



**TESTIMONY OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES FORUM (CIF) OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
IN SUPPORT OF HB 704: COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION EXPANSION PROGRAM -
ESTABLISHMENT
FEBRUARY 17, 2026**

FAVORABLE

Honorable Chair Barnes, Vice-Chair Kaiser, and members of the Committee:

I represent the Critical Issues Forum of Montgomery County, and we strongly support HB 704. CIF is a coalition of three synagogues in Montgomery County, Kol Shalom, Adat Shalom, and Temple Beth Ami, that include over 1750 households and three denominations of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. CIF serves as a vehicle for our congregations to speak out on policy issues, such as food insecurity, that relate to our shared values, including the Jewish traditions that emphasize the sanctity and primacy of human life. CIF provides this testimony in strong support of HB 704, which would provide State funding for schools utilizing the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

CIF recognizes that even before the COVID pandemic, there were a large number of families, particularly families of color, that struggled with food insecurity. The pandemic only increased the number of families struggling to cover basic human needs, such as food. And the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) reports that hunger in America has increased in the years after pandemic relief efforts wound down. The ERS found that, on average, 11.5% of Maryland households were food insecure in 2022-2024. This is a 2.8% increase from 2019-2021. Rabbitt, Reed-Jones, Hales, Suttles & Burke (2025), Household Food Security in the United States in 2024 (Report No. ERR-358, USDA, ERS).

According to the Food Research and Action Center's (FRAC's) dashboard of August 2023 (based on the USDA Household Pulse Survey), 17.7% of Black households, 19.2% of households with high school or less education, and 12.5% of female households in Maryland are food insufficient. Recent inflation and rising food costs have been particularly challenging for families with limited incomes.

Moreover, 14.1 million children in the country lived in households that experienced food insecurity in 2024, a slight increase from 2023. Rabbit, et al. **School meals play a crucial role in reducing childhood hunger.** It must be emphasized that lunches consumed from school are the

most nutritious. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, students who eat school lunches are more likely to consume milk, fruit and vegetables at lunch than students who eat lunch from home or other places. And students who eat school lunches are less likely to consume desserts, snack items, and non-milk beverages at lunch.

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition--and-meal-cost-study>. Research shows that hungry children do not learn as well as children who are well nourished, and hunger also affects their physical and emotional well-being. FRAC (2021), “School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning,” available at <https://frac.org/wpcontent/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>.

The federal Community Eligibility Provision allows high-poverty schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students while eliminating the traditional school meal application process. But while participation in CEP has grown substantially in Maryland over the past few years, many schools do not consider CEP a financially viable option because the federal reimbursement rate is based on the number of students directly certified for free meals (ISP). Schools that teach low-income students but have an ISP below 62.5% are reimbursed at a lower level for a certain number of the free meals served. HB 704 would begin to close this reimbursement gap.

This carefully-targeted bill builds off the important investments made in the 2019 Blueprint for Maryland’s Future by supporting equity in the classroom and ensuring that every child has the nutrition he or she needs in order to excel. Offering free meals in CEP schools not only assures that **each** child has a minimum level of nourishment, but also (1) removes the stigma associated with means-tested school meals programs, (2) opens the program to families not currently eligible for free meals due to the low-income cutoff, (3) ends unpaid school meal debt, and (4) eliminates administrative burdens for schools.

CIF requests a favorable report on HB 704.

