



## **Testimony in Support of House Bill 315: The Maryland Cares for Kids Act**

House Ways and Means Committee

February 8, 2018

**Maryland Hunger Solutions** was established in 2007 by The Food Research & Action Center to fight hunger and improve the nutrition, health, and well-being of children and families in Maryland. We use the following three strategies to achieve our mission:

- Maximize participation in federal and state nutrition programs.
- Educate the public and key stakeholders both to the stark reality of hunger's existence in Maryland and to solutions that are already at hand.
- Improve public policies to end hunger, reduce poverty, and promote nutrition.

Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports **The Maryland Cares for Kids Act** — a bill that removes the school meal co-pays for 45,632 low-income children in families that are struggling to get by on low wages. School meal programs support both health and learning and are effective at reducing **food insecurity**. The lack of reliable access to healthy food, or “food insecurity,” is a condition which affects a disturbing 17 percent of all Maryland households with children (2013-2015, USDA).

More than 348,000 low-income children in our state currently qualify for free school meals. However, not all low-income students live below the federal free meal income limit. In fact, a single parent with one child earning just \$22,000 a year does not currently qualify for free school meals. Families who qualify for **reduced-price meals** have incomes that fall between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level. (See income guidelines chart on next page.) However, with incomes this low, many reduced-price eligible students incur cafeteria debt or go hungry because their parents cannot afford the cost of school meals. In fact, reduced-price eligible students are 26 percent less likely to eat school meals, compared to students that qualify for free school meals (Source: MSDE meal data for 2013-2014).

**HB 315 eliminates a critical barrier to school meals — the cost of the meal itself.** As a result, participation will increase, fewer students will go hungry, and cafeteria debt will be reduced. In addition, cafeteria operations will be streamlined and school staff will be removed from the role of debt collectors. HB 315 essentially expands eligibility for free school meals to include reduced-price eligible students — a common sense solution to reduce hunger and support education. Other states have also eliminated the reduced-price category and have experienced increased school meal participation, higher federal revenues, and more efficient school meal operations.

While other interventions target high-poverty schools, this bill **directly targets the more than 45,000 children** who are in need, regardless of the school they attend. (See table on the next page with number of reduced-price eligible students by county.) The Maryland Cares for Kids Act offers the State a clear path forward to continuing our progress in reducing childhood hunger and alleviating the burdens of poverty. The Maryland Cares for Kids Act will have a measurable impact on the health and economic well-being of low-income families in every district across our state, and we urge a favorable report.

## Number of Students Eligible for Reduced-Price School Meals, By County

Allegany	669	Harford	2,045
Anne Arundel	3,836	Howard	2,138
Baltimore City	*	Kent	66
Baltimore County	7,199	Montgomery	9,647
Calvert	490	Prince George's	10,357
Caroline	358	Queen Anne's	283
Carroll	710	Somerset	*
Cecil	823	St Mary's	776
Charles	1,480	Talbot	215
Dorchester	*	Washington	1,211
Frederick	1,737	Wicomico	593
Garrett	356	Worcester	375

**45,632 students in Maryland will benefit from the Maryland Cares for Kids Act**

\*All students in Baltimore City, Dorchester County and Somerset County Public Schools already have access to free school breakfast and lunch due to district-wide implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision.

The chart was compiled using Maryland State Department of Education enrollment data for the 2016-2017 school year, available at <http://marylandpublicschools.org/programs/Pages/School-Community-Nutrition/FreeReducedPriceMealStatistics.aspx>

## Federal Income Eligibility Guidelines for School Meals

	Free Meals	Reduced-Price Meals	Paid Meals
	Household income must be below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level to qualify for free school meals	Students with household incomes between 130-185% of the Federal Poverty Level qualify for reduced-price school meals	Students with household incomes above 185% of the Federal Poverty Level pay the full price for school meals
Two People in the Household	< \$21,112 year	<b>\$21,113 — \$30,044 year</b>	> \$30,045 year
Three People in the Household	< \$26,546 year	<b>\$26,547 — \$37,777 year</b>	> \$37,778 year
Four People in the Household	< \$31,980 year	<b>\$31,981 — \$45,510 year</b>	> \$45,511 year