

Prevention Workgroup's Food Insecurity Series

Outline: The Story Emerging from the Prevention Workgroup's Food Insecurity Series (July–November 2025)

1. The Inquiry Begins: Defining Food as Foundational

July 14, 2025 marked a turning point: the Prevention Workgroup grounded its prevention agenda in *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, starting at the base with food. The Maryland Food Bank and Maryland Hunger Solutions presentations made vivid that Maryland's food insecurity crisis is not a scarcity issue, but one of access, equity, and systems design.

Key insight: Maryland has adequate food supplies, but access remains a major barrier for families because of poverty, transportation limits, and the high cost of living.

This first meeting reframed food insecurity as an upstream driver of youth system contact, not merely a social services problem. Members began connecting hunger to school behavior, truancy, family stress, and “survival behaviors” (like theft or hustling) that later manifest as justice involvement.

Trend: The conversation moved from charity-based understandings of hunger toward *structural and developmental* ones: food insecurity as a root cause of instability, not a symptom.

2. Systems-Level Lens: Policy and Bureaucratic Barriers

By September 8, the discussion had matured into a structural analysis. The Department of Human Services (DHS) presentation quantified how *federal and state policy decisions cascade downward* into family hardship. The Workgroup recognized that:

- Policy changes like HR1's expanded work requirements disproportionately affect older caregivers, youth with disabilities, and kinship families.
- Administrative complexity itself can be a form of harm: the “redetermination burden” was viewed as part of what destabilizes families already at risk.
- Food insecurity now sits at the intersection of *economic policy, social safety nets, and youth justice prevention*.

Trend: The conversation shifted from *individual access* to *institutional accountability*. The Workgroup began seeing that prevention depends as much on agency coordination and policy design as on individual supports.

3. Evidence and Partnership: Translating Insight into Research

By November, the Workgroup was ready to act on the patterns it had surfaced. The new collaboration with Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) formalized the next phase: *turning lived experience into evidence and evidence into policy*.

This partnership is significant for three reasons:

1. It operationalizes the Commission’s dual framework (Maslow + ecological model) through a study that will gather qualitative data from families across ecological levels: individual coping, family stress, community gaps, and policy barriers.
2. It directly connects food insecurity to system contact, including how hunger leads to absenteeism, family surveillance, and criminalized survival behavior.
3. It establishes prevention as a research-to-policy pipeline, with findings destined for the Governor and General Assembly.

Trend: The Workgroup moved from understanding *why* food insecurity matters to building a research infrastructure to prove *how* it drives system involvement and to identify interventions that can prevent it.

4. Throughlines and Emerging Trends Across the Series

Theme	Evolution Across Meetings	Implication
From Need to Systemic Cause	Started with hunger as an unmet need (July); now recognized as a systemic driver of juvenile justice outcomes (Sept–Nov).	Prevention must address foundational needs as justice reform.
From Data Gaps to Evidence Building	Identified lack of youth-specific data on hunger and system contact (July–Sept). Now creating a data partnership with CLF (Nov).	Builds empirical grounding for recommendations.
From Service Provision to Policy Alignment	Early focus on food access programs (MFB, MHS); expanded to bureaucratic	Reveals prevention as cross-agency governance issue.

barriers and state-federal policy alignment (DHS).

From Individual Behavior to Structural Prevention	Initial concern with “youth behavior”; evolved toward structural roots like wages, benefits, transportation, and policy design.	Frames justice prevention as social equity reform.
From Charity to Empowerment	Rejection of handout-based narratives; emphasis on <i>livable wage jobs</i> and non-stigmatizing access voiced by youth in CLF discussions.	Centers dignity and self-sufficiency in prevention strategies.

5. The Overarching Narrative

Across these months, the Prevention Workgroup has built a layered story:

When basic needs go unmet, children’s lives become shaped by systems designed to respond to harm rather than prevent it. Food insecurity is not peripheral to justice; it is the earliest point of system prevention.

