

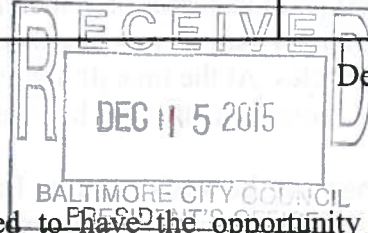


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	Agency Name & Address	Department of Planning 417 E. Fayette Street, 8 th Floor Baltimore, Maryland 21201	MEMO	
	Subject	Informational Hearing – Changes to Food Supplement Program Benefits Schedule		

To: President and Members
of the City Council
409 City Hall

December 15, 2015



The Department of Planning (DOP) is pleased to have the opportunity to review Council Resolution 15-0278R – Informational Hearing – Changes to Food Supplement Program Benefits Schedule.

The Baltimore Food Policy Initiative (BFPI) is an intergovernmental collaboration between the Department of Planning, Office of Sustainability, Baltimore City Health Department, and Baltimore Development Corporation (BDC) to improve health outcomes by increasing access to healthy affordable food in Baltimore City's food deserts.

In June of 2015, the City released the 2015 Food Environment Map and Report, and the Food Desert Retail Strategy. The report revealed that 25% of residents live in a food desert. The Food Desert Retail Strategy is a formalized approach to stimulating food retail development and expanding access to healthy food in food desert areas. The strategy will reduce the number of people living in food deserts and grow the economy using five key approaches:

1. Retain and Attract Supermarkets
2. Improve Non-Traditional Grocery Retail Options
3. Improve Healthy Food Availability in the Public Market Setting
4. Expand Homegrown Baltimore to Serve Food Desert Neighborhoods
5. Support Food Access through a Transportation Strategy

Under the Retain and Attract Supermarkets tenant, BFPI has employed two main policy strategies: financial incentives for retailers in food deserts, and extending the monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) issuance period. BFPI thanks the City Council for approving Administrative Bill 15-065 Personal Property Tax Credits – Food Desert Incentive Areas. With this legislation, Baltimore City will complete the first part of its two-part policy plan.

This memo will address the second policy strategy to extend the monthly SNAP issuance period which has significant long-term implications for attraction and retention of supermarkets; nationally and specifically in Baltimore City.

FAV a/c comm

Retailers repeatedly mention that one of the biggest barriers to doing business in and near Baltimore's food deserts is that SNAP benefits are only disbursed over 10 days. Because many of the customers at these stores shop with SNAP benefits, this creates a pattern of highly concentrated sales during two weeks of the month and very little business during the rest of the month. From the retailer perspective, extending the issuance period helps retailers achieve a smoother sales cycle throughout the month, which will allow for more consistent stocking and hiring, as well as reduced security concerns. Indirectly, customers have a better shopping experience with fewer crowds and a consistent supply of fresh produce.

In 2012, BFPI issued a best practice report on *Extending SNAP Issuance Days*. The report highlighted the growing trend of states extending their disbursement periods with the specific intent of smoothing retail cycles. At the time of the report, at least 11 states had increased their disbursement periods, and more than 10 states had benefit periods of 19 days or longer.

As a result of these findings and the feedback from Baltimore City grocers, BFPI worked closely with Rosemary Malone from the Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) to extend the monthly SNAP issuance period. In August 2015, Maryland DHR announced it planned to extend the number of days that SNAP is issued from 10 to 24 days over a five month period, with an individual recipient's disbursement day changing up to three times; once in September, once in October, and one final change in January. The September change went as planned. As a result of retailers voicing concern over SNAP issuance overlapping with holidays, DHR suspended the October changes and revised the schedule to implement one additional change in January –extending the number of days to 20 days, rather than 24 days.

In addition to implementing the disbursement schedule, the state is responsible for informing and educating SNAP recipients on the changes. A flyer with the new schedule was mailed out to all SNAP recipients and posters were displayed at DSS offices informing recipients of the change. Based on the 2015 Food Environment Map Report, knowing that more than 200,000 Baltimore residents receive SNAP each month, the high concentration of shoppers at certain stores and grocers' concerns around customer confusion, BFPI wanted to make a concerted effort to support the outreach efforts and coordinated multiple activities during the transition period.

BFPI supported outreach to City residents by using its partners and networks to communicate these changes:

1. 65 organizations, members of the Food Policy Advisory Committee and other BFPI affiliates including WIC, were given DHR flyers and asked to share the information with their partners and residents. Organizations serving minority communities asked for a Spanish flyer, which BFPI requested from DHR and distributed. In response to community needs, BFPI also created an additional flyer based on existing resources from DSS and the Maryland Food Bank that instructed residents on how to acquire an emergency food box based on geography.
2. BFPI reached out to United Way to serve as a resource for residents. 2-1-1 hotline staff were provided with a guide and educated on the change.
3. BFPI reached out to six City agencies to ensure that residents and community organizations were informed.

4. BFPI met with Council Members to discuss Administrative Bill 15-065 Personal Property Tax Credits – Food Desert Incentive Areas and informed Council Members of the SNAP disbursement change during the same meeting.
5. BCHD (a core member of BFPI) incorporated outreach into elements of the Baltimarket Virtual Supermarket program and grocery store-based community nutrition education.

BFPI and BDC supported grocery stores in the following ways:

1. Notified all 45 grocery stores in Baltimore City of the change.
2. BDC provided grocery stores with technical assistance and BFPI created a guide that included training, outreach recommendations and emergency resources. Some stores went as far as posting enlarged flyers around their stores, at each cashier register, and announcing the changes over the PA system. Stores especially found the list of emergency food boxes useful.
3. BFPI offered every store the opportunity to have volunteers table at their store and educate customers around the changes, of which three stores requested the service. Approximately 20 volunteers spent a total of 90 hours reaching out to almost 800 shoppers.

In the months following the initial schedule change, BDC has continually corresponded with grocers around the short-term impact of the schedule change. Some grocers voiced concern about a recent loss of SNAP revenue specifically. BDC and BFPI relayed this information to DHR and asked for any help in explaining what may be causing this decrease. DHR reported that spending of SNAP benefits had decreased by approximately 5% across the state when comparing October 2014 to October 2015 but confirmed that individual distribution amounts did not change and as a federally funded program, cannot change.

BFPI is confident these policy changes will provide long-term benefits for both residents and grocers, and will reduce the number of people living in food deserts. BFPI encourages short-term assistance be provided through the Maryland Food Bank to support residents during the January transition. While the Food Bank has an effective reach, it will require additional donations after using up most of its stock throughout the holiday season. BFPI will be present at the hearing to present to the committee and answer any questions the Council may have on this matter.

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