

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE REPORT

2025 Legislative Session

Reference No.: CB-067-2025

Draft No.: 2

Committee: HHSPS

Date: September 4, 2025

Action: FAV (A)

REPORT: Committee Vote: Favorable 4-0, with amendments (Council Members Blegay, Fisher, Olson, Watson) (Excused Absence: CM Oriadha)

The Health Human Services and Public Safety Committee met on September 4, 2025, to consider CB-067-2025. Committee Chair Blegay sponsors the bill.

Staff provided an overview of the bill, which proposes creating a new countywide program run by the Prince George's County Department of Health that uses healthy, medically supportive food and nutrition as part of patient care. The program aims to improve overall health, reduce chronic illnesses, and combat food insecurity by offering grants, forming partnerships, and guiding how these food-based health interventions are implemented and reported.

If adopted, the program would target residents who may benefit from nutritional support, like those on Medicaid, people without insurance, or individuals managing diet-related health conditions, by helping them access food resources that improve health outcomes.

Committee Chair Blegay thanked everyone for attending the discussion on the Food as Medicine bill and credited Dr. Jacqueline Somerville for bringing the idea to their attention. She noted that chronic diseases, especially heart disease, are the leading cause of death in the county, and emphasized that improving nutrition is critical. Chair Blegay highlighted that federal support has decreased, but the county can act locally by connecting residents to health food options, including farms and programs like the University of Maryland Capital Region's Food as Medicine initiative, which provides patients with fresh produce. She stressed that the program helps residents manage health and that the county already has resources in place; it's just a matter of connecting them. Chair Blegay thanked the Administration for their support and then turned the discussion over to Dr. Jacqueline Somerville.

Dr. Somerville, Interim Health Officer, introduced herself and highlighted that the Health Department supports CB-067-2025. She noted that access to healthy food and addressing

chronic diseases are top priorities. She stated that they have the prevention link grant model that brings together health care, community partners, and residents to address chronic diseases. This will provide an opportunity to strengthen the collaboration with the community partners, both old and new.

Dr. Somerville discussed the county's high rates of chronic disease, obesity, and diabetes and explained that the program would connect healthcare and social services to provide residents with fresh, nutritious food. She noted that the initiative will require planning, coordination, and funding, and thanked the committee for its partnership in promoting health.

Chair Blegay addressed concerns about funding and implementation, saying a workgroup was created to assist with managing and overseeing the program, helping the Health Department connect existing resources and address funding issues.

Draft 2 of CB-067-2025 was presented for the committee's consideration. Kathy Canning, Legislative Attorney, reviewed the amendments included in the draft.

- 1) Updates the purpose paragraph, long title, and function of the bill.
- 2) Provides for the development and implementation of an educational component of the Food as Medicine Health Program.
- 3) Increases the number of partnerships to include grocery stores, health insurers, and neighboring jurisdictions, with possible funding from the Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments.
- 4) Increases eligible interventions prescribed by healthcare professionals to include farms (prioritized) SNAP benefits, hands-on cooking or cook-along classes, and minimally processed local produce.
- 5) Establishes a Food as Medicine Health Program workgroup, defines its powers and duties, and sets its composition at 21 members nominated by the County Executive and confirmed by the County Council, including the sponsoring Council Member.
One member of the County Soil Conservation District Urban Ag Conservation Program- now reads one member of the County Soil Conservation District, and One member from the community was added.
- 6) Provides that the Department shall issue a public report that includes qualitative data within three years of the program's actual start.
- 7) Provides for prioritizing partnering with authorized farms that accept nutrition benefits and SNAP for technical assistance.
- 8) County shall encourage commitments to multiyear funding to support the program.

Mr. David Noto, Legislative Budget and Policy Analyst, provided written comments on the Policy Analysis and Fiscal Impact Statement for CB-067-2025.

Dinora Hernandez, Associate County Attorney, Office of Law, indicates that she has reviewed Draft 2 and finds it to be in proper legislative form with no legal impediments.

The committee heard public testimony.

Jalissa Arnold, Prince George's County resident, business owner (Soulful Catering), chef, gardener, and former social worker, spoke in support of the bill. She highlighted how food directly impacts health, especially for seniors lacking proper nutrition. Ms. Arnold offered to volunteer through culinary classes and community partnerships to support the program.

Joseph Liu, Director of Advocacy at Capital Area Food Bank, spoke in support and noted that the Food Bank provides 60M+ meals across the region and partners with 200+ organizations. He emphasized that the bill would improve health, reduce health care costs, and increase food insecurity. He thanked the Chair for visiting their food pharmacy program and expressed alignment with the bill's vision.

Jasmine Graham, Board-certified holistic health and wellness coach, precision nutrition coach, and owner of Jazzwell Coaching, supports the bill as it aligns with her work helping people use food to improve overall wellness. She stressed that the Food as Medicine Health Program can prevent, manage, and even reverse chronic disease. She highlighted that food insecurity worsens health disparities. Lastly, she praised the bill for addressing both nutrition and food insecurity, calling it a community-driven solution.

Dr. Ivan Zama, Physician at the University of Maryland and director of Palliative Medicine and the Sickle Cell Program, expressed that decades of research show that nutrition directly affects chronic illnesses. He cited CDC estimates that many deaths could be prevented with healthy diets and shared evidence of UM's Food Prescription program. Dr. Zama urged passage of the bill, emphasizing food access and lifestyle medicine.

Isaac Zama, Farmer, Prince George's County Soil Conservation District Urban Farm Incubator, shared a personal story of growing up in Cameroon, relying on farm food and herbal remedies. He stated that local farms through the Urban Farm Incubator are growing vegetables that he once ate in his childhood and supply produce to the University of Maryland Food as Medicine Health Program. He strongly supported the bill, calling the Food as Medicine Health Program a reality that benefits the whole community.

