Howard County Food & Nutrition Security Roundtable Report

Prepared for Howard County Local
Health Improvement Coalition (HCLHIC)

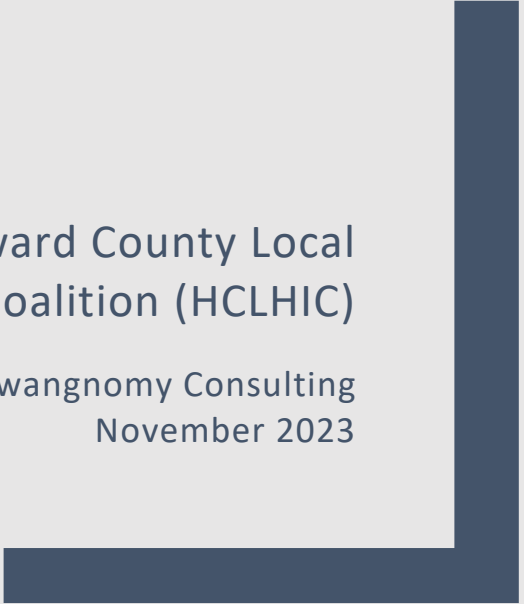By Christine Barbour, Swangnomy Consulting
November 2023

Table of Contents

Background

Over many years, organizations have provided resources to address food and nutrition insecurity in Howard County. In 2014, the Howard County Food Policy Task Force released a [report](#) with a list of recommendations including the establishment of a Food Council of key stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations and a leadership team to guide the development of new policies and procedures. However, these recommendations have not been implemented. As of November 2023, fourteen jurisdictions in Maryland have established or emerging Food Councils. Most of Howard County's neighboring counties have Food Councils including Montgomery, Baltimore, Anne Arundel, Prince George's, and Frederick.

As part of a State Partnerships Improving Nutrition & Equity (SPINE) grant from the Maryland Department of Health (MDH), the Howard County Local Health Improvement Coalition (HCLHIC), co-chaired by the Howard County Health Department (HCHD) and Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center (JHHCMC), formed the collaborative Howard County Food Security Committee in 2022. The goal of the committee is to *increase access to and awareness of culturally appropriate, accessible, affordable, and nutritious food to decrease food and nutrition insecurity among Howard County residents.*

In 2023, through the collaborative efforts of the Food Security Committee (FSC), there have been successful interventions to address food insecurity. A pop-up food pantry and container garden were held at a senior low-income community. Community health fairs were also held at two mobile home parks with an interactive planting activity, health screening, and other partner resources. The FSC spearheaded updates to the Food and Nutrition Resource guide and subsequently designed and translated the community-friendly Howard County Food Pantries and Hot Meals brochure into five languages available on the Howard County LHIC [Healthy Eating web page](#). Additionally, the interactive, mobile-friendly [Howard County Food Connection Map](#) was created to connect residents to food and nutrition resources with public transportation routes. Howard County also has the [CAREAPP](#) tool, a free mobile application to connect residents with free and low-cost resources and services for food and other Social Determinants of Health, such as housing and transportation.

From October 2022 through January 2023, the FSC designed and administered a survey to assess food insecurity rates and needs among under-resourced populations in Howard County. The overall food insecurity rate *among the population surveyed* was 79%. One key finding from the survey was that Black residents are statistically more food insecure. Additionally, bilingual homes, irrespective of race and ethnicity, are more food insecure relative to English-only speaking homes, making language and literacy major barriers to food security. For 76% of respondents, cost was the greatest barrier – food is purchased after covering the cost of housing, utilities, childcare, etc. Other barriers are time (29%) and transportation (28%). Over eighty percent of respondents shopped at grocery stores (81%) and drove to get food (82%). The drive ranged from 5 to more than 20 minutes. A staggering 71% are not aware of places to get free or low-cost food. Twenty-six percent do not have their religious, personal and/or

medical needs met. Twenty-three percent have a member of their household with food allergies. Overall, there is a lack of access to fresh produce and essential non-food items.

In September 2023, HCLHIC hosted two roundtable discussions to develop short and long-term collaborative goals to address food and nutrition insecurity in Howard County. The first discussion focused on economic and literacy barriers to accessing healthy food and the second one focused on the resources needed to address food insecurity. At both roundtables, participants were asked to identify potential actions and food policy solutions to address health, economic and environmental disparities through a Policy, Systems and Environmental Change (PSE) lens. The PSE framework focuses on changing conditions to make healthier choices more practical and accessible to all members of a community. These changes are more effective than traditional programs alone because they create more supportive environments, reach more people, and lead to more impactful, sustainable change.

