



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 704

Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

House Appropriations Committee

February 13, 2026

The Anne Arundel County Food Bank (AACFB) strongly supports HB 704 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment, which aims to support hunger-free schools in Maryland by providing state funding to high-poverty schools and school districts using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to provide school meals to all students at no cost.

The Anne Arundel County Food Bank provides critical resources, including food, baby supplies, and hygiene products, to a network of 76 Network Partners across Anne Arundel County. In FY25, we distributed over 4.5 million pounds of food and supplies, reaching over 577,000 individuals. The Community Eligibility Provision is an important pathway to Healthy School Meals for All - supporting students' academic achievement and healthy development. Even in wealthy Anne Arundel County, there are 47 designated Community Schools, reflecting the high rates of concentrated poverty. Across the county, the rate of students qualified for Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMS) is 42%.

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up 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 \$59,500 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven solution to this issue. This federal program allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students, including in over 700 Maryland schools – reaching over 390,000 students across the state. Research has shown that CEP schools experience a range of 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.

Despite these benefits, not all schools can use CEP due to limitations in the current federal reimbursement structure. Moreover, recent cuts to SNAP and Medicaid at the federal level threaten to reduce the number of students who are able to be directly certified for free school

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.



meals, which will make it harder for schools and districts to meet the minimum CEP eligibility threshold and cause federal reimbursements to become even more inadequate to maintain operations.

Establishing a \$10 million state CEP supplement fund as outlined in this bill would help make the program financially sustainable for more schools across the state as well as protect the financial sustainability of the program in existing CEP schools that are at risk of decreased federal reimbursements due to the impacts of H.R. 1.

With the cost of living rising and more families struggling to meet basic needs, expanding the number of CEP schools in Maryland would be transformational for many students and their families. HB 704 would be a critical next step 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 schools across the state are able to remain hunger-free!

Thank you for your consideration. We ask the committee to make a favorable report on HB 704.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leah Paley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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