

# MLK Advocacy Roundtable Transcript

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** So, to our panelists, I'm just gonna go down the row and just let everybody know who's in the room. We've got Shaun Sawko from Montgomery County Public Schools here, he's a wellness supervisor from the Department of Food Nutrition Services, Councilmember Gabe Albornoz. Heather Bruskin, who's the Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council. Delegate Jared Solomon and finally, an MCPS parent and advocate on this issue.

Thank you all for being here. So we're gonna start with one question to each of you. I'm gonna direct one specific question based on your particular vantage point in the community, and you'll have about five minutes to answer that question. We've got my colleague Camila in the back who's gonna be giving you some indication of how much time you have left.

And then we'll go to questions from the audience; so be thinking about what you'd like to ask our panelists today. And then we'll finish up by making sure that we all know what kind of action we can take coming out of this event. So I'm gonna start with you, Heather. The Food Council has been a major support to the county developing the strategic plan to end childhood hunger.

Can you give us a context for this issue, some context for this issue in the county and some background on the initiative.

**Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council:**

Thank you Jenna, and thank you so much for the opportunity to be here and for Manna's leadership and spotlight on this really critical issue in our community.

So the Food Council is a nonprofit organization and we serve as the County's primary convener of businesses and residents to nonprofit agencies and government partners around food system issues in our community, and with a focus on building collaboration and advocacy for systems change. And so we had the incredible opportunity to partner through the leadership of our County Council under then President, Council President Albornoz, to create a strategic plan to address and end childhood hunger right here in Montgomery County.

And so in April of last year the Council passed a resolution or a special appropriation to fund this plan that will address the needs of tens of thousands of our children who have inadequate access to nutrition. So one of the things that we know is here in Montgomery County, we have tremendous bounty when it comes to food.

I think so many of us have the privilege of accessing the restaurants and varied grocery stores and farmer's markets. We have our agricultural reserve. But one of the things that we also know is that this bounty is not shared equally amongst all of our community members. In Montgomery County, we have another incredible bounty, almost 250,000 children people under the age of 18.

And yet there is tremendous income inequality in our community which means that so many of these children and their families don't have access to sufficient, culturally-appropriate, nutritious food. Items that we found most surprising in this research that we've been engaging with over the past four months is that there really isn't a single measure of hunger in our community.

And it's very difficult to get a specific number of how many children are experiencing this tremendous challenge. Originally it was thought, when we started this process, that it was about 15% of our youth population. And what we found actually it's a much higher number, which is both surprising and also unsurprising because we know that hunger is hidden in so many of our communities.

It's present in every single neighborhood in our county. And the pandemic shifted the financial security of so many of our residents and created income and financial and food insecurity for so many families who had possibly never experienced it before. So we now find that there actually is probably closer to 35-40% of our children who are at risk for hunger.

So we, through this plan in partnership with literally hundreds of community advocates, leaders, organizations, government partners have put together a very thoughtful set of recommendations, which will be released probably at the end of this month that look at how can we address this tremendous inequity that exists in our community, and also recognizing that this is, this challenge is not shared equally across our community.

Because Black and Brown students are five to six times more likely to be experiencing food insecurity. And so these recommendations look at how we can reach children at all places that they intersect in our community and with community resources. So in partnership with healthcare providers, in partnership with schools.

With early childhood centers as well as more creative strategies that might enable families to be able to grow their own food or grow food as a part of their community or even within their own home. So there's lots of important recommendations that we are very eager to partner with our elected officials, with our community partners, and with residents.

And most importantly, centering the residents themselves, in both identifying solutions and implementing the strategies that are to come because their voices in informing and driving policy change is most critical.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Absolutely. And with that [MCPS Parent], as a parent of an MCPS student and an advocate on this issue, it's very personal to you.

I know. Can you share a little bit about your story and in particular, what services or programs have you found helpful for your family and what would've been beneficial, but doesn't yet exist?

**MCPS Parent and Manna Participant:** Hi my name is [omitted]. I'm a single parent of two. I have a nine year old daughter. She is in fourth grade in [omitted] Elementary School and a seven-year-old in second grade. Both of them are in the brand new school. I will say almost three years ago, I used to be on public assistance where I didn't feel any, nothing. I don't feel any impact. I used to have Food Stamps, which granted my children to be on reduced meal, or free meal, at school.

In February, or April, of 2021, I start working--but--everything changed. I don't have any of my government assistance anymore. And then they tell me that I have to put money on the card for my children to eat at school. And then I call the school, they say I can still apply for reduced meals. So they direct me to the website where I apply.

Now, I will say for now, they are eating those, they are eating breakfast and lunch at school. And then when they come home, I provide dinner. One day we had this two-hour delay because of the weather condition and they did not go to school on time. I asked them, do you guys want to eat something before you go? The little one said they want cereal, which I provided. Once they go to school and come back, as always, I provide dinner. Then at 8:30 I asked them to go to bed. Then my daughter said, oh, I did not have three meals today. That's when I realized there is something, I was getting a big help because they were having lunch, breakfast and lunch, at school.

Then all I provide is dinner. Then when she sit down and I said, oh, there's something going on, some. Because? Because I start working everything else on my own as a single parent. I have to do everything else, I'm on my own now, so this, it has a big impact. Then I realize that having reduced meals or free meals at school, it is a big help.

