



Testimony in Opposition to HB 1273

By

Maryland Hunger Solutions

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My name is Michael J. Wilson, and I am the Director of Maryland Hunger Solutions. We are a nonpartisan, nonprofit statewide organization devoted to ending hunger and promoting nutrition. We address hunger by utilizing a four pronged approach; public education, advocacy, outreach, and collaboration.

As part of our work, we ensure that eligible Marylanders can enroll in the Food Supplement Program (FSP), which is Maryland's designation for the national Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the food stamp program. In addition, we help other nonprofit organizations reach persons experiencing hunger.

We also work with child nutrition programs, including school breakfast, school lunch, after-school meals, and summer meals. We also work with the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). We collaborate with other organizations such the state's food banks, food pantries, and food policy councils.

We have been proud to work with the legislature to address hunger. The enactment of the Hunger-Free Schools Act led to tens of thousands of children getting school breakfast and lunch at no cost to the families or the state. This Committee was integral in increasing the minimum FSP benefit for Marylanders age 62 and older. As many of you may know, the minimum food stamp benefit is actually \$15 a month, and nearly 30,000 Marylanders actually get \$15 a month. By increasing the minimum benefit to \$30 month, we were able to improve the health and nutrition of 18,000 Maryland seniors. Working with our allies, we were also able to enact the Equal Access to Food Act, thereby reforming the two-decade old drug felony laws to ensure that those who had served their time and were eligible for the FSP program would be able to have access to food. And working with farmers markets we have enacted legislation — thus far unfunded — to provide bonus funding at farmers markets for Marylanders who are using public benefits, which will not only provide additional nutrition to low-income consumers, but will provide retail income to Maryland farmers. We look forward to continuing to work with you to devise smart, targeted approaches to address the challenges that face more than 1 in 10 Maryland households. That is why I am here today in opposition to HB 1273.

In addition, we have a letter to the Committee co-signed by 50 organizations in the state joining us in opposing this legislation. They are as varied as the Southern Maryland Food Bank, the Prince George's County Food Equity Council, the NAACP of Calvert County, the Washington County Hunger Group, and the Family League of Baltimore. We have submitted this letter for the Committee's consideration.

History

The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 had many far reaching provisions, but the SNAP time limits were among the most controversial. Limiting recipients to only getting benefits for three months in a three year period was not only punitive, it was also thought unproductive. While some have attempted to describe these time limits as “work requirements”, that is more political rhetoric than reality. Why? First, because once the Congress restricted the time limits to a just one part of the population — able-bodied adults without dependents, often referred to as ABAWDs — that group of recipients was a small subset of the overall SNAP population. Second; because much of this population actually is working, but their hours are limited by their employer, not the ABAWDs themselves. Finally, depending on their employment, their health, their family situation (related to dependents), their geography and the economic status of their geography could also determine whether they face time limits. It is that waiver authority exercised by the governor that HB 1273 seeks to eliminate.

Maryland History

Due to the Great Recession, Maryland, like many other states, was not required to institute time limits until 2016. For years, we had a statewide waiver from USDA. In fact, most SNAP outreach organizations and local officials were unaware of the time limits or ABAWDs.

By the end of 2015, however, many parts of Maryland had begun to recover economically. As such, Maryland was no longer eligible for a statewide waiver from USDA. The state of Maryland, using appropriate and legal analysis, requested waivers for part of the state, but not for others. Initially, six jurisdictions were no longer waived; Anne Arundel County, Baltimore County, Howard County, Montgomery County, and Prince George's County. This meant that ABAWDs in those jurisdictions faced the time limits.

Over time, more jurisdictions have lost their waivers. Presently, only Baltimore City, Allegany County, Garrett County, and the Eastern Shore are waived. They are waived because the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS) examined all of the available economic data, including unemployment and labor surplus area statistics, and applied for waivers for those parts of the state deemed eligible under the rules — areas with high unemployment and jurisdictions where there simply are not enough jobs for those who need them. Those waivers were approved by the United States Department of Agriculture.

The Hogan Administration and the Department of Human Services have done the right thing. Politics aside, they looked at the data, made a determination, requested waivers, and they were approved.

HB 1273

HB 1273 would force every jurisdiction in the state to limit ABAWDs to only receiving food stamps for three months in a three-year period. Regardless of unemployment or labor surplus data. If enacted, this law would mean additional hunger and poverty for our state.

It would not save the state of Maryland a single dime, as these are federal dollars. It would not “force recipients to work,” but it would force them to lose access to food.

It would not even require the state to offer job training or employment assistance as a condition of benefits. The state already is operating job training and employment assistance connected with benefits in most jurisdictions that are not waived — in addition to Baltimore City. Those programs provide tangible assistance to thousands on a regular basis.

I want to be clear — HB 1273 does not assist the state with outreach, education, or connections to employment and training. It simply says that the state of Maryland should not utilize the waivers available under federal law and would force every Maryland jurisdiction to impose undue burdens on their residents, irrespective of the level of unemployment or economic hardship. In short, HB 1273 would severely limit the state’s authority to make appropriate determinations that safeguard the economic and nutritional well-being of our poorest residents by limiting the governor’s waiver authority.

HB 1273 should be rejected, and the appropriate use of waivers should be combined with the use of legitimate exemptions and robust employment and training programs to move people from assistance to self-sufficiency wherever possible.