



**Mission:** *To improve public health in Maryland through education and advocacy* **Vision:** *Healthy Marylanders living in Healthy Communities*

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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF CB45-2023**  
**The Healthy Meals for Children Bill**  
**By: Maryland Public Health Association (MdpHA)**  
**Hearing Date: November 20, 2023**

Dear Howard County Council,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of County Bill 45. This legislation will support the health of Howard County's children by making sure healthy options are available and promoted on kids' menus in restaurants.

The frequency with which children dine at restaurants has increased for several decades.<sup>1</sup> Restaurants play a vital role in children's dietary intake and overall health,<sup>2,3</sup> and governments can use a spectrum of policies from voluntary to mandatory to improve nutrition.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, interventions to promote healthy ordering in restaurants have primarily targeted adults and not necessarily children.<sup>2</sup> A large body of research have documented that children who consume fast-food are at increased risk for obesity and other diet-related diseases.<sup>5</sup>

In Howard County, 6.5 percent of children have obesity.<sup>6</sup> In a survey of Howard County adults, 48.4 percent of respondents identified overweight/obesity as a top healthy priority in the county.<sup>7</sup> Soda consumption has increased among Howard County children. From 2018 to 2021, the overall percentage of children that drank soda increased, driven by a statistically significant increase in the percentage of children drinking 1 or more sodas per day from 4 to 10 percent.<sup>8</sup> In addition, roughly one-third of Howard County adults report eating fruits or vegetables less than once a day or never. In 2021, the proportion of Howard County adults that reported they ate vegetables less than once per day or never was 32 percent, and the proportion of residents who ate fruit less than once a day or never was 38 percent.<sup>9</sup>

A food environment that encourages and supports families to make healthier food choices is an important element to address overweight and obesity.<sup>10,11</sup> One study that recruited parents to complete a 15-min observational, online survey regarding their experiences and hypothetical choices when eating out with their child/ren found that 98.3 percent believed that healthier alternatives should be available for children in cafes, restaurants, hotels and clubs (CRHC).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, results from a national survey conducted in the United States indicate that children are receptive to fruit or vegetable (FV) side dishes and healthier beverage options with their restaurant meals.<sup>12</sup> Hence, an opportunity exists for restaurants to leverage child receptivity to healthier sides and beverages by offering and promoting healthy options.

Furthermore, growing evidence makes clear that multiple, complex factors beyond personal decisions strongly influence dietary choices and patterns.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, key healthy eating initiatives at restaurants may include providing healthful children's foods and presenting nutrition information on children's menus.

Failure to enforce restaurants' sale of healthy meals for children can create insurmountable barriers to making healthy dietary choices and addressing the pandemic of childhood obesity and chronic diseases in Howard County. Given the increasingly important role that restaurants are playing in children's dietary intake, we thereby urge a favorable report for CB45-2023. Thank you for your consideration.

*The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is a nonprofit, statewide organization of public health professionals dedicated to improving the lives of all Marylanders through education, advocacy, and collaboration. We support public policies consistent with our vision of healthy Marylanders living in healthy, equitable, communities. MdPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association, a nearly 145-year-old professional organization dedicated to improving population health and reducing the health disparities that plague our state and our nation.*

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, K., Conklin, M., Bordi, P., & Cranage, D. (2016). Restaurants' healthy eating initiatives for children increase parents' perceptions of CSR, empowerment, and visit intentions. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 59, 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2016.07.008>

<sup>2</sup> Castro, I. A., Williams, C. B., Madanat, H., Pickrel, J. L., Jun, H.-J., Zive, M., Gahagan, S., & Ayala, G. X. (2016). Food ordering for children in restaurants: Multiple sources of influence on decision making. *Public Health Nutrition*, 19(13), 2404–2409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980016001403>

<sup>3</sup> Center for Science in the Public Interest. Serve Kids Better - Healthy Restaurant Children's Meals Improve Children's Diets and Health. Retrieved November 17, 2023, from [http://www.clocc.net/wp-content/uploads/Kids-Meal-Science-Based-Rationale\\_041017.pdf](http://www.clocc.net/wp-content/uploads/Kids-Meal-Science-Based-Rationale_041017.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Mozaffarian, D., Angell, S. Y., Lang, T., & Rivera, J. A. (2018). Role of government policy in nutrition—Barriers to and opportunities for healthier eating. *BMJ*, 361, k2426. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.k2426>

<sup>5</sup> Choi, Y. Y., Hyary, M., Fleming-Milici, F., & Harris, J. L. (2021). Voluntary healthier kids' meals policies: Are caregivers choosing kids' meals and healthier items for their child? *Pediatric Obesity*, 16(10), e12797. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijpo.12797>

<sup>6</sup> Howard County General Hospital and Howard County Health Department. *2019 Community Health Needs Assessment*. 2019. Accessed August 24, 2023. Available at [https://health.maryland.gov/pophealth/Documents/Resources/Howard\\_CHNA\\_2019.pdf](https://health.maryland.gov/pophealth/Documents/Resources/Howard_CHNA_2019.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Howard County General Hospital, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Howard County Health Department. *2021 Howard County Health Assessment Survey*. 2021. Accessed August 24, 2023. Available at <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/howard-county-health-survey-2021>

<sup>9</sup> Howard County Health Department, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Brindal, E., James-Martin, G., & Bowen, J. (2021). Parental food choices for children when eating out: Attitudes and impact of healthy choice menu labelling based on a hypothetical scenario. *Public Health Nutrition*, 24(9), 2533-2541. doi:10.1017/S1368980020003675

<sup>11</sup> Sacks, G, Swinburn, BA & Lawrence, MA (2008) A systematic policy approach to changing the food system and physical activity environments to prevent obesity. *Aust New Zealand Health Policy* 5, 13.CrossRefGoogle ScholarPubMed

<sup>12</sup> Shonkoff, E.T., Anzman-Frasca, S., Lynskey, V.M. *et al.* Child and parent perspectives on healthier side dishes and beverages in restaurant kids' meals: results from a national survey in the United States. *BMC Public Health* 18, 56 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4610-3>