The Workgroup’s inquiry evolved from understanding hunger as an immediate need, to identifying its structural and policy roots, to building partnerships that can translate research into prevention policy.

This arc reflects a *maturing prevention model*, one that moves from compassion to coordination, from programmatic response to systemic reform, and from anecdote to actionable evidence.

Narrative: Prevention Workgroup: Building a Framework for Upstream Prevention

Over the course of 2025, the Prevention Workgroup has traced a clear throughline from immediate need to systemic cause, using food insecurity as its first test case for the Commission's prevention framework. Beginning with the Maryland Food Bank and Maryland Hunger Solutions, members learned that hunger in Maryland is not about scarcity but access, which is rooted in the state's cost of living, transportation barriers, and the administrative complexity of public benefits. The group grounded its inquiry in *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs* and an *ecological model*, situating food as a foundational need upon which safety, belonging, and stability rest. What began as a discussion of unmet needs quickly expanded into an understanding of how chronic food insecurity produces family stress, disrupts education, and contributes to the criminalization of "survival behaviors" among youth.

By September, a presentation from the Department of Human Services deepened this systems-level perspective. Members examined how policy changes at the federal and state levels, such as expanded work requirements and narrowed caregiver exemptions under HR1, exacerbate hardship for caregivers and youth already vulnerable to system contact. The conversation shifted from program access to *bureaucratic harm*, recognizing that administrative barriers themselves can destabilize families and compound disparities. Prevention, the group concluded, must be built not only on meeting individual needs but also on aligning policies across agencies to remove structural obstacles to stability.

In November, the Workgroup entered a new phase through a partnership with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF). This collaboration formalizes a research-to-policy pipeline, generating qualitative data from youth and families to document how hunger intersects with mental health, school attendance, and early justice involvement. The study will map overlaps between food insecurity and juvenile system data, highlighting the role of policy design in either mitigating or perpetuating inequity. Through this collaboration, the Workgroup is transforming its insights into actionable evidence and laying the groundwork for a statewide prevention model centered on relational, equitable, and community-driven supports that address harm before it begins.

Jul 14, 2025 - Prevention Workgroup Meeting Notes

Date: July 14, 2025

Time: 1:00–2:00 PM

Focus: Food Insecurity as a Foundational Prevention Strategy

Attendees:

Sukyi McMahon (GOCPP, Chair), Aubrey Edwards-Luce (Co-Chair), Donna Christy (Co-Chair), Delegate Sandy Bartlett, Chief Russell Hamill, Munazza Abraham (DJS), Meg Kimmel & Anne Wallerstedt (Maryland Food Bank), Julia Gross (Maryland Hunger Solutions), Anne Wallerstedt (MFB), and others.

Meeting Purpose

The Workgroup launched its first in-depth inquiry into Maryland’s prevention landscape through the lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and an ecological model. Members examined food insecurity as the most fundamental determinant of youth and family stability. Presenters from the Maryland Food Bank and Maryland Hunger Solutions outlined the scope of hunger in Maryland, the policies shaping access to food assistance, and the connections between unmet basic needs and system contact.

Key Presentations

1. Maryland Food Bank (MFB) — Meg Kimmel & Anne Wallerstedt

Overview:

Founded in 1979, the Maryland Food Bank (MFB) operates three major branches (Baltimore County, Salisbury, Hagerstown) and partners with more than 700 community-based organizations statewide. MFB now emphasizes long-term economic stability rather than short-term food distribution.

Findings & Data:

- 1 in 3 Marylanders is at risk of food insecurity, a number that has remained high since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 11% of Marylanders receive SNAP benefits, but another 29% earn too much to qualify and too little to afford essentials.
- Financial hardship, high housing costs, and transportation barriers are key drivers.
- Google searches for “free food near me” have increased 60% year over year.

Regional Disparities:

- Rural counties (Somerset, Garrett): lack of transportation and job access.
- Urban centers (Baltimore City): lack of healthy food options and community resources.
- Suburban counties: affordability and transportation challenges.

