



Maryland
Hospital Association

February 9, 2021

To: The Honorable Paul G. Pinsky, Chair, Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee

Re: Letter of Support - Senate Bill 365 - Neighborhood Business Development Program - Food Desert Projects - Business Retention

Dear Chair Pinsky:

On behalf of the Maryland Hospital Association's (MHA) 60 member hospitals and health systems, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on Senate Bill 365.

Access to healthy food is essential to achieve optimal health and ensure health equity for all Marylanders. Hospitals support Senate Bill 365, which would close the gap in food access and help eliminate food deserts.

The legislation would double the maximum eligible loan amount under the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development's Neighborhood BusinessWorks program. It also would provide financing to small businesses, such as grocery stores and nonprofits, in food deserts that offer fresh, healthy foods and grant forgiveness for some costs if the business or nonprofit operates in the same location for five years.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased food insecurity statewide. Widespread job losses, financial hardships, and school closures contributed to a surge of Marylanders seeking food assistance. In June, three months after the start of the pandemic, a record-setting 14% of the state's population received assistance—with every county impacted.² The Maryland Food Bank served 43 million meals between March and December—an 89% increase from the same period in 2019.³ Black and Hispanic families were twice as likely to be food insecure compared with white families.⁴ These statistics are alarming, but even more concerning is the potential impact on the health of these Marylanders.

¹ Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development. (January 20, 2016). "[Annual Report to Senate Budget & Taxation Committee, Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee, House Appropriations Committee & House Environmental Matters Committee on Neighborhood Business Development Program's Actions in Food Deserts](#)"

² Maryland Hunger Solutions. (n.d.). [2020 Maryland County Hunger Profiles](#).

³ The Maryland Food Bank. (n.d.). "[The Maryland Food Bank's COVID-19 Response](#)."

⁴ Harvard School of Public Health. (2020). "[Nearly four in 10 Black, Hispanic Families Facing Food Insecurity During Pandemic](#)."

Food insecurity prevents people from consuming a balanced diet and harms overall health. Unhealthy diets contribute to chronic diseases like diabetes and malnutrition if a person's food intake is insufficient. Malnutrition can lead to diseases like hypertension and behavioral health issues like depression or anxiety.⁵ For children, food insecurity may lead to developmental problems. Studies show children from food insecure households have two to four times more health problems than children from low-income households who are food secure.⁶ Black and Hispanic households and low-income and immigrant populations are disproportionately affected and more likely to live in food deserts.⁷

Access to healthy and affordable food options are essential to food security—a major social determinant of health. A person's food selection and spending are likely influenced by the accessibility and affordability of food retailers—including distance, selection, and price.⁸ For low-income 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.⁹

Maryland hospitals support SB 365 because it incentivizes businesses to improve and maintain access to healthy food where the need is greatest, in both urban and rural areas of the state. Many states across the country rely on similar financing models to overcome store access barriers.¹⁰ This is essential to close the gap in food access, improve food security, and advance the health of communities.

For these reasons, we request a *favorable* report on SB 365.

For more information, please contact:
Erin Dorrien, Director, Government Affairs & Policy
Edorrien@mhaonline.org

⁵ American Hospital Association. (June, 2017). "[Social Determinants of Health Series: Food Insecurity and the Role of Hospitals.](#)"

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ USDA, Economic Research Service. (January 6, 2021). "[Trends in U.S. Food Security.](#)"

⁸ USDA, Economic Research Service. (September 24, 2020). "[Food Access.](#)"

⁹ USDA, Economic Research Service. Economic Information Bulletin Number 209. (May 2010). "[Understanding Low-Income and Low Access Census Tracts Across the Nation: Subnational and Subpopulation Estimates of Access to Healthy Food.](#)"

¹⁰ Ibid.