



## **Testimony in Support of SB550**

**March 14, 2019**

**Senate Finance Committee**

### **The Food Supplement Program – Minimum Benefit for Persons with Disabilities State Supplement**

Across the state of Maryland, nearly 20 percent of households with children struggle to put food on the table, and one in 10 Marylanders are food insecure. This means they skip meals, eat less than they need, or even go hungry because they do not have access to enough food to live a healthy, active life. This is a significant problem in Maryland – one that affects our healthcare system, our education system, our employment system, and our retirement system. This is all in spite of the fact that Maryland is, by per capita income, the wealthiest state in the nation.

Maryland Hunger Solutions is been proud to have worked with the state legislature and the Governor's office to address these issues. From funding the gold-standard school breakfast program Maryland Meals for Achievement, which provides free breakfast in the classroom to schools across the state, to the enactment of the Hunger-Free Schools Act, which enables hundreds of schools to utilize community eligibility to provide federally-reimbursed breakfast and lunch to tens of thousands of Maryland students at no charge from Somerset County to Washington County to Prince George's County and Howard County, as well as every single student in the Baltimore City Public Schools system.

Additionally, the passage of the Maryland Cares for Kids Act eliminated the reduced-price fee category for families relying on free and reduced-price school meals. Outdated and discriminatory bans to the Food Supplement Program (FSP, known nationally as SNAP) were removed for those convicted of minor drug charges, and the minimum benefit for FSP recipients ages 62 and older was increased from just \$15 to \$30 a month.

Today, with SB550, there is a new opportunity to impact the quality of life and well-being for some of our most vulnerable Maryland residents – the opportunity to increase the minimum FSP benefit for Marylanders with disabilities from \$15 to \$30 per month.

There are over 630,000 Marylanders currently participating in FSP in Maryland. More than half of these recipients are children, seniors and people with disabilities. Although the program is underutilized, it is the most widely used and effective tool in our arsenal, and a proven intervention to reduce food insecurity and combat hunger. While the Maryland Food Bank, the Capital Area Food Bank, Manna Food Center in Montgomery County, the Howard County Food Bank, the Southern Maryland Food Bank and dozens of food pantries provide thousands of meals to people in our communities, they are emergency food providers. Their resources become stretched when the economy is impacted, and their leadership acknowledges they cannot fight hunger alone. This was

readily apparent during the recent federal government shutdown, when more of our neighbors were forced to rely on them for services. It takes sound policy and a strengthened safety net to protect our residents from hunger and food insecurity.

In 2016, when the state legislature increased the minimum benefit for seniors 62 and older to \$30, the minimum benefit nationally was just \$16 per month. Since then, the minimum benefit has fallen to \$15 per month, averaging to about 50 cents per day. This can't buy milk, or bread, let alone a full meal, and it certainly doesn't begin to last a month.

We are asking you to once again address this issue for Maryland residents in a targeted and meaningful way. Maryland Hunger Solutions supports SB550, which would provide a state supplement to ensure that disabled FSP recipients receive a minimum of \$30 per month.

Fifteen dollars a month simply isn't enough, and it leaves thousands of our neighbors in desperate situations, depending on emergency food suppliers for their basic needs. We believe that adding a state supplement of \$15 to the federal benefit of \$15 would be a great step toward improving this situation for households with people with disabilities that receive the minimum FSP benefit.

SB550 is an investment in the health and nutrition of our poorest neighbors. In addition, it would serve as an investment in the state of Maryland because those dollars will be spent in local grocery stores, corner stores, and farmer's markets. USDA's own research shows that \$5 in food stamps generates \$9 in gross domestic product as consumers, retailers, wholesalers, distributors, and farmers all benefit.

In closing, every dollar spent in this program will be used to ensure people with disabilities can access the food they need to help prevent hunger. Increasing the minimum benefit for people with disabilities is a sensible, reasonable investment, one that our neighbors in the District of Columbia have already taken. Let's use the existing federal program and leverage our state dollars for the benefit of our fellow citizens and our economy.