

**Capital Area Food Bank**  
**Brian Alexander, Sr. Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy**  
**HB0696 – Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion**  
**Ways and Means Committee**  
**Hearing Date 2/14/2024 at 1pm**  
**Testimony of SUPPORT**

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Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Brian Alexander, and I am the Senior Manager of Advocacy and Public Policy at the Capital Area Food Bank. I write to offer our support for HB0696 to provide universal school meals to all Maryland students.

The Capital Area Food Bank has been a leader in the Washington, D.C. area's hunger relief community for more than 44 years, serving residents of Northern Virginia, the District of Columbia, and Montgomery and Prince George's Counties in Maryland. During our last fiscal year, we distributed nearly 29 million meals in those two Maryland counties alone through a vast network of partners and programs to help our neighbors keep food on their tables.

Each year, the Capital Area Food Bank releases a Hunger Report – a comprehensive study that looks at food insecurity across the food bank's service area. One key finding from our 2023 Hunger Report was that households with children continue to experience food insecurity at extremely high rates. Survey results revealed that more than 42% of all households with children across the region experienced food insecurity at some point during the last year, as opposed to less than 27% of households without children.

For parents and grandparents raising children and young adults in a region with a very high cost of living, budgets can easily become stretched, and data tell us that when resources are tight, food is frequently one of the first things to be cut back. According to our Hunger Report, caregivers have indicated they may skip meals or cut down on the size of their portions to stretch budgets and ensure children are fed.

In response to this need, the food bank operates out-of-school and summer meal distributions, which provide meals to children when school is out, reducing the pressure on household food budgets. However, we also know many of the families we serve rely on in-school meals, both school breakfasts and lunches, as a reliable, healthy source of food for their children.

At the height of the pandemic, the USDA provided waivers to schools across the country, allowing school meals to be served at no cost to all students. When these waivers ended, schools reverted back to previous payment structures, once again introducing the burden of school meal debt and limiting eligibility to those with annual incomes less than 185% of the

federal poverty level. As a result, many students are now no longer eligible to participate even if their families earn less than a living wage or struggle to meet their basic needs.

Students should have the food and nutrition they need to thrive during the school day, and Maryland can make this a reality for all students by joining a growing list of states prioritizing Healthy School Meals for All. We strongly encourage a favorable report on HB0696. Thank you.