Strategic Shifts:

- Moving from food charity to economic relief, reducing financial stress linked to food insecurity.
- Programs like Mobile Markets (mobile grocery stores for rural areas) and FoodWorks (culinary workforce training) address root causes of poverty.

Concerns:

- Loss of federal support for SNAP and Medicaid could cost Maryland hundreds of millions.
- Administrative burdens and under-resourced safety nets intensify need.

Recommendations:

- Stronger coordination between state agencies, philanthropic groups, and businesses.
 - Integration of lived experience in program design.
 - Emphasis on food security as essential to educational and behavioral outcomes for children.
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2. Maryland Hunger Solutions (MHS) — Julia Gross

Overview:

Maryland Hunger Solutions is a state initiative of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), focusing on outreach, education, and policy advocacy to eliminate hunger.

Key Concepts:

- Food insecurity = lack of reliable access to affordable, nutritious food (USDA definition).
- Household-level issue: distinct from individual hunger.

Major Themes:

- Maryland has enough food. Accessibility is the main barrier.
- Food insecurity extends beyond poverty; many middle-income families now struggle to afford groceries.
- “There is no face of hunger.” It cuts across class and region.

Consequences:

- Children: higher rates of illness, disruptive behavior, and absenteeism.
- Adults: increased chronic disease, stress, and depression, creating cycles of instability.
- Food insecurity contributes to behavioral issues that can escalate into school discipline or law enforcement involvement.

MHS Workstreams:

- SNAP outreach: statewide hotline and multilingual support.
- School meals advocacy: training school districts and promoting “breakfast after the bell.”
- Policy work: advancing Healthy School Meals for All and SNAP adequacy campaigns.
- Public education: using personal stories to destigmatize food assistance.

Barriers:

- Stigma remains, particularly among immigrant families.
- SNAP benefits remain inadequate to cover full household needs.
- Complex application processes exclude many eligible families.
- Federal and state budget cuts threaten the food safety net.

Discussion Highlights

- Youth Risk and Behavior: Members noted data showing that teenagers experiencing hunger are five times more likely to attempt suicide and 74% more likely to exhibit disruptive classroom behavior.

- Justice Link: Aubrey Edwards-Luce raised the need for data connecting hunger with system involvement. Julia Gross offered to share FRAC research and suggested partnering with youth advocacy groups such as HeartSmiles in Baltimore City.
- Root Causes: Donna Christy highlighted that food insecurity is a symptom of broader economic instability and asked how families are linked to wraparound services.
- Systems Coordination: MFB described partnerships that connect clients to utility aid, SNAP, and employment assistance through outreach navigators.
- Workforce Development: The FoodWorks program provides both food access and career pathways, addressing causes and consequences of hunger simultaneously.

Summary Insight

The Workgroup's July session established food insecurity as a structural, not situational, issue; one that shapes a child's behavior, family stability, and long-term risk for justice system involvement. Members agreed that prevention begins at the most fundamental level: ensuring every family can meet its basic needs without stigma, administrative burden, or system contact.

Sep 8, 2025 - Prevention Workgroup Meeting Notes

Meeting Purpose

The session advanced the Workgroup's exploration of *food insecurity* as part of its dual-framework prevention model:

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – grounding the discussion in basic physiological and safety needs.
- Ecological Model – examining how those needs are met (or unmet) across individual, family, school, community, and policy levels.

The meeting featured Web Ye, Chief of Staff for the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS), presenting on the implications of HR1 of 2025 for Maryland's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the populations most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Key Takeaways

1. Anticipated Impacts of HR1 on Maryland Families

- HR1 expands work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents from ages 18–54 to 18–64, and now exempts only caregivers of children under 14 (previously under 18).
- Roughly 80,000 Marylanders will face new administrative burdens to retain SNAP benefits.
- HR1 eliminates the \$557 standard utility allowance for most households, reducing monthly benefits for thousands.
- The State's share of SNAP administrative costs will rise from \$115 million to \$172.5 million in FY27; Maryland may also assume \$240 million in new annual benefit costs.
- These shifts translate to an estimated \$412.5 million annual cost by FY27 to maintain current benefit levels.

