

Senate Bill 98
Department of Housing and Community Development - Food Desert Study
Seante Finance Committee
February 7, 2024

Position: SUPPORT

Senate Bill 98 requires the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to conduct a study on the location and impact of food deserts in the state and later issue a report with recommendations on how to reduce the number of food deserts.

The Maryland Food Bank estimates that 1 in 3 Marylanders is at risk of food insecurity. A person who is food insecure does not have consistent access to healthy and nutritious food on any given day, and this problem persists in every area of the state. There are also communities and populations that are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, including communities of color, families with children, and older adults. The drivers of food insecurity are complex and often include additional factors such as low income, lack of reliable transportation, and access to healthcare.

The State of Maryland designates an area a food desert based on several factors, including availability of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthy foods, income levels of residents, transportation availability, and comments from local government. The study authorized by SB 98 on the location of these areas and the impact they have on the local population will allow DHCD to better understand what creates a food desert and identify these issues to help fight the root causes of hunger. Many residents of Baltimore City live in a food desert, but these areas are not limited to urban regions. Though suburban and rural food deserts have different parameters regarding distance to a grocery store, the lack of access to nearby, healthy food options affects Marylanders across the state.

The Maryland Food Bank engages in multiple initiatives to address food insecurity caused by food deserts, including the Pantry on the Go program which distributed over 9 million meals to neighbors in need in underserved areas across the state. The Maryland Food Bank recognizes that food deserts are also connected to health outcomes, and that along with a lack of access to nutritious foods, individuals residing in these areas often do not have access to services like banks, healthcare, or recreation spaces. A report outlining the effects food deserts have in generating and sustaining food insecurity across Maryland and how to reduce the number of these areas would be beneficial in locating and addressing root causes of hunger statewide.

For these reasons, the Maryland Food Bank respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 98.