

March 5, 2025

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1254
Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment
House Appropriations Committee

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we strongly support HB 1254 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment, which aims to expand access to school meals and increase the number of hunger-free schools in Maryland by supporting the implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) – an existing federal provision that allows high-poverty schools and districts to provide school meal at no cost to all of their students.

We know that school meals play an important role in academic success, reducing childhood hunger, supporting good nutrition, and ensuring that students are well-nourished and ready to get the most out of their school day. Research links participation in school meals to positive education and health outcomes for our nation's children. School meals are just as important to academic success as textbooks, computers, and transportation, and all children should have access to them every school day.

As vital as the school nutrition programs are to ensuring children's access to healthy, nutritious meals, too many children in need miss out on school meals because of the programs' current structure. Many struggling families do not meet the eligibility threshold for no-cost meals, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$57,700 annually. The current structure with some children being offered meals at no cost, and others paying for their meals, also leads many children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals to choose not to participate because of stigma.

Providing state funding to support CEP implementation, as outlined in HB 1254, would take a meaningful step towards solving this problem by allowing more schools and districts to tap into this existing federal resource to serve meals at no cost to all attending students. **Currently, over 670 schools in Maryland use CEP to offer meals at no cost to over 370,000 students across 19 counties.** Research shows that these schools have benefitted from an increase in school meal participation, reduced stigma, and decreased financial strain on families.¹ Moreover, CEP has been shown to promote food security, with households of students attending CEP schools being three times less likely to be food insecure than households in non-CEP schools.²

Although any school or district where at least 25% of students are directly certified for free meals is eligible to participate in CEP, over 400 Maryland schools with a combined enrollment of over 275,000 students are currently not able to participate due to inadequate federal reimbursements. The reimbursements that CEP schools receive are calculated with a formula that is based on the percentage of directly certified students, which means that schools on the lower end of the eligibility spectrum often

¹ Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free schools meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland food service provider perspectives. In *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (pp. 1–22). Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.033>.

² Gross, S.M., Kelley, T.L., Augustyn, M., Wilson, M.J., Bassarab, K., and Palmer, A. (2019). Household food security status of families with children attending schools that participate in the community eligibility provision (CEP) and those with children attending schools that are CEP-eligible, but not participating. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. 2019 October; doi: 10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318.

do not receive enough funding to cover the cost of their operations, making CEP financially unsustainable for these schools.

By contributing a state supplement, Maryland would be making up the difference between a school's current CEP reimbursement rate and the 100% free-meal reimbursement rate set annually at the federal level. The \$10 million allocation outlined in HB 1254 would allow district flexibility and freedom to sustainably maintain their CEP schools and has the potential to allow an additional 200 schools to become hunger-free through CEP, potentially impacting over 90,000 Maryland students. For those schools, this bill would reduce stigma and ensure that all students have the nutrition they need during the school day. It would ease the pressure on families' household food budgets, allowing them to count on a nutritious school breakfast and lunch each school day to help make ends meet. It would reduce administrative work for school staff, and it would eliminate unpaid school meal fees, helping to ensure that the cafeteria is a positive place for all students and ending the financial burden that school meal debt creates for school districts.

For these reasons, we, the undersigned organization, respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 1254.

Thank you for your consideration,

Agudath Israel of Maryland
American Heart Association
Anne Arundel County Food Bank, Inc.
Baltimore City Food Policy and Planning Division
Baltimore City Public Schools
Baltimore Hunger Project
Capital Area Food Bank
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Collective Impacts Foundation Corporation (CIFIC)
FoodCorps
Free State PTA
Manna Food Center
Maryland Center on Economic Policy
Maryland Food Bank
Maryland Hunger Solutions
Maryland Nonprofits
Maryland School Nutrition Association
Montgomery County Food Council
Share Our Strength/No Kid Hungry Maryland
Strong Schools Maryland
Wicomico County Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services
Young Democrats of Maryland