My request now will be like the way they do that program has a P-EBT. If they can find something like that to help us, build, for those children are our future. They are not supposed to go to school empty stomach. So please help us to build our future. They're our, the future of tomorrow. So that will be my request.

If you guys can find, help us find a program, like the P-EBT or the pandemic EBT. Something like that that can help, but that is helping. I would say in the beginning of this year, they have put money on those cards and then I, I wasn't aware of it. One of the parent came to me, 'did you check your card?' I said, 'really?'

'Is there something on it?' That helped; when I went and checked there is something on it that I can put food on the table for the children. Please help us to build our future.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** I've heard that Councilmember Kate Stewart is right here. Thank you so much . Welcome. Thanks for being here. Shaun, the Montgomery County Public School Department of Food Nutrition Services has the great responsibility as [MCPS Parent] was talking about, nourishing over 160,000 students every day, if I have that number,

**Shaun Sawko, MCPS DFNS Wellness Supervisor:** 161.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Oh, yes. What do you see in the department's role in addressing child hunger, both inside and outside of the school?

**Shaun Sawko, MCPS DFNS Wellness Supervisor:** Yeah. So again, thank you so much for having me. Thank you so much for hosting this event. Every single time I'm here, every single time I talk to you, I just get so excited about the work and passion that you have, as well as just the entire Manna Team has for childhood younger, and solving those issues.

So we're both dieticians and the way that I view food and nutrition is, we work best as a preventative measure. We're never gonna cure diabetes, we're never gonna cure hypertension, but we can help prevent against those chronic diseases. And specifically, whenever we're implementing nutrition at an early age, and we're teaching students how to eat properly at an early, early age, we can really have that snowball effect of really progressing the health of the entire county.

Since we're able to touch all 161,000 students the way that we see our role and the way that the Division of Food Nutrition Services wants to do is we don't wanna just feed our students, we wanna nourish them. You know, we're so honored and to have the ability to actually provide at least breakfast and lunch to our students, but also potentially supper and snack to our students as well.

And we know, 40% of our students' calories are coming from us, so it's a really great opportunity to not only just provide them with food, but nourishing food too. So making sure that, you know, we're preventing against chronic diseases by ensuring that they're getting calcium every single day because those things, nutritional deficiencies, are something that builds upon themselves. So you won't just wake up with brittle bones, you won't wake up with just, you know, Rickets disease, you won't wake up with chronic anemia. Those are things that kind of build up over time, and we have the opportunity and the honor and the, the, the role of actually helping prevent against those chronic diseases too.

So the way that we see things is that we're trying to expand our access as much as possible in the construction or in, I guess, the barriers or, or, or regulations that we can. So we've been able to participate in something that's been really helpful for us and it's Medicaid matching this, this school year.

So we've seen a huge increase with our free-and-reduced-meal population. So first of all, we, since we are so lucky to be in the state of Maryland, we are able to provide free meals to any student whether they qualify for reduced or free.

They're all, there's not that additional fee that they have to pay, but because of this Medicaid matching, we've been able to see that a normal school year we would be doing, about 30% of our students would qualify for free and reduced, and now we're about 45% free-and-reduced just this year alone. So it's allowing us to not only just look at how we can make a larger impact, but also what the future holds, whether or not it's universal meals, whether or not it's anything like that. We can still kind of see where we're gonna go and how we can make the most impact within the regulations that we have currently too.

Beyond that, we're trying to partner with all kinds of community partners. All kinds of other vendors that we engage with on a normal basis. I'm so lucky to be a part of the Food Council because they have been an amazing advocate. First of all, they connected us, which was amazing. But then also it's been really great because we're trying to do a lot of priorities when it comes to feeding our kids.

One of the biggest priorities that I have is making sure that we're connecting local farmers with our students. We're spending so much of our money, as federal dollars, outside of Maryland. It's about time that we provide that funding inside of Maryland, specifically in Montgomery County, because as we're meeting with these farmers, we're noticing that they're not making a large amount of money. These farmers are barely eating ends or barely making the ends meet.

So if we're able to not just only invest in our students, but also invest in our community like that too then it's just, you know, the world opens up to us as well.

I know I didn't get exactly what that last bit was, but, is there anything else?

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** I, well the last bit was talking about maybe any role that the office has for supporting children outside of the school day.

**Shaun Sawko, MCPS DFNS Wellness Supervisor:** Yeah. So, I mean, Manny the Bus is amazing. I love the idea of having that connection piece of, you know, not just

what you're eating, but how it impacts your body. So I think the role that you guys do as well as the rest of our, our community partners, is just so incredible. And again, just thank you so much.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** That end part was not a pitch for you to talk about Manna, but I thank you. And you outed me as a dietician, which sometimes I am loathe to do...- just kidding. Councilmember Albornoz, so as Heather mentioned last year as Councilmember, as Council President, you brought this issue to the forefront and I'm curious what your vision is for the County Government's response to the issue and what are the next steps toward that vision?

**Councilmember Gabe Albornoz:** Thanks, Jenna. First, it's such an honor and privilege to be with everybody in this room. I am just humbled by the energy, the intellect, the brilliance, the dedication of everybody here. And a big part of the solution is in this room. I see state partners, I see county partners, I see members of the Board of Education, and I see strong community and civic leaders.

