



**TESTIMONY OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES FORUM (CIF) OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
BEFORE THE HOUSE WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE
IN SUPPORT OF HB 628: BREAKFAST AND LUNCH PROGRAMS - UNIVERSAL EXPANSION
FEBRUARY 22, 2023**

FAVORABLE

CIF is a coalition of three synagogues in Montgomery County, Kol Shalom, Adat Shalom, and Temple Beth Ami, that include over 1750 households and three denominations of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. CIF serves as a vehicle for our congregations to speak out on policy issues, such as food insecurity, that relate to our shared values, including the Jewish traditions that emphasize the sanctity and primacy of human life. CIF provides this testimony in support of HB 628, which would provide State funding for free breakfasts and lunches in many Maryland schools beginning in FY 2025.

CIF recognizes that even before the COVID pandemic, there were a large number of families, particularly families of color, that struggled with food insecurity. The pandemic only increased the number of families struggling with covering basic human needs, such as food. According to the FRAC dashboard of August 2022 (based on the USDA Household Pulse Survey), 14.9% of Black households, 16.3% of Latinx households, and 13.8% of households with a high school education or less in Maryland were food insufficient. Recent inflation and rising food costs have been particularly challenging for families with limited incomes. Research shows that hungry children do not learn as well as children who are well nourished, and hunger also affects their physical and emotional well-being. Food Research and Action Center (2021), "School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning," available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>.

HB 628 would ensure that all schools participating in the Federal School Breakfast Program or National School Lunch Program would continue providing free breakfast and lunch to all their students, as they did during the Public Health Emergency. The bill thus builds off the important investments made in the 2019 Blueprint for Maryland's Future by supporting equity in the classroom and ensuring that every child has the nutrition he or she needs in order to excel. Offering universal free meals not only assures that each child has a minimum level of nourishment, but also removes the stigma associated with means-tested school meals programs, opens the program to families not currently eligible due to the low-income cutoff, ends unpaid school meal debt, and eliminates administrative burdens for schools.

CIF requests a favorable report on HB 628.