Randy Atchison, a community advocate and master gardener, compared the way bees defend plants from pests to how communities must protect their food sources. He stressed that food is medicine and called for investment in urban gardens, local farms, and access to fresh produce.

Dr. Charles Choti, originally from Kenya, said his upbringing on garden-grown food showed him how diet directly affects health. Now leading a nonprofit and a local farm, he promotes culturally appropriate diets and food security. He urged support for the Food as Medicine Health Program, noting it's key to preventing disease, sustaining health, and building community wellness.

Tiffany Harmon, a Prince George's County resident and mother, voiced both support and concern for the Food as Medicine Health Program Act. She praised its focus on nutrition and chronic disease but argued the workgroup lacks direct community representation and risks being dominated by institutions. She urged adding a resident seat, ensuring public input through listening sessions and surveys, and moving faster on implementation, noting that past county pilots already proved successful. Ms. Harmon warned delays could push help to families too far into the future and closed by stressing that Food is Medicine, but so is the community's voice.

Rihanna Jones, Founder & CEO, Reverse Operations, Prince George's County
Ms. Jones emphasized that many Maryland families face fragmented health, housing, and social services, leaving vulnerable residents behind. Her organization creates an integrated ecosystem covering senior wellness, clinics, trauma-informed care, nutrition access, and a job program to provide stability, equity, and accountability. She highlighted that these programs could save Medicaid dollars, create jobs, and improve community health and trauma-informed funding, and piloting these services in Prince George's, Baltimore, and Montgomery counties.

Luana Kennelly, Medical Professional/Personal, shared personal experiences growing up with herbal remedies and family-focused nutrition. She emphasized understanding family health predispositions and managing diet accordingly. She advocated for an educational component on nutrition, portion control, and chronic disease prevention, as well as access to a food pharmacy. She highlighted the importance of questioning prescriptions and understanding how medications interact with health.

Michelle Burton, Program Manager, Food Equity Council, Prince George's County
Ms. Burton highlighted the results of the Prince George's Fresh Food as Medicine Pilot Program (2021-2023), which connected clinics to grocery stores for residents with chronic diseases. Participants received produce vouchers and nutritional counseling, resulting in healthier eating, weight loss, improved blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, and mental health. The program engaged nearly 90% of participants and included a participant Advisory Board to ensure community voice. She emphasized sourcing from local farmers to support the regional food system and expressed strong support for CB-067-2025.

Reisa Wells, Food and Friends, a Nonprofit serving medically tailored meals
Ms. Wells described the organization's 37-year history of providing home-delivered, medically tailored meals and nutrition therapy to low-income, food-insecure clients with serious illnesses, including cancer, heart failure, kidney disease, and diabetes. Last year,

500,000 meals were delivered to over 1,200 clients in Prince George's County. She noted that medically tailored meals improve health outcomes, reduce hospitalizations by nearly 50%, and save health care costs. Ms. Well emphasized that the Food as Medicine bill would expand and systematize these proven interventions, directly benefiting vulnerable residents.

Tolson Banner, Executive Director, Prince George's County Community Development Corporation (CDC), emphasized the need to address food deserts and support black farmers by establishing food co-ops in empty county buildings. He shared examples of community programs his CDC has led, including farm visits, nutritional education, cooking classes, fitness initiatives, and a mobile shoe restoration program to support wellness. He highlighted alarming health disparities in the county and expressed strong support for the Food as Medicine Bill, offering his organization's expertise to help implement solutions.

Kyle Reader, Administrative Director, Capital Market, described the Capital Market's work connecting food, farms, and families since 2018, including SNAP benefits expansions, produce distributions, and community activations. He emphasized the county's food insecurity, health disparities, and challenges for local farmers. He argued that investing in food systems not only improves health but also stimulates the local economy. He endorsed the Food as Medicine bill as both a health and economic strategy, highlighting its potential to centralize resources, increase participation, and support long-term sustainability for residents and farmers.

Rebecca Christian, Founder, Women Rise Center, emphasized the importance of health and wellness in her organization's mission to support women with disabilities and economically disadvantaged women. She strongly supported the Food as Medicine bill, highlighting its potential for systemic change and improved health outcomes. She expressed hope that the program could be replicated across the county to better serve women with unmet health needs.

Liz Robinson, Garden Internation Farm; Representative, Gift Legacy Foundation; Member, Food Equity Council; Vice President, Prince George's County Farm Bureau, supports the bill and stresses the importance of sourcing from local farmers for better nutrition, local economic growth, job creation, and sustainability. She noted that contracts with farmers improve planning and reduce costs. Ms. Robinson urged a focus on quality food, not just the cheapest options, to benefit community health and development.

Dr. Kofi Yus, Community Pediatrician and Associate Professor, stressed that poor nutrition is the leading cause of early death, with most U.S. adults facing chronic diet-related diseases. He noted that food insecurity worsens these conditions and disparities. He praised the bill for elevating food as medicine and urged its use to prevent, manage, and even reverse illness.

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and supporting the Food as Medicine bill, noting that the committee and the public learned a lot from the testimony. She confirmed that the workgroup will include one resident, as Tiffany Harmon requested. Chair Blegay emphasized that the work would continue throughout the year, connecting existing food programs and engaging the community through town halls and visits.

Chair Blegay made a motion, seconded by Council Member Watson, to move favorably on Draft 2, including the soil conservation amendment. The committee voted unanimously in favor.

CB-067-2025 Draft 2 was then moved favorably, with all members expressing gratitude to the Chair for her leadership, collaboration, and input from the public, administration, and coalition partners.

The Health Human Services and Public Safety Committee voted 4-0 favorably on CB-067-2025 Draft 2.