

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1458
State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Refugees and Asylees - Establishment
Appropriations Committee
March 19, 2026

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports HB 1458, which would establish a State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for refugees and asylees. This legislation would uphold Maryland's commitment to the fundamental human right to adequate food, protect vulnerable populations, and ensure that no child, family, or survivor of persecution is left hungry due to changes in federal eligibility rules.

HB 1458 operationalizes and protects at the state level a long-standing commitment to food security as a human right. It ensures continuity of food assistance for refugees, asylees, humanitarian parolees, trafficking survivors, and other lawfully present noncitizens who were eligible for federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits under the eligibility rules in effect on July 3, 2025, but who would otherwise lose access due to subsequent changes in federal law.

The right to adequate food is firmly grounded in international human rights law, including Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹ and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).² The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has clarified that the right to food is realized when every person has physical and economic access to adequate food or means for its procurement at all times.³ While the United States has not ratified the ICESCR, it has consistently affirmed that freedom from hunger is a universal human right. Moreover, the United States is a party to the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, which incorporates the core protections of the 1951 Refugee Convention. These protections include nondiscrimination and equal treatment in access to public relief and assistance.

HB 1458 rightly recognizes refugees and asylees as especially vulnerable and deserving of special protections. Refugees and asylees are not voluntary migrants; they are individuals who have fled persecution, conflict, torture, trafficking, or violence. Many arrive in Maryland after prolonged displacement, trauma, and economic deprivation. Their early years in the United States are a period of stabilization and rebuilding. The bill appropriately defines "refugee" to include individuals admitted under federal refugee and asylum statutes, Afghan and Ukrainian humanitarian parolees, victims of severe forms of trafficking, Special Immigrant Visa holders from Iraq and Afghanistan, and other populations designated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. These categories reflect groups that the federal government itself has determined are eligible for refugee resettlement services due to compelling humanitarian need.

International human rights law recognizes that refugees and similarly situated populations require special protection measures. The principle of non-refoulement protects them from return to danger; the principle of nondiscrimination protects them from unequal access to essential services such as food assistance. **Denying food support to newly arrived refugees and asylees is undermines their right to dignity, health, and family unity.**

HB 1458's inclusion of survivors of severe forms of trafficking and designated humanitarian parolees reflects best practices in trauma-informed policy. Survivors of trafficking often emerge from situations

of extreme exploitation, coercion, and deprivation. Access to food assistance is essential to preventing re-victimization. The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons calls for measures to assist and protect victims, including recovery and social reintegration.⁴ Ensuring food security is fundamental to that mandate. Similarly, Afghan and Ukrainian humanitarian parolees, as well as Special Immigrant Visa holders who supported U.S. missions abroad, were admitted based on urgent humanitarian or national interest considerations. Ensuring they have access to basic nutrition is consistent with principles of fairness, responsibility-sharing, and good faith.

Food security, promoted by HB 1458, is not only a humanitarian imperative; it is a cornerstone of successful integration. Research consistently shows that early economic stabilization improves employment outcomes, educational attainment, and long-term self-sufficiency among refugees.⁵ When families have access to adequate nutrition: children are better able to learn and thrive in school;^{6,7} adults can pursue language acquisition and workforce training;⁸ and families can prioritize housing stability and health care access. Conversely, food insecurity is associated with higher rates of chronic disease,⁹ mental health challenges,^{10,11} developmental delays in children,¹² and increased strain on emergency systems.

HB 1458 is a wise investment in new Marylanders. Social protection programs like SNAP are investments in human capital. Short-term food assistance reduces long-term public expenditures associated with emergency room visits linked to malnutrition and chronic illness, child protective services interventions related to neglect driven by poverty, homelessness services, and lost workforce productivity. Maryland has long demonstrated leadership in welcoming newcomers and promoting inclusive growth. By stabilizing refugee and asylee households during their first five years in the United States, the state strengthens its labor force, supports local economies, and upholds our commitments.

HB 1458 preserves continuity of access by ensuring that Maryland residents who were eligible for SNAP on July 3, 2025, are not abruptly deprived of access solely because of changes in federal eligibility categories. As a reaffirmation of Maryland's commitment to human rights, human dignity, and the shared prosperity that comes when all residents have access to the basic necessities of life, **SWASC strongly urges a favorable report on House Bill 1458.**

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

¹ United Nations. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

² United Nations General Assembly. (1966). *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. Treaty Series, 993, 3.

³ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 12, Right to adequate food (Twentieth session, 1999), U.N. Doc. E/C.12/1999/5 (1999).

⁴ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Organized Crime, Nov. 15, 2000, 2237 U.N.T.S. 319.

⁵ Capps, R. et al. (2015). *The Integration outcomes of U.S. refugees: successes and challenges*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

⁶ Georgieff, M. K., Ramel, S. E., & Cusick, S. E. (2018). Nutritional influences on brain development. *Acta paediatrica (Oslo, Norway : 1992)*, 107(8), 1310–1321. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.14287>

⁷ Tamiru, D., Belachew, T. The association of food insecurity and school absenteeism: systematic review. *Agric & Food Secur* 6, 5 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40066-016-0083-3>

⁸ Nyhus Dhillon, C., & Ortenzi, F. (2023). Assessing the Impact of Workforce Nutrition Programmes on Nutrition, Health and Business Outcomes: A Review of the Global Evidence and Future Research Agenda. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 20(9), 5733. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20095733>

⁹ Gregory, C.A. & Reed-Jones, M. (April 4, 2024). Chronic disease risk increased with U.S. household food insecurity. US Department of Agriculture.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/chart-detail?chartId=108913#:~:text=Researchers%20at%20USDA%2C%20Economic%20Research,Adults%2C%20published%20in%20July%202017.>

¹⁰ Jessiman-Perreault G, McIntyre L. (2017). The household food insecurity gradient and potential reductions in adverse population mental health outcomes in Canadian adults. *SSM -Population Health*. 3:464-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2017.05.013>

¹¹ Men F, Elgar F, Tarasuk V. (2021) Food insecurity is associated with mental health problems among Canadian youth. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. 75(8):741-8. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-216149>

¹² Casey, E. G., & Winsler, A. (2025). Impacts of Food Insecurity on Child Development: Strengthening the Role of Childcare. *Nutrients*, 17(15), 2427. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu17152427>