



February 6, 2024

Attention: Members of the Maryland Senate Finance Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony considering SB 98.

My name is Carla Schroyer, and I am the Director of Community Choice Pantry Services at Community Assistance Network. Community Assistance Network (CAN) is the designated anti-poverty organization serving all of Baltimore County, Maryland. Born from President Lyndon B. Johnson's war on poverty, and established in 1965, CAN's Mission is to work in partnership with the community to develop, operate, and support programs that reduce vulnerability and empower personal growth, dignity, stability, and self-sufficiency among people in Baltimore County experiencing economic challenges. We are part of a network of over one-thousand community action agencies and one of seventeen in Maryland. CAN provides programs to address food, housing, income security and self-sufficiency.

CAN is in support of Senate Bill 98 which calls for the Department of Housing and Community Development to conduct a Food Desert Study to analyze the location of food deserts in the State, make recommendations to reduce the number of food deserts in the State and determine the impact of food deserts on the local population and economy. As Director of Community Choice Pantry services, I see the impact that food insecurity has on the neighbors that we serve as evidenced in the neighbor impact statements that I have attached. Based on my daily interaction with Baltimore County neighbors, feedback from partner agencies and calls received indicating a need for pantry service, we know that there are countless other constituents with barriers to food access such as lack of transportation, lack of funds needed to travel to agencies like CAN, grocery or drug stores, and the absence of grocery stores, drug stores and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in close proximity to their residence.

Turner's Station is a community in Dundalk within CAN's 21222 service area that is a food desert. So far, this fiscal year CAN served 2058 households, 772 of which reside within the 21222-zip code. There is no grocery store or drug store in the community which makes it difficult for individuals to access healthy, nutritious food and medicine. There is a "dollar store" near the community, however, neighbors cannot access meat, eggs, cheese, milk, fresh produce, or other healthy food options. The cost of food when purchased at "dollar stores" is higher than if the same product was purchased at a grocery store. In addition to lack of access to healthy food and an increased cost, neighbors living in food deserts are not

afforded the same dignity of choice that neighbors who do not live in a food desert are afforded, especially when we consider religious and cultural observations.

Conducting a food desert study will empower communities to make lasting changes. Based on positive improvements that CAN has made to our facility and food access processes I have several recommendations. Provide access to healthy, nutritious food and medicine in communities where these resources are lacking. Over time we will observe improved physical health of the community members. Provide community members with the dignity of choice in their local grocery store so that they are afforded the opportunity to feel a sense of ownership and pride in their community. Over time I submit to you that in neighborhoods where these changes are made, we will observe improved mental health and a decline in crime. The findings of this study will also allow us to learn what additional resources such as community-based organizations are needed in food desert communities throughout Maryland and ultimately, agencies like CAN and those working on the front lines to alleviate poverty will be able to best serve the constituents of Maryland.

I urge you to vote in favor of SB 98. We can make a difference in the lives of all Marylanders and plant the seed of change.