



Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger and promoting well-being

**Testimony in Support of SB0913
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Heat and Eat Program
Finance
February 18, 2021**

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice-Chair Feldman, and Members of the Finance Committee,

Maryland Hunger Solutions is a statewide, non-partisan, non-profit organization working to end hunger and improve the nutrition, health, and well-being of individuals, children, and families in Maryland. Maryland Hunger Solutions strives to overcome barriers and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods. Maryland Hunger Solutions works with state and community partners to seek to:

- provide education about the stark reality of hunger's existence in Maryland and the proven solutions to reduce food insecurity;
- improve public policies to end food insecurity and poverty; and
- ensure that all eligible residents are connected to federal and state nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also known as SNAP and formerly known as food stamps) and school meals programs.

It is within that regard that we are testifying in support of SB0913, which requires the Department of Human Services to establish the Heat & Eat Program within the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Maryland. The Heat & Eat Program is an existing federal program which allows low-income residents who are eligible for SNAP and eligible for energy assistance to receive additional federal SNAP dollars. It is not a new program, and more than a dozen states have implemented this program across the nation. It is a benefit that Maryland is leaving on the table as other jurisdictions have thoughtfully, efficiently, and in a non-partisan way have maximized federal assistance for their low-income residents. Maryland's unwillingness and inability to implement this effective program can only be corrected by having the state legislature require the Department of Human Services to implement the program.

The program functions by providing a Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP or MEAP in Maryland) benefit to eligible households paying utility costs through their rent. This annual benefit would automatically qualify recipients for a "standard utility allowance," an average of the state's utility costs. This increases the likelihood of the household qualifying for increased shelter deductions and thus, higher SNAP benefits.

There are two important items for consideration. First, the way that the program is implemented must conform to the federal requirements as stipulated in the 2014 Farm Bill, as passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama. We reference here a summary provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures ¹, which I will summarize here; states may ensure that LIHEAP eligible households receive benefits of more than \$20 a year, which will ensure compliance and enable those same households, if they are also SNAP participating households, to boost their SNAP allotment. Prior to 2014, there was no minimum, and many states provided less than \$20 in order to increase SNAP allotments.

The NCSL also pointed out that if a state is running low on federal LIHEAP funds, that they may allocate state funding to boost funds available for assistance.

This is a critical point; existing federal dollars may be used. Additional state dollars may also be used. We believe that using additional state dollars would be appropriate and a smart investment. But for Maryland to continue as they have and not at least ensure that federal LIHEAP dollars are utilized is wasteful and inefficient.

A second and critical point is that Maryland would not be the first state to use this program. As quoted in the USA Today of March 14, 2014 ² New York decided to spend \$6 million in federal funds to preserve \$457 in food aid for 300,000 households rather than cut the benefit because of the change in the federal law, essentially using those federal funds to ensure that a minimum of \$20 was spent per household. Similarly, Rhode Island spent an additional \$1.3 million to avoid a cut of \$69 million. Across the border in the District of Columbia, DC needed to boost their LIHEAP funding by \$1.3 million. These jurisdictions had to boost spending to avoid cuts. Maryland is in a different place. By implementing the program and applying our existing LIHEAP funding for our SNAP eligible residents who are not getting LIHEAP, we can increase our federal SNAP benefits.

Pennsylvania's Republican Governor Tom Corbett agreed to spend \$8 million in federal LIHEAP benefits to save \$300 million in SNAP benefits for 400,000 Pennsylvanians.³

Our colleague Louise Hayes of Community Legal Services of Philadelphia has submitted testimony in support of this legislation. In it, she says, "From Pennsylvania's perspective, Heat and Eat is a no-brainer. It greatly benefits Pennsylvania's neediest seniors and people with disabilities, and it greatly simplifies program administration, at minimal cost. I heartily urge Maryland to adopt Heat & Eat." She also submitted an operations memo from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania from February of 2011 from Acting Director of Operations from the Department of Public Welfare, Lourdes Padilla. It details how local executive directors are to implement heat and eat in Pennsylvania.

¹ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/-heat-and-eat-and-snap-changes-in-the-2014-farm-bill.aspx>

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/03/17/stateline-food-stamps/6538141/>

³ https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/politics/20140306_In_surprising_move__Corbett_forestalls_deep_cuts_in_food_stamps.html

That memo is from the current Secretary of the Maryland Department of Human Services who was an official in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania when their policy was put into place in that state.

New York, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania are examples of states that immediately boosted their LIHEAP benefits to accommodate the federal changes enacted in 2014. Two states: Wisconsin⁴ and New Jersey⁵, failed to act, with an estimated 250,000 and 160,000 residents, respectively, seeing a loss to their benefits as a result. New Jersey estimated that the average benefit lost to their recipients was around \$90 a month. Michigan similarly did not make the necessary accommodations to fulfill federal guidelines and 159,000 households saw an \$80 reduction in their benefits. From their losses we can see what Marylanders stand to gain from the program.

In a 2016 analysis of implementing the Heat & Eat Program, the Maryland Department of Human Resources estimated 32,000 Marylanders would receive an average of \$59 a month of additional SNAP benefits. This has most likely increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our on-the-ground experience with those who are food insecure is that the inadequacy of the SNAP benefit has always been a challenge. When the coronavirus pandemic began, our federal and state governments took action to ensure moratoriums would be placed on energy bills, helping families keep the lights on as businesses closed and unemployment skyrocketed. We also saw the enactment of policies to address food insecurity such as the emergency benefit, which increased SNAP allotments for most households, and procedures to enable remote application and recertification.

However, the effects of the pandemic will be felt for years to come. The challenge is to analyze which changes should continue beyond the pandemic. The Heat & Eat Program is one of the small beneficial policy changes which we should have made years ago which would be beneficial beyond the pandemic, and which will provide benefits to low-income Marylanders.

Thank you for your consideration, Maryland Hunger Solutions **urges a favorable report on SB0913.**

⁴ <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/pressrelease/rep-bowen-introduces-heat-eat-legislation/>

⁵ <https://www.assemblydems.com/mosquera-speaker-prieto-decry-heat-eat-bill-veto-override-failure/>