



Maryland
Hospital Association

February 8, 2024

To: The Honorable Pamela Beidle, Chair, Senate Finance Committee

Re: Letter of Support - Senate Bill 98 - Department of Housing and Community Development - Food Desert Study

Dear Chair Beidle:

On behalf of the Maryland Hospital Association's (MHA) member hospitals and health systems, we appreciate the opportunity to comment in support of Senate Bill 98. Access to nutritious food is essential to achieve optimal health and ensure health equity for all Marylanders. SB 98 would require the Department of Housing and Community Development to study food deserts in the state and suggest solutions to increase access to nutritious options. The resulting report will provide insights into the extent of food insecurity, supporting initiatives to improve overall population health and health equity.

One in three Marylanders face food insecurity, which includes individuals living in food deserts lacking access to nutritious foods.¹ A 2021 study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that nearly half of Hispanic respondents experienced new and persistent food insecurity.² Marylanders on the Eastern Shore have the highest percentage of households statewide with food insecurity among those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. A person's food selection and spending are influenced by the accessibility and affordability of food retailers—including distance, selection, and price.³ For low-income and/or rural communities, for example, lack of transportation could make it difficult to travel to a grocery store. As a result, people in the community may go to smaller stores that are closer to their home but lack affordable, healthy food options.⁴

Food insecurity prevents people from consuming a balanced diet and harms overall health. Unhealthy diets contribute to chronic diseases like diabetes, while malnutrition can lead to

¹ Maryland Food Bank. "Hunger in Maryland." mdfoodbank.org/hunger-in-maryland/ (accessed February 7, 2024).

² Bradley, Brianna, et al. "Food security and food access for People of Color and Hispanic/Latinx households in Maryland during the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic." cf.jhsph.edu/publications/food-security-and-food-access-people-color-and-hispanic/latinx-households-maryland (accessed February 7, 2024)

³ USDA Economic Research Service. "Food Access." ers.usda.gov/topics/food-choices-health/food-access/ (accessed September 24, 2020).

⁴ Rhone, Alana, et al. "Understanding Low-Income and Low-Access Census Tracts Across the Nation: Subnational and Subpopulation Estimates of Access to Healthy Food." Economic Information Bulletin Number 209. (May 2019). ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/93141/eib-209.pdf?v=8920.1.

diseases like hypertension and behavioral health issues like depression or anxiety.⁵ For children, food insecurity may cause developmental problems. Maryland hospitals recognize that food is medicine and partner with community organizations to provide stopgap healthy meal delivery services to patients living in food deserts with conditions impacted by nutrition. However, these measures are limited and require significant resources to expand to wider populations. SB 98 allows the Department of Housing and Community Development to explore recommendations for sustainable programs to reduce the number of food deserts statewide.

For these reasons, we request a *favorable* report on SB 98.

For more information, please contact:
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⁵American Hospital Association. “Social Determinants of Health Series: Food Insecurity and the Role of Hospitals.” [aha.org/ahahret-guides/2017-06-21-social-determinants-health-series-food-insecurity-and-role-hospitals](https://www.aha.org/ahahret-guides/2017-06-21-social-determinants-health-series-food-insecurity-and-role-hospitals) (accessed February 7, 2024).