And that's what it's gonna take to address this issue. All of us working holistically together in a strategic fashion. And for context before I get into sort of the overall vision, I've been in the health and human service space for most of my professional career. I used to work for the Latin American Youth Center and before that for Children's National Medical Center, and have always been impressed with the infrastructure of community-based organizations working often in tandem with our faith-based organizations to address the many needs of our residents.

So I've seen firsthand the incredible infrastructure and work that is done every day from a policy level down to the programmatic one-on-one level. But what we saw the last three years, and the need that arose, starting with the government shutdown which lasted a record time and nonprofit organizations were not getting their reimbursement checks.

There are over 68,000 federal workers here in Montgomery County. And there are thousands more contractors that rely on the federal government in their work. That was the first big issue that our Council had to tackle. And we were alarmed then at the significant increase that Manna, Capital Area Food Bank, and many of your other outstanding community-based organizations were experiencing.

And then COVID hits, and we all saw it with our own two eyes. The lines that were—in some cases, blocks long—just to get a packet of food. The constituent calls that we were getting on the Council were absolutely heartbreaking, absolutely devastating, but what arose out of that was something that was extraordinary.

So we had the Food Council, which had already been doing really extraordinary work. We had Manna and all these great community-based partners, but dozens, if not hundreds of organizations entered into this space. And remember COVID, at the beginning, when we were all afraid because we didn't know what was happening to go out of our own homes.

Thousands of people were stepping up to volunteer, risking their own health to help families in need. And through that process and the infrastructure that had already been established, because it had grown to a point where we all started asking ourselves, gosh, if we just strategized, if we just were able to more to, to better use the resources that we already had to establish a roadmap so that we were sharing and collecting data so that we were making more seamless referrals of families who were in need, identifying families who were sort of in that missing middle, that we could really achieve something great.

And so as Council President last year—it's a cool gig—but you only are in it for a year. And, but you have an opportunity to make a mark. And I chose as Council President addressing childhood hunger as the issue that I wanted to focus on, along with all of my colleagues. And boy, was it an easy sell.

I have been so fortunate to work with both the previous Council and now this incoming Council with women and men who get it. Who know what we need to do and have the political will, as Dr. King mentioned, to get this done. But what we needed were the experts to tell us what they needed, and that's what this blueprint is about.

And so in the coming weeks when it's shared more definitively with the public, It will include recommendations for policy changes at the federal level so that we can truly have universal meals. It will include recommendations for the collection of additional data and how to appropriately use that data.



It will include recommendations on strengthening the administrative infrastructure of community-based organizations who all of us want to fund the direct service. But if you don't have that administrative backbone, these organizations are not going to be able to achieve what they need to be able to achieve.

And it's also going to include recommendations that this is not just a one-time thing. This has to be sustained over generations. And so as long as I'm around, and I know as long as everybody in this room is around, we are going to be deeply committed to this. And I have never been more optimistic than I am right now, truly that we can address this, maybe not once and for all, because it's never gonna stop, but we can put a dent in childhood hunger in a way that's gonna have a generational impact for years to come.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Thank you. Delegate Solomon, what are some of the policy solutions coming out of Annapolis?

**Delegate Jared Solomon:** Yeah. Well first of all, thank you for the invitation. I'm sorry to be a couple of minutes late. We have a newborn and a toddler and no childcare today, so I was juggling as much as I could with helping my wife.

It's a real honor to be here. I've had the pleasure of getting to serve on Manna's Advocacy Task force since before I was elected, so it's really cool to now be on the other side and be able to help and sitting up here with some really distinguished, amazing folks who I spent a lot of time with District 18 residents as well; thank you Heather.

Yeah, so, you know, there's a couple of things I think in the works and, and I'll caveat this all with: we are in somewhat of an uncertain time right now in Annapolis, but uncertain in a good way. So I think as many of you know, we are literally two days away from the inauguration of a new governor, Governor Moore, Lieutenant Governor Aruna Miller.

And so there's a lot of sort of shakeup happening that happens when you bring in a new administration. We just found out who the new secretary of the Department of Human Services is going to be. He's got deep Maryland background, Raphael Lopez. Before working at the Department of Health and

Human Services in Washington and working for the Obama administration, he was the President of the Family League of Baltimore, worked for the Annie Casey Foundation, which is based in Baltimore. But not sure kind of how deep his Montgomery County connections are. So there's a little bit of a question mark there. You know, and we have from the Moore Administration, from the Governor himself, I wanted to read a quote because I think this just shows you where Governor Moore's priorities are gonna be. He said, 'I will never understand, or get over, how in a society is giving and as prosperous is ours, that we allow so much pain and suffering on the basis of things like food insecurity.' He said that when visiting the University System of Maryland's campus in Hagerstown, so all that's to say we know where Governor Moore's North Star is.

It's about fighting poverty, it's about fighting child poverty, it's about ending food insecurity, ending hunger. I think how we're gonna get there is still a little bit of a question mark. You know, we have a really big budget surplus right now, but one of the, one of the fears is that that is going to disappear at potentially the whim and the change of the economy.

