



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 704
Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program –
Establishment
House Appropriations Committee
House Ways and Means Committee
February 17, 2025

POVERTY FREE MARYLAND

Voting Member Agencies:

Anne Arundel County Food Bank
Baltimore Jewish Council
CASH Campaign of Maryland
Catholic Charities
Family League of Baltimore
Laurel Advocacy & Referral Services,
Inc.
Maryland Center on Economic Policy
Maryland Family Network
Maryland Food Bank
Maryland Hunger Solutions
Poverty Free Maryland

Poverty Free Maryland supports HB 704, which aims to establish \$10 million in annual 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 \$59,500 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

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>

*Founded in 2025 through the merger of Welfare Advocates (established in 1979) and Marylanders Against Poverty (established in 1988), **Poverty Free Maryland** is a coalition of service providers, faith groups, and other organizations working together to exchange information, educate decisionmakers, and advocate for statewide public policies and programs necessary to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty and ensure that low-income Marylanders are provided with low- and no-barrier access to all resources needed to thrive and build a better life for the future.*

Abby Snyder, Co-Chair
P: (240) 593-6121
E: ASnyder@baltjc.org

Anne Wallerstedt, Co-Chair
P: (410) 991-7285
E: AWallerstedt@mdfoodbank.org

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 administrative burdens in over 700 schools in Maryland - covering over 390,000 students across 19 counties.

Unfortunately, cuts to SNAP and Medicaid that were included in the federal H.R. 1 budget package are threatening the ability of schools and districts to maintain their CEP status. Children whose households participate in SNAP and Medicaid are directly certified for free school meals. Direct certification leverages data and technology to automatically link children in SNAP households with free school meals, eliminating the need for a school meal application. Direct certification rates are the primary basis for determining which schools can utilize the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to offer free meals to all students. These rates are used to determine eligibility, with schools becoming eligible for CEP when over 25% of their student population is directly certified.

Direct certification rates are also used as the basis of the federal reimbursement formula that determines how much CEP schools get reimbursed for the meals they serve. The more children directly certified for free school meals, the more likely a school can implement CEP and the more financially sustainable the program becomes. As barriers to SNAP and Medicaid grow and fewer students are able to receive these benefits, we will see a decrease in the number of students able to be directly certified for free school meals, leading to lower federal reimbursement levels for our current CEP schools, which could lead to a lack of financial sustainability and inability to maintain CEP participation.

HB 704 aims to address this new threat to CEP by providing state funding to supplement the declining federal reimbursements. Making this investment in CEP schools is an important step towards ensuring that students 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.

Poverty Free Maryland envisions a Maryland without poverty, and a future where all Marylanders have the support and economic stability that's needed to thrive.