

DATE: February 8, 2024

BILL NO.: Senate Bill 98

TITLE: Department of Housing and Community Development - Food Desert Study

COMMITTEE: Senate Finance Committee

Letter of Support

Description of Bill:

Senate Bill 98 tasks DHCD with studying food deserts in Maryland and, by November 30, 2024, submitting its findings and recommendations for reducing the number of food deserts in the state to the Senate Committee on Education, Energy and the Environment and the House Environment and Transportation Committee.

Background and Analysis:

A “food desert” is a geographic area with limited access to affordable and nutritious food. Food deserts are frequently found in low-income urban and rural areas that lack supermarkets and grocery stores, or where many residents have inadequate transportation options for reaching such stores. According to Johns Hopkins University researchers, 1 in 4 Baltimore City residents live in a food desert. Living in a food desert is correlated with below-average health outcomes and life expectancies, and Black Marylanders are disproportionately affected.

DHCD is actively working to pursue new funding and to better adapt existing tools to create more food resources in low-income communities. The Neighborhood BusinessWorks program, which provides flexible financing to new or expanding small businesses and nonprofit organizations, has supported multiple projects anchored by grocery stores. An up-to-date food desert study would allow DHCD and the General Assembly to enhance existing lending and grant tools to better meet the unique needs of businesses that provide fresh foods. Additionally, it will support the agency’s objective to promote additional policies that increase Maryland residents’ access to fresh, affordable, nutritious food.

DHCD Position:

The Department of Housing and Community Development respectfully requests a **favorable** report on SB 98.