And so there's been a lot of emphasis in Annapolis on sort of spending those dollars on more one time fixes, as opposed to sort of ongoing costs. And I think we're facing the change of, you know, of the House in Washington, a federal government that may not be quite as responsive to our needs as we really need.

You know, with things like the SNAP cliff pending, with a lot of the benefits that you know, were expanded and did tremendous work because of COVID, starting to run out. And the problem is when those costs get shifted to states, it's really difficult for us. You know, it's a lot easier for the federal government to do these sort of things than for the state to pick up the cost. And so there's a lot of really great ideas out there. I think a lot of us are still sort of waiting to see what the administration is really going to prioritize. But I will say this, I think we are going to have an incredibly engaged and willing partner that frankly many of us have not seen.

And certainly in the four years or so that I have been in Annapolis, some of my colleagues obviously have been there longer. I just don't think this administration, the current administration has been as committed to this kind of work. But I did wanna highlight a couple of things I know that we're working on sort of bigger and

broadly in Annapolis, you know, really focusing on sort of express-lane eligibility and how we get more of our systems to talk to one another. So for example, I worked on a bill last year that I was really really excited to get through around childcare and our childcare scholarships and doing things like if you qualify for snap, your income would automatically qualify you for a childcare scholarship.

So why do we make families have to fill out the same application over again? We know that if you need food support, more than likely you also need help with paying for childcare. So we've streamlined that application process. We need to do that writ large. Most of the data that we request families to provide, the barriers that we put in place for applications, all that data exists somewhere in one form or another, usually in a server, somewhere in one agency, it's just those agencies don't talk to one another. And so I think there's gonna be a lot of interest and a lot of new ideas in how we make our systems function better, how at the end of the day, we get families the supports they need, and we as a state government and as a government entity, figure all the other stuff out on the back end, and it's on us, not on the families.

You know, one basic core function that we have not done is literally staff the state government. And I know that that is going to be, that is a top priority for Speaker Jones in the house. It was the number one priority she mentioned in her speech when she was sworn in earlier this week.

We see record levels of vacancies. We have the highest rate of vacancy in state government ever. Since our Department of Budget Management has been keeping track of this and that trickles down to everything. And we saw that during COVID, when you couldn't get your calls answered, you couldn't get help with anything. Folks in the Department of Human Services didn't even have computers that they could take home to do the work that was necessary to make sure that families were still getting the support they needed.

So, even if we don't pass any major splashy bills this year. And I do have a list of things that I know I don't have time to get to right now, but I have a list of some legislation to direct you all to. If all we do this session is make sure that we actually fill the vacancies that are currently there, that we make sure that our agencies do what they are tasked to do, that they're able to implement the bills

that we've passed already in the past few years, that in and of itself will be groundbreaking for the state government.

So I'm really excited, I know to be working with the incoming governor and I know my colleagues are as well.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Well, I'm gonna use my facilitator's privilege and give you some additional time to get to that splashy legislation. We wanna hear about them if you don't mind.

**Delegate Jared Solomon:** Yeah, yeah. Well, there's a couple of bills that I know are either on their way or have already been filed, and again, this is what the caveat of, for those of you who are not super familiar with Annapolis, there's sort of a couple of ways that bills get introduced. There's the pre-file deadline, which is bills that get introduced actually long before the legislative session, and those tend to be bills that are very big priorities or bills that maybe haven't gone anywhere for the past year or two and are being brought back.

And those get that list becomes public literally the day that we go into session. And then there's a period of sort of the next three or four weeks where bills are still in drafting.

Actually most, I would say probably 80% of the bills that I'm working on this session myself are still, we're still working out some of the last minute kinks. So those bills haven't necessarily been dropped yet but you kind of know that they're on their way. So I wanted to highlight a couple one that's already in from new Montgomery County Senator Katie Fry Hester, and I know we introduced Delegate Natalie Ziegler, who is one of the newest members of the Montgomery County Delegation, she also represents Howard. So we expanded—Montgomery County grew—in the last census. So we picked up two additional members of the House of Delegates. Delegate Ziegler and her colleague Delegate Wu. And then we also picked up another senator, Senator Katie Fry Hester, who was already in office and her district changed a little bit.

So we are now the largest jurisdiction and the largest delegation in the state, in the State House. So Senator Hester has a bill to make sure that folks who lose SNAP benefits because of fraud are reimbursed. Which obviously was a huge issue

during the pandemic—seems like a no-brainer—that if through no fault of your own you lose your benefits, that those benefits go back on your card.

Another bill that I know has not been introduced yet but is going to Delegate Reznik, who chairs the Budget Committee that oversees the Department of Human Services has been working for the last few years on creating or getting us closer to universal Free Meals at school. I know there's a little bit of back and forth on that.

I know that's been brought up before, but his bill would get us to a place with community eligibility that we're closer and closer to, and that's a big deal. Another bill that I know, my colleague—my new district mate—is gonna be introducing, a bill that I worked on last session, to expand and make permanent the Food Stamp improvements for college students.

That was part of the COVID expansion. I see Mitchell clapping in the back, thank you to the Critical Issues Forum for your work on that. Aaron is a new member of our delegation and I'm very happy to be working on this with him. This is one of his top priorities, but we wanna make sure that, again, when some of those COVID benefits go away as much as we can because obviously this is a huge, these expansions are huge parts of our budget. Making sure that we can, we can step in as needed to try to provide support to folks who really need it.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Thank you.

