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Marylanders Against Poverty

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1254

Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

House Appropriations Committee

March 5, 2025

Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) supports HB1254, which aims to establish state funding to support schools and school districts that offer school meals at no cost to all of their students through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Studies have long shown that school meals reduce childhood hunger, decrease rates of childhood obesity, improve nutrition and wellness, enhance development and school readiness, and support learning, attendance, and behavior.¹ Recent studies reaffirm that access to nutritious meals in school increases long-term health and educational outcomes for children by establishing healthy eating habits early on.²

Despite these proven benefits, the current tiered payment system allows too many children to fall through the cracks. While school meals remain one of the federal government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children, the low eligibility threshold excludes many families who struggle to meet their most basic needs from receiving any assistance. For example, a family of four living on just \$57,000 per year is ineligible for the free or reduced-price school meal program. With inflation levels and grocery prices at a historic high on top of Maryland's already high cost of living, many Maryland families living above this threshold still struggle financially and are unable to make school meal payments, leading to burdensome school meal debt. Additional obstacles such as language barriers, misinformation, and stigma prevent many eligible families from applying for assistance.

CEP eliminates many of these barriers by providing breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost without the need for meal applications. CEP has proven successful in addressing food insecurity, eliminating unpaid meal fees, and reducing the administrative burden of the program. Unfortunately, the current federal reimbursement formula for CEP schools is often inadequate to cover the full cost of operating a universal meals program, leaving many schools at the lower end of the eligibility spectrum unable to participate due to a lack of financial sustainability.

HB1254 aims to address this barrier to CEP implementation by providing state funding to supplement the insufficient federal reimbursements. Making this investment in CEP schools is an important step towards ensuring that students in CEP eligible schools have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive in the classroom and beyond – advancing equity, ending stigma, and investing in Maryland's future.

MAP appreciates your consideration and requests the committee provide a favorable report on HB1254.

¹ Food Research & Action Center (2016). Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning. Available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>

² Food Research & Action Center (2021). School Meals are Essential Health and Learning. Available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>

Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) is a coalition of service providers, faith communities, and advocacy organizations advancing statewide public policies and programs necessary to alleviate the burdens faced by Marylanders living in or near poverty, and to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty.