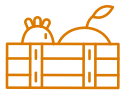


# MARYLAND 2023 Policy Agenda



For over 42 years, the Capital Area Food Bank has served as the backbone of the region's hunger relief infrastructure. In FY22, the Food Bank distributed 52 million meals to neighbors in need across the DMV. However, we know that ending hunger takes more than good food today; advocating for policies and programs that enable long-term food security, financial empowerment, and health equity is an essential aspect of our commitment to building brighter futures. The following policy priorities—informed by data, community partners, and those we serve—represent impactful interventions that the Food Bank will advocate for in 2023 to end hunger and its root causes.



## Fully Fund the MD FARM Program & Farm to School Grant Pilot

In the 2022 legislative session, Maryland state legislators took an important step toward enhancing food system resiliency and reducing food insecurity by passing the Farm to Food Security Act ([HB147/SB121](#)). This bill took a three-pronged approach to shifting toward a more sustainable, localized food system, utilizing the power of Maryland agriculture to strengthen supply chains, build up local farms, and bring consumption to equity and access. However, while the final signed version of the bill made all provisions law, two went underfunded. The Food Bank supports the [recent recommendations of the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council](#) to fully fund the following two programs:

### The Farm to School Grant Pilot

Although school districts have expressed a desire to expand farm-to-school initiatives in Maryland, these efforts currently receive no state-allocated funding or staff. The Farm to School Pilot Grant program will allow Maryland school districts to apply for grants of 20 cents for every meal served that includes a local food component. **We request that this program be fully funded at \$500,000 to make local, healthy food more available for Maryland's schoolchildren.**

### The Maryland Food and Agriculture Resiliency Mechanism (MD FARM)

MD FARM will help mitigate the economic hardships and supply-chain issues of the pandemic by supporting food assistance organizations to leverage Maryland agriculture for emergency and resiliency purposes. This program was funded at \$200,000 dollars – well below the request of \$1.25 million. **We request that the state fully fund the program with an additional \$1.05 million to address the level of food insecurity throughout Maryland more adequately.**

## Improve Client, Agency, and Food Bank Experience Through The Emergency Food Assistance Program

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a federal program administered by the USDA to help alleviate food insecurity through the provision of free emergency food assistance. Through the program, the USDA purchases a variety of surplus agricultural commodities and distributes funds to states based on various metrics of need. States lean heavily on food banks to oversee the delivery and administration of commodities to smaller recipient agencies throughout their respective regions. Of the 200 Feeding America food banks, the Capital Area Food Bank is one of only six with three states in its service area. Thus, we are held to vastly different approaches and requirements by each state, for the same federal program.



Based on our experience administering this program across three states and after leading an extensive effort to survey other multi-state food banks across the country, we recommend that policymakers amend TEFAP to make it more streamlined, accessible, and beneficial for neighbors, partner agencies, and food banks.

#### Increase Client Access

TEFAP's authorizing language and commensurate federal regulations require states to ensure that beneficiaries are "needy." Each state takes its own approach to assessing whether a client fits this criterion, often by calculating their percentage of poverty threshold or enrollment in social safety net programs; this equates to varying degrees of eligibility across states, for the same federal program. **We request that Maryland increase the neighbor income eligibility threshold to at least 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline, remove the identification collection requirement, and loosen other restrictive requirements to increase access to and eligibility for the program.**

#### Streamline Administrative Reporting Requirements

States have a significant amount of latitude to oversee, audit, and monitor TEFAP administration by food banks and participating agencies. However, based on conversations with food banks across the country, this degree of latitude results in widely different programmatic requirements, deadlines, technologies, and outcomes nationwide. **We request that Maryland set standards for reporting, site reviews, and audits that are streamlined and uniform with other states in the DMV and Mid-Atlantic USDA Region.**

#### Diversify Commodity Offerings and Allow for Food Bank Input

Food banks have very little autonomy over the types and quantities of food provided for distribution. This can make administration difficult, given that food banks are consistently adhering to nutrition ratio standards, ordering for a range of cultures and dietary needs, and offering a range of products to supplement other services and food items. Additionally, although food banks must abide by the administrative and operational requirements put forth by states within the state distribution plan, food banks often have little input into said plan. **We request that Maryland continue to incorporate practices to diversify commodity offerings that reflect the cultural and dietary needs of clients and allow for requisite food bank input into its state distribution plan.**



### Expand School Meals for Maryland Students

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs provide critical meals for students at school. Many states, including Maryland, choose to build upon these programs with additional funds and programs to supplement federal meals. The nutritional, educational, and behavioral benefits of providing school meals for students are clear; higher test scores, better attendance, proper behavior, reduced illness, and increased well-being can all be correlated with access to healthy meals. Maryland must invest in our students by expanding access to nutrition assistance at schools:

#### Fully Invest in Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA)

This state fund allows eligible schools to implement free breakfast in the classroom for all students. However, the current level of investment means the number of schools that can participate in the program is limited; about 160 eligible schools cannot be funded. **We request an additional investment of approximately \$3.4 million to allow all eligible schools to provide free breakfast to students.**

### Provide Universal School Meals for All

Throughout the pandemic, national waivers allowed all Maryland to students to receive school meals. As these waivers lapse, the state has the opportunity to continue this influential practice and support children and families' food security, health, education, and well-being. **We request that Maryland implement healthy school meals for all students.**



### Apply Categorical Eligibility to Low-Income Utility Assistance

Throughout the pandemic, demand for utility assistance has increased dramatically in Maryland. The state has taken steps—such as implementing moratoriums on late payments, investing funds to reduce utility arrearages, and passing legislation to support energy assistance—to help low-income households maintain electric and gas services. Notably, the Heat and Eat Program was established in the 2022 legislative session, expanding food and utility access to households eligible for or receiving SNAP. As the economic effects of the pandemic are likely to impact thousands of Marylanders for years to come, the state must continue to support intersecting basic needs, like food and utilities. **We request that lawmakers pass legislation to extend categorical eligibility for utility assistance to those receiving SNAP, TANF, and SSI.**



### Permanently Implement Expansions to the State-Level Earned Income Tax Credit

Maryland is one of 28 states to offer a state-level Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), supporting more than 400,000 Marylanders who work hard but still struggle to get by on low wages. In 2021, Maryland legislators passed the RELIEF Act, expanding the state EITC to thousands of low-income workers who were previously ineligible for the credit and increasing the value of the credit for all recipients. These changes have made the EITC in Maryland more effective by investing in all low-income working people—particularly immigrants who have chosen Maryland as their home. However, these expansions will sunset this year if legislative action is not taken. **We request that the Maryland General Assembly make expansions to the EITC permanent in the 2023 legislative session to continue providing critical assistance to thousands of working Marylanders.**



### Incorporate Food Security as a Formal Priority in Agency-Level Strategic and Administrative Planning

The objectives and measures embedded in strategic planning are intended to monitor performance, increase accountability, and ultimately guide fiscal investments in programs and priorities. At a state level, Maryland's planning apparatus sets the direction of agencies, counties, and municipalities through the tone and template laid out in strategic-planning documentation. Food security metrics and priorities should be integrated across various Maryland agencies, as recommended in the [Maryland Food System Resiliency Council's recent report](#). **We request that Maryland elevate the issue of hunger by incorporating food security metrics and objectives into agency-level strategic planning.**



## Support Cross-Regional Strategic Approaches to Food System Resiliency

In response to the pandemic's vast impacts on food security and food systems, the Capital Area Food Bank led a cross-regional initiative to craft a DMV Food Security Playbook. This Playbook provides operational tactics for local nonprofit hunger relief organizations to coordinate a response to food security emergencies, while simultaneously building long-term food system resiliency. Alongside The Metropolitan Washington Council of Government (COG), the food bank is committed to building upon the recommendations in the Playbook by crafting strategies, structures, and approaches that hunger-relief actors in the DMV can execute. The first priority of the three-dozen regional food relief actors who were engaged in the creation and review of the Playbook is the development of a centralized distribution dashboard tool: a crowdsourced database where nonprofit organizations can self-report service statistics to increase situational awareness in an emergency. Crafting this type of tool is critical for the region's nonprofits to be able to respond strategically to future food security crises. **We request that government actors support the efforts to implement Playbook recommendations, including the creation of a centralized distribution tool.**



## Create a Maryland Health Equity Fund

Similar to the [proposed fund in California](#), the Maryland Health Equity Fund would provide grants to community-based organizations and providers to address health disparities and social determinants of health, including food security and nutrition. The state has already taken great strides to implement such approaches, and we believe this grant should build upon the data and understanding of the [Maryland Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities](#) to enable community partners to do the same. **We request Maryland allocate \$1 million to create a state Health Equity Fund to further advance health equity work throughout our community.**



## Policy Priorities for Local Jurisdictions:

### Montgomery County, MD

- Invest in inter-programmatic benefit enrollment experts, hosted at community-based organizations
- Implement universal school meals or utilize the self-sufficiency standard to calculate eligibility for school meal participation
- Establish a food-as-medicine program to build partnerships with and empower pediatricians and other clinicians to screen for and address food insecurity
- Make permanent the Working Families Income Supplement expansion to individual tax identification number filers

### Prince George's County, MD

- Create a county-level Earned Income Tax Credit
- Invest in inter-programmatic benefit enrollment experts, hosted at community-based organizations
- Create and fund a Prince George's County Food Security Office
- Establish a food-as-medicine program to build partnerships with and empower pediatricians and other clinicians to screen for and address food insecurity



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