Summary of Key Findings

> The overarching finding of the roundtable discussions was a lack of collaborative body that reflects the interests and needs of residents facing food insecurity and the multiple stakeholders that are part of the food system. Establishing a Food Council would provide a structure to address all areas of the food system. These include production, processing, distribution, and consumption (North Carolina Food System Resilience Strategy, 2012).

Other common themes to reduce food insecurity emerged across the stakeholder roundtables, including gaining community buy-in to build trust, working with disability and cultural organizations to be inclusive, and coordinating with existing partners and resources for more effective communication and education.

A key suggestion is to increase community and container gardening to grow enough fresh produce to meet the diverse cultural, nutritional, and dietary needs in Howard County. Short-term goals include educating community members about how to garden. Long-term goals include developing land use policies to allow and promote community gardens and school policies to grow gardens in schools and tie the gardens in with nutrition education and use in school meals.

Reducing food waste is an important goal for efficiently reducing food insecurity. This effort requires increasing grocery store partnerships, decreasing the stigma around harvesting imperfect produce and developing policies on food storage and retail rescue.

There are many resources already available in Howard County, but there is need to increase awareness of these resources through effective communication. This requires a coordinated effort to work with all partners and providers to make information about eligibility for Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and other services available throughout all "touch points" within communities. Community Health Workers (CHWs), faith-based organizations, and volunteers are critical for outreach and

engagement and for promoting the use of CAREAPP to screen and make connections to services.

Plain language communication policies need to be developed. Training opportunities should be provided to the county workforce on cultural competency. Streamlining the translation system and providing training for residents on financial literacy, how to use benefits, nutrition literacy, gardening skills and cooking skills is critical to efficiently reduce food insecurity.

For schools to provide access to affordable and nutritious food for all students from early childhood through community college, coordination with the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS), the School Board, the Howard Country Health Department (HCHD), Department of Social Services (DSS), County Council, elected leaders, and the Department of Agriculture needs to be stronger. Howard County could develop and implement effective policies on free universal school meals and auto-enroll families in SNAP based on their tax returns. Many of the other policy solutions for schools are cross-cutting and include having gardens in all schools tied in with nutrition education and use in school meal programs and decreasing food waste by promoting adequate storage and distribution of perishable foods.

Methods

ACCESSING FOOD ROUNDTABLE

HCLHIC hosted the first roundtable, Accessing Food, with 26 participants at the HCHD Ascend One Building. Christine Barbour, Swangnomy Consulting, facilitated the roundtable with the objective of *developing short and long-term goals, objectives, and activities to address food and nutrition insecurity in Howard County.* Based on the survey findings, HCLHIC identified three areas to explore for the Accessing Food Roundtable:

- CAREAPP: Increasing CAREAPP awareness and use to screen for food insecurity and resource connections. Current CAREAPP food insecurity screening questions include: *Do you ever worry that your food would run out before finding money to buy more? Do you ever run out of food because you don't have money? Do you need help finding affordable food?*
- NAVIGATION: Increasing awareness and improving food system navigation tools for benefits such as SNAP and WIC (connections to CHWs; DSS and outreach).
- NUTRITION: Increasing participation in education related to making SNAP dollars stretch and other culturally appropriate nutrition-related education sessions (e.g., University of Maryland Extension SNAP-Ed and Giant Food classes).
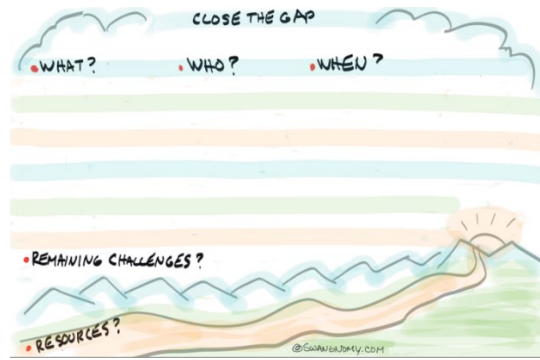
Figure 1. Close the Gap Template

Participants were assigned to tables based on their expertise in each of these areas and they stayed with the tables for the duration of the two-hour roundtable. Within these topic areas, participants were given a visual template to guide the process and asked to brainstorm gaps and develop short and long-term actions to close those gaps. They identified key partners and available resources critical to addressing the gaps. Participants were encouraged to explore policy solutions. The table representatives then shared their key findings with the larger group during a gallery visit where they posted their work on a wall for discussion.

