



Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger and promoting well-being

**Testimony In Support of SB752
Restaurant Meals Program
Senate Finance Committee
March 14, 2019**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known in Maryland as the Food Supplement Program (FSP), formerly food stamps, is a critical federal safety net program for low-income individuals and families. It is a proven, effective, and efficient strategy for reducing food insecurity — the lack of reliable access to food — a condition that impacts 1 in 10 Marylanders, representing over 230,000 households. Senate Bill 752, the Restaurant Meals Program, will allow individuals experiencing homelessness, along with seniors and people with disabilities who are unable to cook, prepare or store food to use their FSP benefits to purchase cooked foods.

FSP serves more than 630,000 Maryland residents. However, our recent research and mapping project, done in conjunction with Johns Hopkins Center for A Livable Future, shows that every jurisdiction has unmet needs, and there are tens of thousands of potentially eligible Marylanders who are not participating in the federal nutrition programs. Participation in the USDA's Restaurant Meals Program could help address this unmet need, and allow those who are unable to purchase and prepare meals on their own to still be able to have access to complete, nutritious meals. Although soup kitchens and other charities serve an important need in our communities, they aren't the complete answer. Transportation, stigma and dietary restrictions are just some of the barriers that people face.

The Restaurant Meals Program was created by USDA in 1977 as a voluntary component of the Federal Food Stamps Act. There is no additional cost for the state to join the program, and restaurants are not required to join. In order for a restaurant to participate in the program, it must apply and be approved. Additionally, it must offer low-cost menu options, and typically must complete a memorandum of understanding or agreement with the state. Cash registers that accept debit cards are also needed. In Maryland, EBT machines can be purchased for less than \$1,000.

Currently, FSP recipients purchase foods at approved vendors: corner stores, farmer's markets and grocery stores. The rules are very strict; prepared foods such as a hot pizza, or a hot rotisserie chicken can't be purchased with FSP benefits. By participating in this program, some of our most vulnerable FSP recipients will be able to have more choices

to get the nutrition they need, and to do so with dignity. Many national restaurant chains have participated in other states, and we believe that some local restaurants in Maryland would choose to participate as well.

The Restaurant Meals Program is not a new program that Maryland would have to establish. This is an existing USDA program that expands access to healthy, nutritious food for seniors, disabled, and homeless persons. It is another tool to address the food insecurity that already exists in our state, which we believe that we should adopt in order to provide additional options for those who would be eligible to use it under federal law. We urge a favorable report.