

Statement of Kari Keaton
House Ways and Means Committee
January 24, 2023
Position: FAVORABLE HB 78

Dear Chair Atterbeary and members of the Ways and Means Committee:

I live in Rockville, Maryland, and I am a parent of two sons with life threatening (anaphylactic) food allergies, each of them to multiple foods. Between the two of them, they have allergies to 6 of the 9 major allergens. I am here to strongly support House Bill 78. My sons are now 30 and 24 years-old, so they are long past their days in Montgomery County Public Schools. I am thankful that they avoided serious food reactions during their time in public school, which required many meetings with school personnel each school year to ensure their proper care and safety.

I think I first testified before this committee in 2007 on a bill that required the development of Maryland State School Health Services Guideline for Management of Students at Risk for Anaphylactic Reaction. I participated on the committee with the Department of Education and the Department of Health & Mental Hygiene to develop the state guidelines which were published in 2009. School districts were encouraged to use the state guidelines to develop their own guidelines, but I understand that this didn't happen in all of the school districts in the state, hence the need for this new bill to require them to do so.

Since 1999 I have been a member, and for most of that time, the facilitator for the Metro DC Food Allergy Support Group. We started with 7 families, grew to 300 families and currently still have 150 active families. The group is composed of parents of food-allergic kids sharing information on managing all aspects of life with a food-allergic child. We have members that live in several Maryland counties. Many parents join the group when they are about to send their child to school for the first time to get help on how to ensure their child's safety from food-allergic reactions. Over the years, this topic has been the most discussed on our group's active listserv and at monthly meetings. If there were published guidelines in each school district they would provide the starting point for parents to prepare for their meetings with their child's school. These meetings need to happen every year as there are always changes that occur that need to be discussed and care plans must be updated.

The second most discussed topic among our support group members is restaurant dining. House Bill 78 goes further than the 2009 published state guidelines by requiring the labeling of ingredients of all food served in the school cafeteria. I fully support this addition to the school guidelines. This labeling is required by federal law for all packaged foods, and many restaurants have voluntarily started publishing the major food allergens in their food. While my sons did not eat any cafeteria food during their public school life, I did learn the value of this kind of menu labeling when one of my sons attended UMBC and the food service there did publish the ingredients of the food, including highlighting the major food allergens. My son was able to eat safely at the UMBC dining hall. I am very thankful that Delegate Palakovich Carr included this in the bill so that kids in public school can eat safely in their cafeteria. House Bill 78 outlines all areas that need to be addressed to ensure safety of food-allergic students at school. I ask the committee for a favorable report on HB 78.