



Montgomery County, Maryland | 2021 Policy Agenda

The Capital Area Food Bank projects that the number of food insecure individuals in Montgomery County will have increased by approximately 110 percent by the end of 2020, to more than 131,000. Although we are on track to distribute food for nearly 8 million meals to Montgomery County residents in fiscal year 2021, we are asking for the support of policymakers to reduce the level of food insecurity. It will take all of us—across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—to holistically support the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities. The requests below represent our agenda and recommendations as to how the local government can reduce the burdens of hunger over the coming year.

Executive Summary

2021 will provide policymakers with the opportunity to enact changes that determine the pace of recovery, the strength of the rebuild in our region, and the immediacy of the impact on those in need. Below is an overview of the food bank's requests for Montgomery County.

In the last decade, the Food Bank has distributed just over 43 million meals in Montgomery County. It is clear that we must do more for our clients than simply provide food.

EXPAND THE WORKING FAMILIES INCOME SUPPLEMENT TO IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is one of the most effective anti-poverty tools in U.S. history. Maryland is one of 28 states to provide an additional credit that builds upon the federal EITC, and Montgomery County is one of the few localities throughout the country to offer a refund to further supplement the wages of the working poor through the Working Families Income Supplement (WFIS).¹ The WFIS, based on the federal EITC, precludes lawful, immigrant workers who pay their fair share of taxes from receiving this benefit. ***We request that the Montgomery County Council enhance the WFIS' impact by allowing all county residents with Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITIN) to receive the credit.***² The Maryland Center on Economic Policy estimates that if this change were enacted, nearly 5,500 immigrant families in the county would receive approximately \$3 million in the upcoming tax season.

STANDARDIZE AND INCORPORATE FOOD SECURITY METRICS INTO THE THRIVE 2050 PLAN AND STRATEGIC PLANNING DOCUMENTATION

The county's General Plan (GP) has, for decades, been instrumental in guiding policymakers as they track, prioritize, and respond to various objectives for the betterment of residents throughout the county. ***We request that policymakers utilize the soon-to-be-published Thrive 2050 plan to develop a more***

¹ Chuck Marr et al., "EITC and Child Tax Credit Promote Work, Reduce Poverty, and Support Children's Development, Research Finds." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, October 1, 2015, https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/eitc-and-child-tax-credit-promote-work-reduce-poverty-and-support-childrens#_ftn1

² ITIN holders include undocumented workers, student visa holders, some family members of workers with employment visas, and some survivors of domestic violence.

tailored food security plan, using our [Food Security Playbook](#) as a resource to identify various metrics for inclusion.

CONDUCT A COORDINATED OUTREACH CAMPAIGN TO INCREASE UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL WELFARE

Montgomery County is anticipating a loss of \$522 million in revenue for FY21.³ *Given the reality of this fiscal climate, and the uncertainty of congressional response, we request that the county invest in a strategic and coordinated effort to increase participation in SNAP, WIC, Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT), Medicaid, the EITC, and Economic Impact Payments (EIP).* Through our conversations with advocates, policymakers, and governmental administrators, we believe the county can activate millions of dollars in federal social welfare by hiring a full-time staffer to work among departments; implement and negotiate data-sharing agreements; and incorporate research-oriented practices into existing and newly created outreach practices.

Montgomery County has the highest percentage of individuals who are eligible for SNAP, and are not enrolled in the program of any other county in the state of Maryland; **64 percent of eligible households do not participate in the nation's most effective anti-hunger program.**

REMOVE REDUCED LUNCH CHARGE FOR STUDENTS IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Beginning in the 2019–2020 school year, legislation took effect in Maryland that gradually eliminates reduced-price fees for school breakfast and lunch. The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) system has already taken the step to proactively eliminate the reduced-price meal charge for breakfast, and it should not wait until the full four-year phase-in date of 2022 to remove the charge for reduced-price lunches.⁴ *We request that MCPS remove the reduced-price lunch charge for students beginning in the 2021–2022 school year, when USDA waivers eliminating charges for all meals and all children are set to expire.*

PILOT FREE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM WITH HIGHER POVERTY THRESHOLD

Eligibility standards for free and reduced-price school meals are set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and are applied uniformly across the country regardless of the estimated cost of living in a given district or county. Montgomery County's self-sufficiency standard (defined as "what it takes for a family to make ends meet at a minimally adequate level without public or private assistance") is \$90,509—nearly twice the threshold for free and reduced-price school meal eligibility.⁵ *We request that MCPS launch a pilot program in one to three schools to provide free meals to children from families with incomes between 185 and 300 percent of the poverty level (income just above the level of eligibility and just below the county's self-sufficiency standard).*

ENLIST ALL ELIGIBLE SCHOOLS IN THE MARYLAND MEALS FOR ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM

The Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA) program provides state funding to school districts to offer free breakfast in the classroom to all students. *Although the program is at capacity and cannot enlist any more schools, we request that Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) place all eight eligible schools not enrolled onto the waiting list. This will position schools within the county*

³ Briana Adhikusuma, "County Tax Revenue Estimates Decrease \$522 Million For Three Years," *Bethesda Magazine*. July 16, 2020, <https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/government/county-tax-revenue-estimates-decrease-522m-for-three-years/>

⁴ MD Educ Code § 7-602 (2018)

⁵ "Self Sufficiency Standard Maryland," *University of Washington*, <http://www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/Maryland>



to be enrolled in case the program is expanded, and it will signal to state legislators that more funding is needed.