



TESTIMONY AT THE HOUSE RULES COMMITTEE FIELD HEARING

Dear Representatives McGovern and Raskin, and distinguished members of the community, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about food insecurity in the 8th Congressional District, and the critical need for government and community partnership at all levels, from the neighborhood to the federal government, in building food system resiliency.

My name is Heather Bruskin, and I am the Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council in Maryland. The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for County residents at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County's farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity in the nation and in Montgomery County in particular, exposing critical weaknesses and deep inequities in our food system. Currently, the County's rate of food insecurity is hovering around 10%, up from 7% pre-pandemic, which means that over 100,000 people in our County, including over 30,000 children, are unsure where their next meal is coming from. Since March 2020, Montgomery County has seen an estimated 50% increase in the number of residents accessing food assistance services.

The health impacts of food insecurity and hunger disproportionately affect our County's children and people of color. According to the Maryland Department of Health, The Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey - administered before the pandemic - found that Black students are 5 times more likely and Latino students are 6 times more likely to be food insecure, as compared to their white peers. In addition, nutrition assistance programs do not reach many of Montgomery County's mixed immigration status families, which is evidenced by the fact that we have the lowest SNAP enrollment rates in Maryland. Our County's geographic diversity also means we have both urban areas neighboring DC and rural areas with very limited grocery stores and public transportation. And despite the fact that the County has a 93,000-acre agricultural reserve, with a third of our land preserved for farming, it is estimated that only one percent of the food we eat in the County is produced on this land, leaving us reliant on the same food supply chains we have seen consistently disrupted during the pandemic.

Tied to the rise of food insecurity is the rise of poverty in the County. Despite our County's overall wealth, the number of residents living below the poverty line has been growing. For example, the number of residents living below the poverty line rose by almost 5,000 to 76,985 in 2019. It is worth noting that this trend is not mirrored by all counties across the state; neighboring jurisdictions experienced decreases in their poverty rate from 2018 to 2019. In addition, the high cost of living in the County, in particular housing costs, means that we



also have tens of thousands of County residents who earn too much to qualify for benefits like SNAP and WIC, but do not make enough money to make ends meet. As a result, more than one third of our County's children qualify for Free and Reduced Price Meals at school, in one of the nation's largest school districts, with over 160,000 students at over 200 schools.

All of these factors complicate efforts to create and implement strategies to address food insecurity and hunger, and highlight the need for federal funding of local organizations that have intimate knowledge of specific barriers to food access and that can work to create and maintain a resilient food system. Local organizations are uniquely situated to address hunger through collaborative approaches that address many interconnected areas. For example, building local food production capacities, either at the commercial or individual consumer level, is a critical component of addressing food insecurity as it creates jobs, reduces our reliance on food transported from long distances, makes fresh nutritious food more accessible, and helps stimulate the local economy in addition to reducing the environmental impact of food production. Ultimately, collaborative, local solutions like this will reduce the number of Americans and County residents reliant on emergency food assistance resources.

In addition, as we have learned during the pandemic, our national and local food systems are vulnerable to systemic shocks that we must address to effectively combat food insecurity and hunger. Supply chain disruptions, increases in unemployment, and inflation, to name a few, have all hampered our efforts. And despite significant investments and accomplishments in food security strategies in Montgomery County over the past three years, recent economic crises have exacerbated the systemic root causes of food insecurity, including the number of residents experiencing poverty. To create a vibrant food system that is more resistant to these shocks, we need to bolster local food production through improvements in infrastructure, public-private partnerships, and more extensive communications and outreach pathways to coordinate efforts.

That's where the Montgomery County Food Council comes in. We strive to build networks of participants in the local and regional food system and to enhance their capacities. We also lead advocacy that drives policy change centered on the expertise and lived experience of County residents, particularly residents who these policies and systems are designed to support. In addition, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have served as co-lead to the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force, coordinating \$23M+ in innovative food access strategies. The framework for our strategies has been to connect more food - through a diverse sourcing strategy that bolsters local businesses - to more people by leveraging technology to efficiently connect residents to food in accessible, community-coordinated ways. These innovative strategies have proven critical in particular to our food distribution network, which has seen a massive increase in demand for assistance while at the same time experiencing a significant decrease in supply due to supply chain disruptions.

Federal funding has been critical to making our strategies for addressing food insecurity and hunger during the pandemic, tailored to the unique needs of our County, possible. Continued leadership and investment by our federal government will be crucial toward the long-term sustainability of these pandemic-era strategies and programs, which are essential if we are to continue addressing food insecurity and the impacts of the pandemic in the future. It will also allow us to invest federal dollars in neighborhood level initiatives that support community leaders and connect with hard-to-reach populations, while building our economic and overall local resilience to be better prepared for future crises.

We know you have had the opportunity to explore the issue of hunger in congressional districts around the county, and in many ways our residents experience the same food insecurity issues Americans face nationwide. As you know, food insecurity and hunger are symptoms of deeper historic and systemic inequities, primarily income insufficiency and the way community assets, like grocery stores and access to land, are allocated. As



we work to continue combating these problems, we thank you for your leadership in these efforts, and look forward to your continued partnership in the years to come.

For more information, please contact: Heather Bruskin, MCFC Executive Director at the email and phone number below.

Name
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Dear ,

Sincerely yours,

Name
Title



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