At this point in time, we have a few minutes for audience questions. What's been coming up as you've heard what the panelists have shared thus far.

I'll ask you to just kind of raise your hand, maybe stand up if you're comfortable doing so. And I do want to encourage you to ask a question. I think we all have many ideas, statements we wanna make on this issue. It's important to all of us. We don't have a whole lot of time, so I do want to make sure that we get to a question.

Does anyone have anything? Now I've scared everyone.

**Manna Staff Member:** We have a question online.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Oh, great, and then we'll get you

**Manna Staff Member:** Councilmember Alborno, from Kelly Cakouros: It's awesome to hear that there's a roadmap that's gonna be released. Glad to hear it'll cover policy proposals, data required, infrastructure needs, plans for sustainability of the plan. Is there anything included in the plan as a guide for community members not yet involved directly and the key organizations who want to help and have time and resources indicating how they can help?

Also, where will the roadmap be posted?

**Councilmember Gabe Alborno:** So thanks for that question. So—and I'm gonna tag team with Heather on this—but I didn't mention, and this is very exciting, is that the County Government has established an Office of Food Resilience which was one of the key recommendations coming out of COVID.

That there needs to be a convening body in addition to the Food Council. But on the County Government side, because we've got the Department of Health and Human Services, we've got the Department of Housing, even the Department of Recreation is engaged in providing food and nutrition for our residents.

And that coordination sometimes isn't easy. It can be very stove-piped. And so we will be working closely with the school system as well on those efforts. And I think that is going to be pivotal...we will post it in a variety of different areas. We're going to have a Council session to discuss the report first in the Health and Human Services Committee, but then before the full Council, and I'll defer it to Heather because I actually haven't seen the entire document yet. I've been given sort of an overview but I will be digging into it in the coming weeks. So, anything you wanna mention about those questions?

**Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council:** Yes. I hope that everyone will find when reviewing the plan that there is a little something for everyone in there, in terms of possibilities.

I think the honest truth is that we know that addressing food insecurity and childhood hunger, the solutions don't really lie in food. It's about something that's

much deeper. And I appreciate all of the incredible work that Dr. King and Dr. King's legacy has brought forward related to addressing poverty.

Because I think we know here in Montgomery County, income insufficiency is really at the root of so many of these challenges. So while this plan specifically is looking at food-based strategies to address hunger, it's both looking at the immediate need—because it's critically important and we heard this so eloquently referenced earlier in, in the quotes in the opening video—but we both need to nourish the bodies of all of our children and all of our residents to ensure that they have the, the resources that they need to be able to have their minds and their spirits engaged in the work and the journey towards justice. And so both providing immediate emergency support to families but also developing a much longer road towards sustainability and resilience and sufficiency.

Because what we hear overwhelmingly from residents is that the solutions that they would like to see involve their choice-making. Related to what they buy, where they buy it, how they access food. And so that speaks directly to solutions like the child tax credit—which isn't about food—but that puts money in the pockets of residents so that they can drive those choices.

And we know the impact of policies like that. So I think it's kind of a two-pronged approach, both immediate needs and long-term needs. To support as many children as possible through this work. Also, just put in a plug for the Food Council because that's, you know, what I am paid to do in being here, but our work brings together so many different residents and organizations in a variety of ways. So we have actually—starting later this month—a Food Systems Advocacy Community call, which will be a platform for sharing information about a wide variety of food issues. Not just the county, but also the state and the federal levels.

And so we encourage all of you to, to join. It's a virtual meeting. We also have a Food Security Community call, which happens every month where we talk about not just policy issues like one the Delegate Solomon was talking about for free meals for all but also other issues because we have, as the Councilmember highlighted, over a hundred different organizations in this county that are providing food assistance in our community.

So bringing together these many partners in a community of practice. And we have, and I won't list them all because I'm gonna get a sheet of paper telling me to stop, but we have a variety of convening mechanisms around issues like SNAP involvement because we know that's an absolutely critical tool to use, resident and community gardening environmental sustainability, as well as two new groups that are focusing on local food procurement. Just like what Shaun was talking about, with connecting farms to our school partners and, and healthcare providers and other partners. But also expanding equitable and affordable land access for food production because all of these pieces are interconnected and we have to address so many things all at once if we truly want to transform these.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Thank you.

**Delegate Jared Solomon:** Can I just piggyback for one second off of what Heather was saying? I just wanna recognize Delegate Julie Palakovich Carr, who is my colleague from Rockville, but also chairs our County Delegation, has been a real leader. To exactly what Heather was saying, I think we focused on a lot of this stuff in Annapolis and, and Julie's been a leader on expanding the Child Tax Credit.

Many of us have worked together on expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to undocumented families in the state of Maryland who pay taxes, which is a huge reinfusion of, frankly, support and wealth to families that had not typically been getting it. And then I know, I think she stepped out, but Delegate Charkoudian has also been an incredible leader on resiliency and farm-to-food programs through not only our school system, but to food pantries as well and passed the bill last year. Also with Senator Hester to really put an infusion of money and resources and effort from the state government behind those programs.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Okay. Lynn, you had a question.

