

January 31, 2025

To the Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

Please vote for Delegate Charkoudian's HB0056 Procurement – State Department of Education – Control Authority – Local Food Purchasing bill which would help local school districts serve healthy, Maryland-grown and produced fruit, vegetables, proteins, and milk. By giving the Maryland State Department of Education authority to contract with local farmers, fishers, ranchers, food processors, and other local food business, the legislation could greatly enhance local food-source procurement for school meals, especially in smaller school districts with fewer staff and resources. Since school meals account for three-fourths of children's daily nutritional requirements, more fresh, local foods will support healthier children better ready to learn. The legislation would be a win for Maryland's children, schools, producers, and economy.

The Capital Area Food Bank is the anchor of the hunger relief infrastructure in the capital region, providing more than 60 million meals to people in communities across Prince George's and Montgomery County, Maryland, as well as in the District of Columbia and Northern Virginia. We work with a network of nearly 200 other community-based organizations in Maryland to put food resources in the hands of our neighbors in need.

We know that good food today will help make brighter futures for Maryland's children tomorrow. Despite our efforts, there are still 61,000 children in Prince George's and Montgomery Counties who are food insecure, according to our latest Hunger Report survey. In Prince George's, 16% of children or 34,000 lack food security. Montgomery County is home to 27,000 food insecure children or 11% of children in the county. That is why it is so important to do everything we can to empower local school districts in their efforts to enhance the freshness and quality of school meals.

The Capital Area Food Bank, in partnership with the Maryland Department of Agriculture, has been able to distribute Maryland-produced foods to our neighbors through the Local Food Purchase Agreement Program. The demand for local milk, fruit, and vegetables from our neighbors is tremendous. They have also benefitted by our access to blue catfish harvested from the Chesapeake Bay. Not only is this food resource a highly-desired, nutritious, and tasty source of protein, it also provides important environmental benefits by reducing the population of an unwanted invasive species.

HB0056 would benefit local school districts in the same way that the Capital Area Food Bank has benefitted from the LFPA Program. It would be easier for school districts to procure locally-sourced Maryland foods and serve them to school children for breakfast, lunch, after school, and summer meals. Furthermore, farm to school programs create educational opportunities for our children and youth to learn about where our food comes from, visit food producers, and expand their horizons. And experience has shown that children are more enthusiastic about consuming nutritious fresh fruits and vegetables when it is part of their curriculum. For Maryland food producers, the legislation could improve access to an institutional market worth millions of dollars. And Maryland communities would win because buying from local producers and processors creates new jobs and enhances the local economy.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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