



info@marylandmarketmoney.org
www.marylandmarketmoney.org

**Testimony in Support of SB0035
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - State Supplement
Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
January 16, 2024**

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice-Chair Rosapepe, and Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee,

My name is Heather Hulsey. I am the Program Manager for Food Access Programs of the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission (SMADC) and of the Maryland Market Money (MMM) program, a statewide food access program of SMADC and the Maryland Department of Agriculture that feeds Marylanders and supports farmers. MMM removes economic barriers for Marylanders experiencing food insecurity, providing a dollar-for-dollar match for purchases made using federal nutrition benefits *including* SNAP at participating Maryland farmers markets, farm stands, and CSAs while providing technical assistance, training, marketing, and additional services to stakeholders. Maryland Market Money and SMADC strongly support Senate Bill 0035 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - State Supplement.

The loss of SNAP waivers and flexibilities that provided greater access to households to apply and maintain benefits, as well as the loss of pandemic-era SNAP Emergency Allotments in March 2023 greatly affected the Marylanders we serve. With the federal SNAP minimum falling to \$23 a month, we saw fear and desperation from our Maryland Market Money program participants. First, we saw fewer shoppers willing to spend their SNAP dollars with local farmers and at farmers markets where food options are often fresher and healthier and opting to shop at the reduced cost grocers and dollar stores for less fresh food options in an attempt to stretch their meager food budgets.

One example of the desperation we saw was in response to a bulk marketing mailing where we partner with Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS), the agency administering SNAP in Maryland. Every summer, our program prints a small MMM marketing piece to include with DHS's SNAP Redetermination Letters and Maryland Benefits Review Letters going to benefits recipients statewide letting them know of the

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





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opportunity to have their federal nutrition benefits matched at participating farmers markets and direct marketing farms.

Each year we usually receive a few telephone calls from potential program participants wanting to learn more about our offerings and participating locations. This year, the volume of calls and the tone of the conversations was noticeably different than any year prior. The Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland's phone lines rang incessantly day and night. Our voicemail boxes were full every day with new callers. When they filled our voicemail boxes, they chose other extensions unrelated to our program desperate to get a voice on the other end. This went on for months as our mailing continued. We could not keep up. We had countless messages and conversations from benefits recipients asking why their SNAP benefits were now so low and telling us they had no idea how they were going to afford food for their families. There were so many calls even asking about the DHS letters themselves because DHS's SNAP customer service phone lines were so flooded with their own volume of desperate Marylanders. We helped as best we could, listening to each caller's heartbreaking testimony, and told people about our program's benefit matching dollars and additionally, any other food resource information we could provide. For their benefits questions, we tried to refer them to local offices in their county instead of the state customer service line which they could not get through. These were all very hard conversations with folks who didn't know what their future would hold and how they would afford meals for themselves and their families. In a country of wealth and abundance like the United States or even the beautiful state of Maryland, no one should be experiencing food insecurity like this. Between lower benefit amounts, food cost inflation, and wages that are still too low for many to keep up with the cost of living, the level of pandemic-era food insecurity has not gone away.

If the federal government is unwilling to provide sufficient funding to Americans experiencing food insecurity, then it's Maryland's duty to fill in the gap for our residents. Let's stay on track with our Governor's promise of "no one left behind." We owe Marylanders that and this legislation could be an important piece of that puzzle as it has been in other states.

In conclusion, we urge for your vote in favor of SB 0035. Thank you for your time.

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