



February 17, 2026

COMMITTEE: House Appropriations and Ways and Means Committees

BILL: HB 704 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

POSITION: Support

The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives. The Foundation is pleased to **support HB 704 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**. This bill would 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.

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. 11 of these schools are in Howard County. 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 morale.ⁱ Additionally, students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate.ⁱⁱ

Despite these benefits, not all schools are able to use CEP because of 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 can be directly certified for free school 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.

HB 704 would establish a \$10 million CEP supplement fund at the state level, helping to make the program financially sustainable for more schools across the state as well as protect the

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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.

Like many communities across the state, food insecurity has increased in recent years in Howard County, particularly for lower- and middle-income families. For many students, school meals are their primary source of daily calories and nutrition. 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 would be an important 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.

All children should have the nutrition they need to learn and thrive. For this reason, the Foundation **SUPPORTS HB 704** and urges a **FAVORABLE** report. Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱ 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>.

ⁱⁱ 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.