

HB 704 - The Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

Position - Favorable

February 18, 2026

To the honorable Chair and Members of House Appropriations Committee

My name is Lesley Frost and I am the Chair of National Council of Jewish Women, Maryland State Policy Advocacy Committee (NCJW MD SPA) and I am writing to express strong support for 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.

As a Jewish organization NCJW follows our tradition which clearly states that feeding the hungry is not optional. It is a mitzvah — a sacred obligation, and our support for HB 704 is also based on NCJW Resolution 11.5 “Laws, policies, comprehensive supports, opportunities and services that enable all children and youth to succeed and thrive in school.”

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fed 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. In addressing hunger in the school age population the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven solution. 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 morale. 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.

However, 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 are able to 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.

To address these limitations and cuts in SNAP and Medicaid, HB 704 would, as outlined in the bill, establish a \$10 million state CEP supplement fund to 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 positively impact many students and their families. HB 704 would be 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.

On behalf of the 600 NCJW advocates across the state, I ask the committee to make a favorable report on HB 704.

Sincerely,
Lesley Frost
Chair NCJW MD SPA, ncjw.mdacts@gmail.com

7707 Wisconsin Avenue
Bethesda MD 20814, lesleyfrost0@gmail.com