



**TESTIMONY OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES FORUM (CIF) OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
BEFORE THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE
IN SUPPORT OF HB 696: BREAKFAST AND LUNCH PROGRAMS - UNIVERSAL EXPANSION
FEBRUARY 14, 2024**

FAVORABLE

CIF is a coalition of three synagogues in Montgomery County, Kol Shalom, Adat Shalom, and Temple Beth Ami, that include over 1750 households and three denominations of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. CIF serves as a vehicle for our congregations to speak out on policy issues, such as food insecurity, that relate to our shared values, including the Jewish traditions that emphasize the sanctity and primacy of human life. CIF provides this testimony in support of HB 696, which would provide State funding for free breakfasts and lunches in many Maryland schools beginning in FY 2026.

CIF recognizes that even before the COVID pandemic, there were a large number of families, particularly families of color, that struggled with food insecurity. The pandemic only increased the number of families struggling to cover basic human needs, such as food. And the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) reports that hunger in America soared in 2022 after pandemic relief efforts wound down. The ERS found that 12.8% of U.S. households were food insecure in 2022. Moreover, children were food insecure at times during 2022 in 8.8% of U.S. households with children, up from 6.2% in 2021. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=107702>.

According to the Food Research and Action Center's (FRAC's) dashboard of August 2023 (based on the USDA Household Pulse Survey), 17.7% of Black households, 19.2% of households with high school or less education, and 12.5% of female households in Maryland are food insufficient. Recent inflation and rising food costs have been particularly challenging for families with limited incomes. School meals play a crucial role in reducing childhood hunger. Research shows that hungry children do not learn as well as children who are well nourished, and hunger also affects their physical and emotional well-being. FRAC (2021), "School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning," available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>.

HB 696 would ensure that all schools participating in the Federal School Breakfast Program or National School Lunch Program would resume providing free breakfast and lunch to all their

students, as they did during the Covid-19 Public Health Emergency. The bill thus builds off the important investments made in the 2019 Blueprint for Maryland's Future by supporting equity in the classroom and ensuring that every child has the nutrition he or she needs in order to excel. Offering universal free meals not only assures that **each** child has a minimum level of nourishment, but also (1) removes the stigma associated with means-tested school meals programs, (2) opens the program to families not currently eligible due to the low-income cutoff, (3) ends unpaid school meal debt, and (4) eliminates administrative burdens for schools.

CIF requests a favorable report on HB 696.