



Testimony in Support of HB 456
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – State Supplement
House Appropriations Committee
February 8, 2022

Dear Chair McIntosh, Vice-Chair Chang, and Members of the House Appropriations Committee. It is my honor to have the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of Maryland Hunger Solutions, a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit working to end hunger in the state of Maryland. We work with partners, state agencies, schools and school districts, local community organizations, advocates and activists to improve systems, to utilize local, state and federal programs and to ensure the most possible effective use of systems to address hunger. I am here to testify in support of HB 456.

Maryland Hunger Solutions urges your support of HB456, which requires the state to provide a supplemental benefit for any adult aged 60 and older who receives less than \$45 a month through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also known as SNAP and formerly known as food stamps) to a minimum monthly benefit of \$45 a month. In 2015, this Committee led the way by enacting legislation for the first time in Maryland history for a supplemental SNAP benefit. You showed a commitment to helping Maryland's older adults by increasing the minimum SNAP benefit to \$30 a month – instead of the federal \$16 a month. With the rising costs of food, the coming benefit cliff, and the continued burden of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's timely for the state to make an investment in these vulnerable Marylanders.

Maryland Hunger Solutions has conducted SNAP outreach to all Marylanders interested in learning more about SNAP and applying for the program for more than a decade. Prior to the pandemic, much of our outreach focused on assisting older adults with the application process either in-person at senior residences or over-the-phone. Sometimes they were referred by medical professionals seeking to ensure that, if eligible, they would have the nutrition that they needed. When in-person work ceased abruptly in March 2020 due to the pandemic, our main tool in performing outreach became our statewide toll-free hotline, which quickly became inundated with calls. Older adults made up a large demographic portion of our callers during the pandemic and continue to be our most common callers. The most recent data provided by the Department of Human Services shows that a record number of over 860,000 Marylanders are participating in SNAP as of October 2021, with 90,000 of them being older adults.

Since the beginning of the pandemic the cost of food has risen at an alarming rate. In fact, food price inflation has been rising at a historical rate. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) found that average annual food-at-home prices rose 3.5% from 2019 to 2020 and rose an additional 3.5% from 2020 to 2021, both exceeding



historical averages.¹ Estimates from USDA ERS forecast an additional 1.5-2.5% rise in food-at-home costs in 2022 and are expected to again surpass historical averages.² While some of this can be attributed to supply-chain issues, the issue is clear: food costs are rising rapidly with no end in sight. Providing this increase to older adults keeps in step with the rising costs of food so they can continue to access a diet that is critical to their nutritional needs.

During the pandemic, individuals on SNAP have been able to receive the maximum allotment for their household size. However, the effects of the pandemic will be felt for years to come. In addition, the maximum benefit allotment – just like the federal public health emergency – will prove to be a temporary policy. For hundreds of thousands of Maryland families, that will mean having their SNAP benefits recalculated and decreased. For example, an older adult household of one on SNAP currently receives \$250 a month with emergency allotments, but could drop down to \$30 a month. Many of the households that will see this deduction are older adults. Older adults on SNAP often receive the minimum amount due to their benefits being calculated according to their income, expenses and household size. What can Maryland do to address this coming policy change? We can enact HB 456.

The record number of SNAP participants shows how critical this program is during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it will continue to be as the state moves through a long road to recovery. SNAP has become a more powerful means of enabling eligible participants to put food on the table by expanding food budgets. It has also proven to be an economic driver, providing approximately \$100 million dollars of benefits to the Maryland economy, to be spent at grocery stores, farmers markets, and corner stores. With the implementation of the online SNAP program in 2020, which allows SNAP users to purchase groceries via online retailers, and the incoming Restaurant Meals Program, which allows older adults and other populations to use their benefits at restaurants, SNAP dollars are an important part of our local economy.

To be clear, this legislation cannot make up for the federal program. Only the federal government has the resources to address food insecurity on the scale that has been accomplished during the pandemic. While it is our view that the federal government should undertake comprehensive policies and fully fund SNAP, WIC and school meal programs, that is another question for another legislative body. For today, we respectfully request that this committee consider HB 456, which is a modest, targeted amendment to an existing Maryland program.

Thank you for your consideration, Maryland Hunger Solutions urges a favorable report on HB 456.

1

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending/?topicId=1afac93a-444e-4e05-99f3-53217721a8be>

² <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>