**Audience Question:** So in all of this amazing work that you've done, I always see amazing opportunities to achieve and involve the youth resource. And I'm just wondering how you all see a role--we have amazingly empowered and effective student advocates, and so often, you know, we're talking about child hunger. Wouldn't the best messaging, the best messenger, come from the humans themselves? What intentional way can you see to bring people to the table and



share their lived experience about each one of the areas of work that we're all doing?

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Shaun, would you like to start with that?

**Shaun Sawko, MCPS DFNS Wellness Supervisor:** Yeah, I mean it's been fantastic and--and Lynn, you're aware of this as well--but...being able to actually meet with the students and have their voice be heard has been amazing as far as improving our program and making sure that we're being able to provide what our students actually want and have them feel like they're being reflected into their meals that they're eating too.

But I completely agree. I think students are the best advocates for themselves...I think what would be amazing, especially, I mean, universal meals is something I think every single person in this room would love to have. But if it would be, you know, students being able to advocate for that, whether that's at a state or federal level I just think that that would be such a moving and powerful voice.

**Councilmember Gabe Albornoz:** I'll just add really quickly, I had the good fortune of, and the Board of Education had a session on Tuesday, otherwise, I'm sure you guys would've been there too, but they had the grand opening of the most recent food pantry at Weller Road Elementary School and it's the largest of the food pantries.

And it was the students themselves that were just as excited as the parents and several of them attended the ribbon cutting ceremony. And as they were going through the pantry, they commented because it was all culturally-appropriate food. They had done a really outstanding job of stocking the shelves with food that kids from that community are actually gonna eat and look forward to eating.

So I, I do think there's more we can do to harness the energy and the enthusiasm of our, of our children and youth. And I think it's a really good suggestion and something we should think about in the next phase of this, whether it be through the Office of Food Resilience, there is an infrastructure of organizations that help organize youth civically. But this should be an issue that they begin to focus on more.

**Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council:** So many thoughts on that, because I couldn't agree more. And every single time I have the opportunity to engage with students, whether it's on issues of the environmental impact of our food system, or hunger, or economic opportunity in workforce development related to food, they've got incredible ideas.

So a couple quick thoughts. I echo everything that's been shared before, but certainly as expert resource navigators in their own communities, in their homes, in their neighborhoods, among their peers. I've got two kids and they can find things on the internet in 30 seconds that would take me hours to find, right?

So I think building partnerships not just with staff and teachers at MCPS, but also with student groups to share information. The Food Council regularly does trainings in the community around navigating programs like SNAP, which are incredibly complicated, both from a technology perspective as well as simply from maintaining benefits, but also from all the incredible resources that are out there in our community, that so many residents are not connected to, using their voices as and their expertise as voters. Gabrielle and I are working with a team on Leadership Montgomery to engage those who are voter-adjacent at this point, who will be voters soon enough. And I know there's incredible work happening in MCPS, but that policy is how we make these things happen. Also telling the stories of the impact that these programs have both positively and negatively in our community I think are all critically important things to do because I think the stories are what resonate, both in terms of investment, but also in terms of policy making.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** [MCPS Parent], did you wanna add anything at this point?

**MCPS Parent and Manna Participant:** You have mentioned a lot of stuff that'll make me happy. Hopefully in the next couple months, yes, we will see changes that will help us build our future.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Thank you, we can probably take one more question from either—oh, now we've got two in the room. I don't know whose hand went up first, go ahead.

**Audience Question:** Okay. Hi. My name is Fania Yangarber. I run Healthy School Maryland, and—as you know—we've been advocating for Universal Meals for a long time. I just wanted to address something Delegate Solomon said, and that was, there's currently a surplus in the state budget, but it could disappear, right?

Or, or trickle away. I just wanted to ask what we could do as a county to make sure that no matter what happens on the state level or on the federal level, children in Montgomery County public schools are insured to be able to get a meal at school no matter what. And that includes understanding that any bill that comes through Annapolis this year may not necessarily institute universal school meals on a permanent basis.

There are many states in the country who have been extending these benefits one year at a time. And even if it goes into effect this year, there could be a two year gap before kids get those meals. So we still need to be doing backup work on the county level and not just waiting for the federal government and the state government to bail us out.

**Councilmember Gabe Albornoz:** Well, that's a good question. I also want to acknowledge my colleague, Laurie-Anne Sayles has just come in the house and, and do want to thank Councilmember Stewart for being here as well. So, again, context is important here. When I started as the director of the Department of Recreation, it was during the fiscal cliff that the county and the rest of the country had gone through during the recession.

So over the course of three years our budget was cut 36% cumulatively, and very difficult decisions had to be made at the time, and it was done on a sliding scale. And so fortunately HHS's budget was reduced at a significantly smaller portion, but it was still reduced. And, there are some projections economically that, you know, there's another looming recession on the horizon and we have to be honest with ourselves about that.

So there, although there is no perfect solution, because county and state governments, by law, we have to balance our books at the end of each year. And so it is a zero-sum game. But what we can do as elected officials and as policymakers is, to the best of our ability, wall off the funding for these critical services and programs and ensure that they are the highest possible priority.