FOOD NEEDS ROUNDTABLE

HCLHIC hosted the second roundtable on Food Needs and Resources at the Harriett Tubman Cultural Center. This roundtable included 30 participants drawing largely from the community. HCLHIC chose four table topics, and the facilitator orchestrated a World Café process where the topic stays at the table, but participants move to different tables to bring new perspectives. The idea behind this method is to shape the future of food security with important conversations to capture and distill group wisdom through collaboration. This method was successful for networking and building relationships among the diverse participants.

The table topics included:
- COMMUNITY & CONTAINER GARDENS – Community and container gardens can be used to grow fresh produce to meet the needs of diverse communities in Howard County.
- MOBILE PANTRIES – Mobile markets provide access to produce, staple items, and household items such as diapers, detergents, etc. to every Howard County resident in need.
- DIETARY & CULTURAL NEEDS – Food pantry operations provide specific dietary/cultural and nutritional needs for tasty food for people with chronic conditions, food allergies, and various cultural needs such as vegetarian, Halal, etc.
- STUDENTS –Every student from early childhood through Howard Community College has access to affordable and nutritious food.

During the first round of World Café discussions, participants brainstormed gaps on the topic. During the second round, they brainstormed actions to close those gaps and ran the priority actions through a Policy, Systems and Environmental Change (PSE) funnel with the goal of

creating lasting improvements in individual and community health and well-being. They asked the following key questions:

- Does the action meet these criteria?
- Does it create lasting improvements?
- Is it practical and affordable?
- Is it accessible (e.g., language, literacy, transportation)?
- Is it culturally supportive or diverse?
- Can it be scaled?

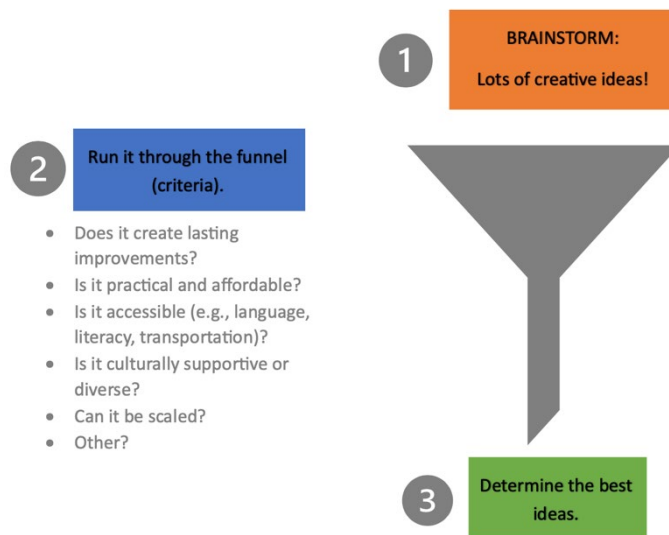**Policy, Systems and Environmental Change (PSE) Framework**

Figure 2. Policy, Systems and Environmental Change Framework Funnel

Participants shared actions that made it through this funnel with the larger group and were asked to complete a roadmap answering the following questions:

- WHAT action will address the issue or close the gap?
- WHO can take the lead?
- WHO/WHAT can support this effort?
- HOW can the lead take this action?
- Is this a SHORT-TERM action?
- Is this a LONG-TERM action?

Finally, participants identified policies and remaining challenges to achieving the goals. Roundtable participants are listed at the end of this report.

Findings

HCLHIC hosted two roundtables in which seven major areas served as a guide to the discussions:

- CAREAPP: Increase use of CAREAPP to access resources.
- NAVIGATION: Increase awareness and better navigation tools of food systems and benefits.
- NUTRITION: Increase participation in education related to making SNAP dollars stretch and other culturally appropriate nutrition-related education sessions.
- COMMUNITY & CONTAINER GARDENS: Increase availability of fresh produce.
- MOBILE PANTRIES: Increase access to produce and household staples for residents.
- FOOD PANTRIES: Increase access to specific food related to dietary, cultural, and nutritional needs.
- STUDENTS: Increase access to affordable and nutritious food.

Entering the roundtables, HCLHIC experts suggested the following potential policies/areas:

- Create a Howard County Food Council
- Increase overall resilience to reduce the need for food assistance in emergency situations (and burden on the Food Bank and food pantries).
- Promote all residents' familiarity with nutrition, as well as with growing, storing, preparing, consuming, and properly disposing of food.
- Reduce acute food insecurity by protecting federal nutrition assistance programs (SNAP and WIC), federal meal programs (such as school breakfast, school lunch, summer meals, and Eating Together for seniors), and resources such as food pantries. Ensure these are effectively implemented, accessible and utilized so that no residents experience hunger.