2. Populations at Heightened Risk

- 270,000 of Maryland's 680,000 SNAP participants are children.
- 59% of SNAP households include children, and 39% are working families.
- 28,843 SNAP customers are unhoused, and 128,000 are people with disabilities.
- Older caregivers and kinship providers caring for youth ages 14–17 are disproportionately impacted due to the loss of exemption from work requirements.
- Youth in or exiting foster care, as well as those overlapping with the juvenile legal system, may experience food instability and administrative exclusion due to these changes.

3. DHS Mitigation Efforts

- Launch of the Maryland Benefits One Application (Marylandbenefits.gov), enabling families to apply simultaneously for SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, energy, and WIC benefits.
 - Reduction in the SNAP payment error rate from 35.56% (FY22) to 13.64% (FY24), improving efficiency.
 - Implementation of HB 1499 (2024), strengthening kinship care resources and training; Maryland's kinship placement rate has risen above the national average of 37%.
 - Ongoing efforts to reduce hospital and hotel overstay for youth in DHS care (from 75 combined in early 2024 to 22 as of September 2025).
 - Active participation in Governor Moore's inter-agency initiatives, including *Enough Communities*, *Safer Stronger Together*, and the *Community Schools Delivery Pilot*, all linked to ending childhood poverty.
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Discussion Themes

- **Intersection with Juvenile Legal System:** Members emphasized the need to map data showing how food insecurity and SNAP participation overlap with system-involved youth and their caregivers.
- **Disparities and Access:** Older caregivers, youth with disabilities, and unhoused families were identified as groups most likely to experience compounded hardship.
- **Policy Alignment:** The group noted the importance of positioning prevention as a shared goal across state agencies and aligning with ongoing Governor's Office initiatives.

Project Plan: Food Insecurity and Juvenile System Prevention

Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform & Emerging & Best Practices Prevention Workgroup + Center for a Livable Future Collaboration

This project leverages a unique collaboration between Johns Hopkins' Center for a Livable Future and the Maryland Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform to generate actionable evidence on the relationship between food insecurity, family wellbeing, and juvenile system involvement. The study will produce qualitative data directly from youth and families, paired with policy analysis, to identify scalable solutions that prevent system contact. By grounding research in real-time policy processes and government decision-making, the project ensures that findings will not remain academic but will be translated into tangible reforms with the potential for statewide impact.

1. Purpose and Objectives

Primary Goal:

- Examine how food insecurity in Maryland households impacts mental health (parents and children), school performance, and risk of juvenile system involvement.

Primary Research Question:

- How does food insecurity tie to juvenile system involvement, and how can this be addressed?

Integration with Commission's Work:

- Investigate and report on food insecurity to highlight how meeting basic needs prevents juvenile system contact, especially for families already intersecting with school discipline and the juvenile justice system.

Objectives for Center for a Livable Future (CLF):

- Advance timely research on how food insecurity intersects with family wellbeing, child development, and juvenile system involvement in Maryland. This project responds to the shifting food security landscape following the rollback of pandemic-era supports, positioning Maryland as an important site to capture urgent lessons for policymakers.
- By generating qualitative data that center the voices of families, alongside analysis of school, arrest, and policy data, CLF will document how hunger affects mental health, academic performance, and pathways into the juvenile system.

- The results will provide evidence-based, policy-relevant insights that can guide prevention strategies, inform municipal and state decision-making, and be directly integrated into the Commission's Annual Report and recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly.