And it will mean pain in other areas. But as Heather noted, we also have to be cognizant of the fact that we have to address the contributing factors that are leading to food insecurity in the first place. And housing instability is a big one. So we have to just to the degree to which we can hold the line. And one element that hasn't been mentioned yet, but is also important to this equation is philanthropy.

So we have seen much more investment in our philanthropic community here in Montgomery County post-COVID than we did prior to that because a lot of our national foundations and even regional foundations did not invest very much in the county, because they didn't think there was the level of need here, that we all know in this room, exists in spades.

So we are gonna have to forge public-private partnerships if and when we are gonna have some challenging times fiscally.

**Delegate Jared Solomon:** And I would just say—and thank you for the question and your advocacy—I think what I'm about to say is probably not a surprise to those of you that have been advocating on this issue in Annapolis. We still have work to do. You know, I think among our Montgomery County colleagues, you're probably not gonna get much pushback, maybe from a handful. But I will tell you from some of the conversations that I had with colleagues last year and folks in leadership, there are a lot of people in this state who do not feel like, and I'm just gonna say it the way that they've expressed it to me, we need to be further subsidizing folks in Chevy Chase to be getting free meals.

And I think that there is, and that's not a pushback, that there is a need—but it's almost—we have so many other needs in the State. They would rather see the dollars be targeted to communities that are particularly hardest hit as opposed to just saying we're gonna universally apply this benefit to everybody.

And so, you know, that dynamic I think still needs to be worked on among our colleagues, particularly in other parts of the state. And I think that dynamic may change with the new governor because I don't think particularly, I don't think Governor Hogan was a particular fan of universal meals.

I mean, we all sort of know the debate at the federal level, and I think he was, he was in line with those with those kind of arguments. And I think with a new

governor, with Governor Moore, that may shift, but there still is work that needs to be done. So I think having Montgomery County sort of lead as a vanguard in that to show what the impact is, is really positive.

But we still have some work, I think, to do at the state level.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Yeah, go ahead.

**Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council:**

Can I add something? So I guess a couple of thoughts—because I appreciate your advocacy and your highlighting this issue—it is very difficult to address that at a local level and still maintain financial solvency.

And so one of the things that I think we've tried to do in the planning process is identify how we can broaden the reach of free meals in schools while also adapting to a fiscal note that would be potentially more reasonable. And so one of the things that we find is—in the federal level—set at 185% of (the) poverty (level) for eligibility for free and reduced rate meals.

What we find in Montgomery County is that it's about 400% of the poverty rate that actually is the threshold where that family's income would cover all of their costs. And so that has been a number that would capture about a couple, about 20,000 additional children whose families don't have enough income to cover all of their housing and healthcare and food and, and clothing costs, but are not eligible for a lot of the federal programs that are available to support them.

And so it's not a solution that covers everybody and it certainly doesn't get at the piece related to dignity and stigma that can result from programs that serve some but don't access all children. But I think that's important to note. I think it's also critical to look at the intersection of local, state, and federal policy and how I think sometimes we put them in different silos, but they're all totally interconnected. And even across programs. So the federal policy change that is now meaning that the end of expanded SNAP benefits resulting from pandemic era are ending at the end of next month. And so that was a surprise. That wasn't expected. We thought we had some more months. But that was a trade off so that we could get expansion of programs like PEBT and some other critical resources for families.

But that means that now, what's gonna happen with the families that are not getting these extra hundreds of dollars and to, towards their grocery bill every month they're gonna turn to our emergency food assistance program, which is fully supported by our County Government. So the more federal dollars that are being shifted away to address these issues locally means our government is not gonna have to step in to cover new ground, but to cover old ground that suddenly has been exposed by the step back at the, at the federal level.

So we have to really keep our eyes on every level at the same time so that we can reserve as many local dollars as possible for the creative solutions that there's no way that federal policy can address.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Well, I wanna close by actually just building on that question you just asked, which is, if everybody on the panel could just give closing remarks and I'd ask you to stress what's one commitment you are prepared to make?

On the issue of childhood hunger in the next, let's say 90 day—pick that number out. And then and what would you call on the people watching on Facebook and everybody in this room to do so? One of each, as we close.

**Shaun Sawko, MCPS DFNS Wellness Supervisor:** So for the next 90 days we are still engaging with our students. And next month we're hosting our first ever student food show where we're inviting over 50 of our students to come in and try different types of foods because it's one thing when we put food out, it's another thing when we're actually putting it into their bodies.

So we are recognizing, just like Lynn mentioned, that as we engage our students, as we hear from what the students want, we're actually feeding the students and not feeding the trash cans. One thing that, you know, I would wanna stress as much as possible for everyone that's here and everyone that is able to see this video, is advocate for utilization of what we currently have.

So if they're eligible for SNAP, they automatically enroll into FARMs or free-and-reduced meals. They're eligible for WIC, that they enroll. If they're eligible for Medicaid, they enroll. There's so many of these programs where it's not just free meals, it's so many other things that can enroll them into free meals,

which can help us make sure that we're feeding our students to the best of our ability.

So make sure that you're advocating for that, whether or not the schools are MMFA schools. Maryland Meals for Achievement schools where every single student gets universal free breakfast or one of our universal free meals schools, you know, try to make sure that those programs and those students and those families are aware of what is eligible at those schools.

