



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 704

Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

House Appropriations Committee

February 13, 2026

Manna Food Center 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.

Manna Food Center has served residents in Montgomery County, Maryland, since its humble beginnings in a vacant elementary school in 1983, serving just a few hundred recipients with a single pledge of \$3,100, and a donation of 16,000 pounds of food. In 2025, 42 years later, Manna distributed **3.14 million pounds of food** and infused **\$356,450** into the local economy.

In 2024-2025, Manna served **7,922 students and families** at 94 school partners through various programs such as monthly markets, weekend bags, and grocery gift cards. Our direct connection to the school system puts us at the front line of serving some of the **218,000 children** living in food-insecure households in Maryland. These school-based programs allow us to gain insights into the factors causing food insecurity for working families in Montgomery County. We know firsthand that the absence of CEP at schools adversely impacts the entire family, school administrative systems, and consequentially, all of our interconnected communities.

Without CEP, schools that are currently able to provide a healthy breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost will return to burdensome paperwork, unpaid meal debt, and more barriers to access that allow too many students to fall through the cracks. When students have access to free meals at schools, families are able to lower grocery bills and stretch their incomes to meet other basic needs. School meals also play a critical role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up and ready to learn. Research shows that students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate.

We are also witnessing recent cuts to SNAP and Medicaid, and fatal incidents across the country with federal law enforcement, leading to fewer students applying to and receiving these federal benefits. Consequently, this is reducing the number of students directly certified for free school meals. Schools are already burdened by limitations in the current federal reimbursement structure, and our current context will make it more difficult for schools and districts to meet the CEP threshold.

To prevent these circumstances from putting Maryland's progress towards ending childhood hunger at risk, CEP schools must be supported by state funding. The funding in HB 704/SB 586 can be used to maintain CEP schools in Maryland even if lower direct certification rates threaten the financial sustainability of the federal reimbursement formula.



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 a game-changer for many students and their families. HB 704 is an important stepping stone 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 remain hunger-free!

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

Sincerely,
Manna Food Center

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