Objectives for the Prevention Workgroup:

- Emphasize that fulfilling essential needs interrupts pathways toward juvenile system involvement, particularly for those already navigating school discipline issues or early justice system contact.
 - Illuminate how unmet needs can lead to the criminalization of survival behaviors, such as youth arrested for food-related theft.
 - Recognize how hunger contributes to depression, substance use, absenteeism, increased family surveillance, and school discipline, which are risk factors for juvenile system involvement.
 - Incorporate families' own descriptions of barriers and solutions to ensure recommendations are practical and prevention-oriented.
 - Understand how administrative and bureaucratic policy decisions impact the accessibility of government provided nutritional support for youth and their families.
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2. Research Questions

Framing:

- Capture qualitative data (youth/family voices on hunger and coping strategies).
 - Connect food insecurity to clustered poverty and broader social inequities.
 - Explore whether food insecurity is a cause or symptom of juvenile system entry.
1. How does food insecurity in the home affect the mental and physical health of both children and parents?
 2. What is the relationship between food insecurity, school outcomes (attendance, performance, discipline), and pathways into the juvenile system? - unsure of the connection
 3. Should the research focus on families with children already involved in the juvenile system, those at risk of involvement, or both?

4. How is food insecurity tied to survival behaviors, such as children obtaining food through illegal means, and what are the impacts on the home environment?
 5. In areas with both high juvenile system interaction and high food insecurity, what patterns emerge in how families experience risk and resilience?
 6. What barriers – economic, housing, transportation, awareness, legal system related obligations, work obligations, health, and storage – do families identify in securing food, and what solutions or recommendations do they propose?
 7. Is food insecurity primarily a cause of juvenile system contact, a symptom of clustered poverty, or both, and how does this distinction shape prevention strategies?
 8. Beyond food theft, how does broader financial strain linked to food insecurity contribute to other forms of criminalized/ unlawful behavior among youth and families?
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3. Methodology

Overall Approach

The project will combine **qualitative research, data analysis, and policy scans** to examine how food insecurity intersects with family wellbeing, child development, and juvenile system involvement. Methods will ensure alignment with the Prevention Workgroup's needs-based inquiry and ecological model (individual, family, community, policy).

Components

- **Qualitative Data Collection**
 - Conduct focus groups and/or interviews with families in zip codes where food insecurity and juvenile system involvement overlap.
 - Capture families' lived experiences, perceived barriers, and their own recommendations for solutions.
 - Include perspectives from youth, parents, and caregivers to highlight the full family impact of hunger.
- **School & Academic Data**

- Review school records and programs (such as chronic absenteeism initiatives) that highlight nutritional barriers to attendance and performance.
- Examine links between food insecurity, absenteeism, discipline, and dropout risk as precursors to juvenile system involvement.

- **Arrest & Court Data**

- Analyze arrest reports for minor theft, particularly food-related theft, to identify geographic or demographic patterns.
- Cross-reference these findings with areas of high food insecurity to test connections between unmet needs and criminalization of survival behaviors.

- **Policy & Program Scan**

- Build on CLF's previous scans (e.g., Anne Arundel County) to map food equity and access policies across Maryland.
- Assess how federal, state, and local food support programs (SNAP, school meals, emergency food assistance) are functioning post-pandemic funding cuts.
- Identify policy gaps where families fall through the cracks, contributing to school and system involvement.

- **Ecological Domain Analysis**

- Map all findings across the ecological framework:
 - *Individual*: youth health, coping, survival behaviors.
 - *Family*: parental stress, household dynamics.
 - *Community*: local supports, concentrated risks.
 - *Policy*: program funding, systemic barriers.

- **Timeline Considerations**

- CLF estimated that the study would take 6–7 months, accounting for community relationship building and data collection.
 - Early results will be shared with the Commission to integrate into the October 2026 Annual Report.
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4. Timeline (TBD)

- Finalize research question, identify communities/zip codes, develop interview guides.
 - Conduct interviews/focus groups, collect arrest and school data, complete policy scans.
 - Analyze qualitative and quantitative data; draft findings.
 - Share preliminary findings with Commission workgroups; integrate statutory reporting.
 - Produce final report sections for the Commission’s Annual Report.
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5. Roles and Responsibilities

- **CLF (Darriel Harris & team):** Lead data collection, analysis, and draft research outputs.
- **Commission Prevention Workgroup:** Guide research focus, review draft questions, ensure policy relevance.
- **Families & Communities:** Participate in interviews/focus groups; co-create recommendations.