



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1254

Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

House Appropriations Committee

March 5, 2025

The Anne Arundel County Food Bank (AACFB) strongly supports HB 1254 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment, which would create more hunger-free schools in Maryland by supporting high-poverty schools and school districts in providing school meals at no cost to all their students through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

For the past 39 years, AACFB has provided critical services such as food, emergency supplies, and other necessities free of charge to our extensive network of partners and the neighbors we serve throughout Anne Arundel County. Last year, in collaboration with our 76 Network Partners, we distributed 4.1 million pounds of food and essential supplies like baby diapers and feminine hygiene products, including 1.3 million pounds of fresh produce and lean proteins.

School meals are important in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring students are fueled and ready to learn. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$57,000 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven solution to address this issue. This federal program allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students, including in over 670 Maryland schools – reaching over 370,000 students statewide. Research has shown that CEP schools experience various benefits, including increased meal participation, reduced stigma for students, elimination of school meal debt, and improved staff morale¹. Additionally, students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate².

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.



Despite these benefits, not all schools can use CEP because of current federal reimbursement structure limitations. Establishing a state CEP supplement would help make the program financially sustainable for more schools. This \$10 million per year investment from the state could help up to 200 additional schools opt into CEP and offer breakfast and lunch to the over 90,000 students attending those schools.

With the cost of living rising and more families struggling to meet basic needs, expanding the number of CEP schools in Maryland would be a game-changer for many students and their families. HB 1254 would be an important stepping stone in Maryland's journey towards Healthy School Meals for All, helping to reduce hunger, improve student health and academic performance, and ease the financial burden on families already facing challenges.

Hungry kids can't wait. Now is the time for Maryland to make this critical investment to ensure more hunger-free schools across the state!

Thank you for your consideration. The Anne Arundel County Food Bank asks the committee to report favorably on HB 1254.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Leah Paley".

Leah Aiello Paley, LMSW
Chief Executive Officer
Anne Arundel County Food Bank