



February 2, 2024

**Testimony in Support of HB0666
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - State Supplement
Appropriations Committee**

Dear Chair Delegate Ben Barnes, Vice Chair Delegate Mark S. Chang, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for granting me the opportunity to speak before you today. I am Shelby Watson-Hampton, the Director of the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission (SMADC), a division of the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland, and a farmer in Prince George's County, Maryland. SMADC is dedicated to supporting farms, farmers, and the future of agriculture by fostering a dynamic and sustainable food system that is economically viable for farmers, empowering for communities, and environmentally responsible.

I am here to discuss the Maryland Market Money (MMM) program, a statewide initiative by SMADC and the Maryland Department of Agriculture aimed at addressing food access issues in the state. This program supports both Marylanders facing food insecurity and local farmers by eliminating economic barriers. It provides a dollar-for-dollar match for purchases made using federal nutrition benefits, including SNAP, at participating Maryland farmers markets, farm stands, and CSAs. Additionally, SMADC offers technical assistance, training, marketing, and other services to stakeholders. I am here to express strong support for HB0666 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - State Supplement, as it aligns with the goals of Maryland Market Money and SMADC.

The impact of losing SNAP waivers and flexibilities, along with the discontinuation of pandemic-era SNAP Emergency Allotments in March 2023, has significantly affected the individuals we serve. The federal SNAP minimum of \$23 per month has caused distress and desperation among Maryland Market Money program participants. We have observed a decline in shoppers willing to use their SNAP dollars at local farmers markets, where fresh and healthy food options are abundant. Instead, some have resorted to shopping at lower-cost grocers and dollar stores for less fresh food in an attempt to stretch their limited food budgets.

A stark example of the desperation we witnessed came from a bulk marketing mailing we conducted in collaboration with the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS), the agency administering SNAP in Maryland. Our annual MMM marketing piece,

The Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission
is a division of the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland
P.O. Box 745 Hughesville, MD 20637
Phone – 240-528-8850 Email – info@smadc.com





included with DHS's SNAP Redetermination Letters and Maryland Benefits Review Letters, usually results in a few inquiries. However, this year, the volume and tone of the calls were unprecedented. Our phone lines were inundated day and night, voicemail boxes were constantly full, and callers were desperate to get a response. The overwhelming number of calls persisted for months, reflecting the magnitude of the challenges faced by benefits recipients.

Our team struggled to keep up with the influx of messages and conversations from individuals inquiring about the significant reduction in their SNAP benefits. These callers expressed deep concerns about how they would afford food for their families. Our efforts to assist included providing information about our program's benefit matching dollars and sharing additional resources for food support. The volume of calls was so overwhelming that even the DHS's SNAP customer service lines were inundated with desperate Marylanders seeking answers.

It is disheartening to witness such widespread food insecurity in a country as wealthy and abundant as the United States, and particularly in a state as prosperous as Maryland. Despite lower benefit amounts, rising food costs, and wages that still fall short for many to cover the cost of living, the level of food insecurity from the pandemic era persists.

If the federal government is unwilling to allocate sufficient funding to address the issue of food insecurity among our community members, then it becomes Maryland's responsibility to fill in the gap for our residents. Let us remain committed to our Governor's promise of "no one left behind." This legislation, HB0666, could be a crucial component in addressing the challenges faced by Marylanders, as it has been in other states.

In conclusion, I earnestly request your favorable vote on HB0666. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Cristina Berthelot, on behalf of

Shelby Watson-Hampton
Director, Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission (SMADC)

The Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission
is a division of the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland
P.O. Box 745 Hughesville, MD 20637
Phone – 240-528-8850 Email – info@smadc.com

