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Budget and Taxation Committee

Capital Budget Subcommittee

Health and Human Services Subcommittee

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Vote Yes on Senate Bill SB 828

SB 828 State Department of Education - Summer Food Service Program - Regulatory Waivers (Summer Meals Waiver Act)

Dear Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan and members of the committee:

I write to you today in support of a favorable vote to SB 828. One in nine Marylanders experience food insecurity, meaning they don't have consistent access to an adequate amount of affordable, nutritious food. Food insecurity varies across the state, but the highest percentage of food insecure individuals live in Baltimore City, where food insecurity is reported by almost a quarter of households with adults and over 40% of households with children and adolescents. Almost half of the children living in Baltimore City experience some amount of food insecurity, meaning they might skip meals, eat less food at mealtimes, or not know where their next meal is coming from, on a regular basis. What's more, food insecurity rises for children during the summer months, when they don't have regular access to free- or reduced-priced meals at school.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federally funded program that was designed to reduce food insecurity among children (ages 18 and under) during the summer months. The SFSP provides children in low-income areas with free nutritious meals and snacks during the months of June, July, and August. Free summer meals help families stretch their food budgets throughout the summer months, decreasing their risk of food insecurity and strengthening summer recreation and enrichment programs. Additionally, summer meals can improve child nutrition and reduce the risk of childhood obesity, since summer meals have to meet federal nutrition standards that require fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to be served.

A quick note about how the SFSP is run: there are two key terms here—sponsors and sites. Sponsors are generally public school districts, local government agencies, camps, or non-profit organizations, and are generally in charge of a number of different trusted and accessible sites, which are located at schools, faith-based organizations, local libraries, recreation centers, and other community spaces. For example, Baltimore City Public Schools serves meals at 124 different sites around the city. Sponsors are responsible for the financial and administrative aspects of the sites, so they're the ones making sure everything runs smoothly and that each site has enough meals to serve daily. There are 45 sponsors and over a thousand sites throughout the state of Maryland, with the highest concentration of sites in Baltimore City and surrounding counties. In 2018, Maryland sites served approximately 60 thousand meals each weekday, totaling over 1.6 million meals served throughout the summer.

SFSP sponsors receive federal funding and sponsors must meet numerous requirements to receive the funding. In the past, federal waivers helped sponsors by removing some of the most burdensome program requirements. In other words, the sponsors used the waivers to get rid of some of the unnecessary logistical hoops and let them focus on the thing that matters most—serving as many meals to as many children as possible. A recent internal audit by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) led to the decision by USDA to rescind six of these waivers, starting in the summer of 2019. Rescinding these six waivers reinstated all the burdensome requirements for all sponsors across the country, including things like obligatory first week site visits, removal of the “offer versus serve” option, and limited meal service time requirements.

The Maryland State Department of Education declined to request the waivers for Maryland. While every other state in the Mid-Atlantic region did request – and receive – the waivers, Maryland stood alone. The other states participated without regard to partisan leadership or size included West Virginia, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia.

Maryland Hunger Solutions and the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health surveyed all summer meal sponsors and interviewed numerous sponsor coordinators about their experiences with the rescinded waivers. The results were disturbing and compelling, but not entirely surprising. Overwhelmingly, sponsors reported that their operations were disrupted by the change, leading to substantial modifications to their day-to-day lives. Some sponsors were forced to stop serving at certain mealtimes, like breakfast or supper, because they simply didn’t have enough time to complete the whole process (which involves setup, distribution of food, adequate time for eating, and cleanup) within the new constraints. Other sponsors found that they didn’t have the staff or resources to meet the new requirements, like providing paperwork to prove that every child who showed up for lunch actually met the requirements to receive a free meal. And while some sponsors were able to hire more staff to deal with these issues, the smaller or less-established sponsors were left with the harsh reality that they would have to serve fewer meals.

One of the most concerning things is the fact that MDSE has decided not to apply for state waivers for the summer of 2020. We hope to remedy this by legislation (SB 828) before the summer of 2020.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Cory V. McCray". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and a long horizontal stroke.

Cory V. McCray
State Senator