Our approach seeks to improve healthy food availability by supporting programs that enhance the quality, quantity, variety, price and location of healthy foods. We aim to improve access to healthy food by addressing such barriers as transportation and affordability. We want to improve the ability of residents to use healthy foods by supporting food literacy, cooking ability, and access to cooking facilities. Finally, we aim to support initiatives that ensure the sustainability of healthy food access and availability.

The grant program will allow for supply to be ensured as it expands capacity and effectiveness of urban farms. The food produced can serve needs throughout a local community and depending on size of the farm and volume, even a region, satisfying the goal of enhancing access to locally grown healthy food. It will also at least indirectly create job opportunities for individuals trained in urban agriculture and potentially lead to career opportunities in a variety of related fields. In addition, urban gardens create a focal point in their communities, creating productive gathering spaces.

For all the above stated reasons, we request a **FAVORABLE** report for HB152.

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