



April 8, 2024

Montgomery County Council President
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

MONTGOMERY COUNTY FOOD COUNCIL TESTIMONY: COUNTY COUNCIL FY25 BUDGET

On behalf of the Montgomery County Food Council, I would like to thank Council President Friedson, Council Vice President Stewart, and the County Council Members for considering community perspectives in the annual budgetary approval process.

The Food Council greatly appreciates the renewal of our existing base budget funds, including a cost of living increase. We are working to build a more resilient post-pandemic food system by cultivating partnerships to end childhood hunger, increasing SNAP enrollment in hard-to-reach communities, strengthening local food procurement and production, and advancing efforts to reduce food waste. The ability of the entire food security community to respond quickly, efficiently and cohesively to the food security crisis brought on by COVID was directly because of the County's investment in strategy, policy, coordination, and direct services. **We support the many food system-specific aspects of this budget and encourage the County Council to continue prioritizing allocations that will help us support and improve a more equitable and resilient food system.**

Fund the Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger: In 2023, the County Government adopted the Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger ([2-page summary](#), [full report](#)) that recommends increased access to financial nutrition benefits, strengthening food support at schools and in childcare, and investing in novel solutions bolstered by data-driven decisionmaking. We recommend that the County use this plan as a roadmap for food assistance coordination and food security investment to address the needs of the 34,000 children who are food insecure and the more than additional 76,000 children living below the self-sufficiency standard, *i.e.*, in households without sufficient income to meet their needs but earning too much to qualify for various nutrition benefit programs.

Support Funding for the Office of Food Systems Resilience: We urge County Council to support the funding appropriated for the Office of Food Systems Resilience (OFSR), which has been instrumental in aligning food-related segments of County government to offer comprehensive and innovative food system improvements. For example, OFSR was able to rapidly deploy funding available through Special Appropriation #24-37 to carry out the County Council's vision to end childhood hunger. Investment in OFSR is necessary for a unified, efficient and visionary approach to achieving food system priorities in the County generally, and for carrying out the recommendations in the Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger specifically.

Support for Dedicated SNAP Outreach and Enrollment: SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against food insecurity, and remains the best way to link food-insecure families with reliable funding to buy



healthy, culturally-appropriate foods with the dignity of choice. SNAP enrollment also automatically qualifies children for free meals at school or daycare, and each \$1.00 in federally funded SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in local economic activity. Investing in SNAP outreach and enrollment efforts ensures that federal nutrition dollars are maximized to support the food security of our residents.

In 2021, the Montgomery County Food Council became a designated Community Based Organization (CBO) with the Maryland Department of Human Services's (DHS) SNAP Outreach Program. Maryland DHS reimburses CBOs for 50% of their costs related to SNAP outreach and enrollment assistance. As a CBO, we work to broaden and increase SNAP outreach and enrollment in under-resourced communities in our County by educating outreach workers, referral partners and anti-hunger organizations, prescreening residents for SNAP eligibility, and assisting eligible residents to complete SNAP applications. This direct support is especially crucial to our residents who face the most barriers in accessing SNAP benefits, such as those with transportation challenges, language access needs, lack of access to technology, and our County's immigrant families who face additional challenges due to deep fears around participation in government programs. **The Montgomery County Food Council is the only CBO in Montgomery County to be selected by Maryland DHS as a Lead Organization.** This gives MCFC the ability to expand SNAP outreach and application services in Montgomery County by adding Montgomery County non-profit organizations as subgrantees to our agreement with Maryland DHS, thereby extending federal dollars to support smaller community partners with unique language and cultural accessibility and allowing them to also receive reimbursement for 50% of their SNAP outreach and enrollment assistance costs. Through our technical assistance to subgrantees and in our role as convener of the Montgomery County SNAP Work Group, MCFC leads coordination of SNAP outreach and enrollment efforts across the County to ensure that all eligible residents receive the federal nutrition benefits to which they are entitled, and can access assistance in their neighborhoods and in the language they prefer.

Support for Other Food Systems Investments:

- The Food Council supports two initiatives to divert food from the County's waste stream. The Department of Environmental Protection estimates that approximately 89,000 tons of food waste were disposed of in Montgomery County last year. Diverting this compostable food would lower the use of the incinerator, reduce methane levels in landfills, and increase the opportunity to create a closed loop by providing usable compost to local organizations. The Food Council therefore strongly supports increased funding for a New Organics Processing Facility to alleviate the burden on waste processing facilities and convert the methane producing waste into compost. The Food Council also supports establishing a Composting Education Hub to train gardeners and farmers on how to properly compost food scraps.
- The Food Council strongly supports local food and beverage businesses and creating connections within the County to increase opportunities for local procurement. The Food Council supports funding for the Office of Agriculture, especially the focus on expanding markets for county table food and beverage producers.

Support for the Not-for-Profit Sector and Increased Budget Transparency: Nonprofit organizations are small businesses with overhead and indirect costs that are often underfunded. Our location near the nation's capital also means we are competing with national-level nonprofits for local candidates, further shrinking the available talent pool. The Food Council serves as a convener and close partner to a number of food systems and social service nonprofit organizations, including a large network of food assistance provider



partners. It is critical to provide adequate funding so that nonprofit partners can continue to support County residents. However, when evaluating the County's budget in preparation for testimony, it is unclear how nonprofit organizations are being included specifically within the budget. We advocate for increased budget transparency in future years so our testimony may be better informed.

By continuing to invest in the Food Council and in our partner organizations and businesses, the County will invest in a more self-sufficient local food system that ensures greater engagement of community voice and expertise in policy and programmatic work. Investment will also maximize the capacity of direct service provider programs, address hunger and financial barriers among County residents, and connect federal and state resources to local efforts.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, and for your leadership and support of a more resilient, sustainable, robust, and equitable food system in Montgomery County. We appreciate the County's investment and partnership, and we look forward to the future.

Sincerely,

Nanya Chiejine
Executive Director, Montgomery County Food Council

