



**Senate Finance Committee
Maryland General Assembly
February 3, 2025**

Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

On behalf of Native American LifeLines, a Title V Urban Indian Health Program serving the Native American community in Maryland, I submit this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 353, which seeks to establish the Food Deserts Workgroup. This initiative is essential to addressing the persistent and harmful impact of food deserts on historically marginalized communities, including the American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) population in Baltimore and throughout Maryland.

Food insecurity is a critical issue for Native communities, disproportionately burdened by diet-related illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. These conditions are exacerbated by a lack of access to fresh, nutritious, and culturally relevant foods. Many of our clients live in areas where corner stores, which primarily stock processed, shelf-stable foods high in salt, fat, sugar, and starch, are the primary food source. Limited transportation options make accessing grocery stores with fresh food difficult, leaving families to rely on calorie-dense but nutritionally poor options.

A recent study by Dr. Tara Maudrie, conducted within the Baltimore Native American community, highlights the unique challenges that Indigenous peoples face regarding food security. As one participant noted:

“I think food security...should be more than just caloric needs met. I think it should also include culturally relevant foods, but I know that food security isn't always connected to culturally relevant foods.”

Dr. Maudrie's research further emphasizes that Indigenous food security is not simply about having enough food to survive but about having access to the foods that nourish our bodies, spirits, and cultural identities. Traditional foods such as wild game, fish, and harvested plants are not readily available in urban environments, severing a crucial link between food, health, and cultural continuity.

For Indigenous peoples, food sovereignty—having the ability to access, produce, and share traditional foods—is foundational to community well-being. However, current food systems often neglect this perspective, focusing solely on individual caloric intake without recognizing the deeper cultural and social dimensions of food security. As Dr. Maudrie and her colleagues have written:

“Food security also extends beyond the tangible food items and to the environment and systems that enable those food sources. A freezer full of salmon may not feel like food security if the spawning rivers and streams are suffering.”

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Senate Bill 353 is an important step in addressing food insecurity as a social determinant of health, particularly for communities like ours that experience high rates of poverty, chronic illness, and systemic barriers to healthy living. By establishing this Workgroup, Maryland can take a proactive role in identifying and implementing solutions that address not just food access, but the broader systemic inequities that create food deserts in the first place.

I urge this committee to advance Senate Bill 353 and take an essential step toward ensuring that all Maryland residents—particularly those in historically underserved communities—have access to the fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant foods they need to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kerry Hawk Lessard
Executive Director
Native American LifeLines