

EQUITY FOR ALL KIDS



To: Health and Government Operations Committee
From: Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, Executive Director
Re: HB819, Health and Wellness Standards -
Correctional Facilities and Health Care Facilities
Date: February 26, 2020
Position: Support

Advocates for Children and Youth supports HB 819, which would require correctional facilities and certain health care facilities in the state of Maryland to adopt health and wellness standards for food service.

While this legislation does not impact the juvenile justice system, it does impact youth. Despite significant reforms in 2015, youth are still held in adult correctional facilities. That legislation included exceptions for when there is no capacity at a Department of Juvenile Service Detention Center, or when a judge finds that detention in a secure juvenile facility would pose a risk to the child or others. As recently as 2018, investigations found youth held in adult detention systems in Frederick and Baltimore Counties.¹ Youth convicted of certain crimes are also held in adult facilities.

For these youth, the benefits of a healthy, plant-based diet are significant. Poor nutrition contributes to high rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic diseases, and these are more prevalent among incarcerated people than the general population. Offering healthy, plant-based diets to youth in correctional facilities not only offers health benefits in the short-term but can help inform their dietary decisions upon release and improve their health over the course of their lives.

Healthy, plant-based diets have also been linked to improved mental health outcomes, including reduced rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and mood disturbance.² Given the high rates of mental health disorders for youth in the justice system,³ dietary interventions can provide an important tool for improving outcomes for youth while incarcerated and to set them up for greater success upon reentry.

ACY hopes that this conversation can spur a deeper analysis and discussion of the healthy food standards for youth in other facilities, including juvenile facilities. We support HB 819 and urge a favorable vote.

¹ <https://foxbaltimore.com/features/operation-crime-justice/juveniles-charged-as-adults-potentially-face-dangerous-conditions-at-detention-centers>

² <https://nutritionfacts.org/topics/mental-health/>

³ Grisso T., Barnum R. Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument, Second Version: User Manual and Technical Report. University of Massachusetts Medical School; Worcester, MA, USA: 2000