

March 9, 2022

Honorable Sec. Padilla,

We, the undersigned organizations, are writing to you today to urge you to continue to apply for the emergency allotment waiver for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to ensure the continued safety of vulnerable Marylanders. We applaud your ongoing efforts to ensure that gaps remain filled while work continues on more permanent solutions, and appreciate the leadership you and the Department of Human Services have provided in addressing the health, wellbeing, and economic needs of Marylanders throughout the pandemic.

Our state vaccination rates are exemplary and continue to provide protection from COVID-19. However, while we share hope that many aspects of life are returning to normal, for many Marylanders, the emergency is far from over. And given Maryland's food insecurity rate of 1 in 9 prior to the pandemic, "normal" was far from ideal.¹ The recovery for Marylanders with low incomes, for those experiencing homelessness, and for those facing hunger, continues to be slow. Maintaining access to this critical program supporting Marylanders' access to food depends upon the continuation of applying for this waiver.

That support is essential. As you are well aware, Maryland recently broke SNAP participation records again with over 880,000 individuals accessing this program in December 2021. The economic impact of COVID-19 remains widespread and continues to severely impact communities across the state. Hunger remains higher than ever before and levels have not decreased in the past year. An eviction crisis still looms and hunger and housing insecurity also disproportionately affect families with children and especially Black and Indigenous Marylanders of color. The increased vaccination rate and continual decrease in COVID cases are certainly cause for celebration, but we are not out of the woods yet.

Since the beginning of the pandemic the cost of food has risen at an alarming rate. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) found that average annual food-at-home prices rose 3.5% from 2019 to 2020 and rose an additional 3.5% from 2020 to 2021, both exceeding historical averages.² Estimates from USDA ERS forecast an additional 1.5-2.5% rise in food-at-home costs in 2022 and are expected to again surpass historical averages.³ While some of this can be attributed to supply-chain issues, the result is clear: food costs are rising rapidly with no end in sight. Taking away the additional federal support now would spell disaster for 419,000 households that receive it.

¹ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maryland>

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<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending/?topicId=1afac93a-444e-4e05-99f3-53217721a8be>

³ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>

11% of Marylanders report that their children aren't eating enough because families can't afford food, and 25% are struggling to cover usual household expenses. Many remain unable to access newly available jobs due to challenges with childcare, transportation, and more. 17% report struggling to keep up with rent, and many others cannot find housing at all.⁴ And the charitable food system simply cannot be a sustained support for all of these needs.

The State of Emergency supports our businesses as well as the most vulnerable. In January 2022, the Department of Human Services issued over \$216 million in emergency allotment benefits to Maryland SNAP households.⁵ These funds not only support the food budgets of nearly 871,000 Marylanders, but they stimulate our economy and support our local food retailers and farmers by keeping millions of federal dollars each month in our communities, with an estimated \$324 million a month generated in the local economy.⁶ These benefits were not only spent at grocery stores, but also at farmers markets throughout the state, which saw increased SNAP purchases this year. The implementation of online SNAP has helped thousands to shop remotely. In addition, the newly implemented Restaurant Meals Program will enable these benefits to be used at participating restaurants, opening a new revenue stream for restaurants still struggling with the economic impact of COVID-19.

Loss of funds tied to the emergency declaration that are helping households afford basic needs in this unprecedented time would be detrimental to Maryland's economy and health. We request that while COVID restrictions have been reduced to help open up our economy, you will also recognize the ongoing health and economic distress of many Marylanders and continue to sustain key elements of the Emergency Order to protect Marylanders who are food insecure. Specifically, we request your administration's ongoing work to ensure the continuation of SNAP emergency benefit allotments for as long as possible, and to renew the alternative state-of-emergency.

Thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your ongoing work to ensure not only a strong recovery from this pandemic, but a future in which all of Maryland's most basic needs are secure.

Sincerely,

Maryland Hunger Solutions

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<https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>

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<https://dhs.maryland.gov/documents/Data%20and%20Reports/FIA/Statistical%20Reports/2021-All-Prg-MoStat-Public-Web-w-Charts-Final-8.pdf>

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<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table>