**Councilmember Gabe Albornoz:** So the next 90 days are actually gonna be pretty exciting. The report will be released, we'll have the opportunity to dig into it and follow up on the policy recommendations, but also the next 90 days we'll cover the county's budget process, which we will be in the heart of.

The County Executive, as he does every year, will release his budget on March 15th. The Council will then have the opportunity to make adjustments or changes—and it's the Council that has ultimate fiscal authority—but I will make sure that this remains the priority that it has to be. And I, again, won't be a difficult sell because my colleagues are all there and are gonna want to see this over the goal line as well.

And to the residents at home, I think it's important, as Delegate Solomon noted particularly at the state level, Montgomery County has to tell its story. The good and the bad, the good and the challenge. And there is this impression that we can do all of it ourselves—we can handle it all here, and we cannot.

COVID really proved that to be true, and so we will need help from the state. And we are fortunate to have a Montgomery County delegation that fights for us every day and is such a wonderful partner and sees the broader vision. And so we will be working collaboratively with our colleagues in Annapolis.

And that leads me to finally, our federal partners. So that is a critical piece. Congressman Raskin has been a national leader on this issue and I know that Senator Van Holland has also been very engaged in these conversations, too. We need to help them as they advocate among their colleagues across the country.



And we've got two years of the Biden administration, two years of the Moore administration, together. Let's hope it's, well—I won't get too political here—but that's a unique opportunity. That's a window that we need to take advantage of for sure. And we will make sure we do that.

**Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council:**

Well first I just wanna say how honored I am to do this work here in our county, and how lucky we are that we—unfortunately have to do this work—to do it in a place where people have so much heart and passion behind it, I think is what means. I share your hope for what comes next. I think that my suggestions for folks in the room as well as people at home is that your voice is critically important in informing the policy making, but also in weighing in on policies that are under consideration. When I show up in elected officials' offices or in their email inbox, they know what I want, they know what I'm saying. They see me coming. But the voices of our residents is, so important and it's often missing in a lot of the policy-making that happens. Similarly, using your voice to share awareness of the resources that are available—building familiarity with what programs that are out there—where people can go if they need support, both in the short or in the long term, is so important. Then, also making sure that you use your voice to destigmatize use of and access to food assistance resources and also build awareness that this is a real issue here in our county. I can't tell you how many meetings I've had where people say, 'oh, not in Montgomery County.' And we have a really significant lack of investment across the board, in terms of this work here in Montgomery County, when it compares us to other jurisdictions.

And while our percentages may be smaller than other places, when you look at the population size that we have here and how many people that actually means, it's tremendous. And it is something that we all have a role to play in to encourage this work that's ahead to, to actually be successful.

**Delegate Jared Solomon:** And they said a lot of really good stuff already. 90 days is the—give or take—the horizon we have until our legislative session ends. So, you know, I commit to help push through as many of these bills as I can to make sure that in the I serve on the appropriations committee that we have a budget that reflects these priorities, that reflects the support and help that our communities really need; and working with the Moore Administration to really figure out again, not all of these solutions require a huge infusion of cash. A lot of it just requires



smarter policy, better collaboration To all of you, and the folks watching, first and foremost, I mean, I think you've, you've heard it even better than I'll say it. Use your voices, tell your stories to your Montgomery County legislators if you have friends in other parts of the state.

Tell your stories to them; get them to weigh in as well. I think you'll find most of the Montgomery County Delegation is already with you—hand in glove—on this kind of stuff. For those of you who are with organizations, taking the next 90 to 180 days to really educate the new folks coming in. We'll likely have some new leadership in the general assembly just through attrition and folks who are leaving to go to the administration, which means new people will step up into new leadership roles. We'll obviously have new people in the administration who will need to, you know, get their feet under them to get educated on what the priorities are for different folks across the state in different areas and regions.

So it'll be a really good opportunity for a lot of the amazing organizations that we have here to help step up and fill that gap. And I know many of you are doing that already and continue to give us ideas. I think we demonstrably have the most brilliant people in the world living in Montgomery County—which is both a blessing and a curse as an elected official. But some of the best ideas that I get, some of the best policies that I get, come from meetings I've had with constituents and residents in the county. So do not be shy, don't be bashful. Tell us your ideas. Tell us what's working, what's not working, and how we can fix it.

**MCPS Parent and Manna Participant:** Yeah. So to sum up, first of all, I would like to thank you for the good ideas that you have to help us parents, and for the 90 days, all those good stuff, all those good strategies that you have mentioned, you wanna come and see in action—not just saying. There is a saying that 'once there is the thought, the action is behind' and I have that feeling that the action we will see in time. Thank you.

**Jenna Umbriac, Director of Programs and Policies:** Please join me in thanking our panelists. And Board of Education member Shebra Evans just snuck in.

So, and thank you all for being here today to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by continuing to push for justice in our communities. And hopefully you

got at least one idea today about what you can do. I wanna thank the Manna Staff and our Board Members who have been here volunteering as tour guides all day.

Thank you very much for making this happen. And if you didn't get a tour—if you got here a little bit later in the day—we are still doing tours. We're open for the next hour and we also have some refreshments in the back that have been provided by one of our advocacy task force members Odessa. So please share food, share conversation, and take a tour if you'd like.

Thank you again.