Roundtable participants addressed some of these policy topics and raised several cross-cutting themes. They highlighted the need for increased coordination to access existing resources, improved communication to increase participation among diverse communities, education to increase nutrition knowledge and skills, and work within communities to build trust. Policy solutions centered around maintaining federal and state programs, integrating gardens in schools and communities, and reducing food waste. Successful implementation of the policy solutions requires extensive cross-sector collaboration through a Food Council.

GARDENING

To ensure that there is enough fresh produce available to meet the needs of diverse communities in Howard County, the partners of the FSC can coordinate and communicate what already exists and develop policies that increase the number of gardens within communities and schools where needed.

Key Theme: Gardening			
Goal: Increase community and container gardening			
Actions		Resources	Challenges
Short-Term	Long-Term/Policy		

• Provide education to community on how to grow gardens, where to donate food, the benefits of supporting the local food system, the impact on mental and physical well-being and the improvement of the environment, horticulture planning and design, and the tools to define their own food system (food sovereignty) and canning and preservation
• Promote gardens in all schools and tie in with nutrition education and use in school meals
• Conduct a study and develop a plan to have culturally appropriate choices available
• Add culturally specific food availability to the Food Connection Map
• Consider accessibility with transportation and language
	• * Work with the Howard County Government and Department of Planning and Zoning/ Office of Community Sustainability, and Community Ecology Institute to develop land use regulations and plans to require new developments to set aside space for community gardens and determine how to incorporate community gardens in existing neighborhoods
	• * Solicit and support growers to grow culturally specific food
	• * Expand Homeowner Association policies to allow for community gardens on village land
	• * Incentivize through tax credits:
	  ○ Agricultural land set asides for community gardens
	  ○ Agricultural Gleaning Programs
	  ○ Community gardens in apartment complexes
		• Columbia Flyer Building
		• Community Ecology Institute
		• Maryland Foodbank
		• Community Action Council of HC
		• HC Head Start
		• University of Maryland Extension Master Gardeners
		• Farmers Market Voucher Program
		• Columbia Community Care
		• United States Department of Agriculture Grant Opportunities
		• HC Library System
		• Jenny's Market
		• Food Pharmacy
		• Boy Scout Eagle Projects
		• Upcycle recycled materials for raised gardens
			• Resource alignment and red tape are obstacles for executing novel ideas
			• Funding for maintenance and upkeep and to support soil improvement

Implementation required through Food Council

FOOD WASTE

Participants identified the need to create policies on food storage and food waste. Part of this is reducing the stigma of food recovery programs and creating broader access to retail rescues. This includes imperfect foods and dented boxes. Participants suggested creating a tax incentive for surplus food donations to those in need.

Key Theme: Food Waste			
Goal: Decrease Food Waste			
Actions		Resources	Challenges
Short-Term	Long-Term/Policy		
• Develop produce harvesting plan (identify local food pantries for drop-off) • Create access to retail rescue • Decrease stigma around harnessing food waste • Increase grocery store partnerships • Promote proper storage and distribution of perishable foods	• * Create policy on food storage, food waste, imperfect foods, dented boxes • * Create a tax incentive for surplus food donations to those in need • * Create policies for acceptable food donations to discourage food waste and encourage food recovery	• Glenelg United Methodist Church Pantry (Park-It-Market) in Western Howard County • Community Action Council of HC • Roving Radish Market Place (expected launch April 2024) • Horizon Foundation's Healthier Choice Coalition • Faith-based Mobile Pantries • HoCo Respond Maryland Reserve Corps (MRC)	• Inadequate policies and public perception surrounding food waste • Lack of funding and staffing

Implementation required through Food Council

COMMUNICATION

To increase the effectiveness of communication efforts to reduce food insecurity, more partner and community engagement is needed to reach residents facing food insecurity. Key stakeholders need a clear connection to the population to address diverse cultures and garner community input to build trust. All stakeholders need to look for ways to increase awareness and knowledge around eligibility for available resources including SNAP and WIC.

Key Theme: Communication			
Goal: Increase awareness of resources			
Actions		Resources	Challenges
Short-Term	Long-Term/Policy		

• Provide information on eligibility using all channels
• Use CAREAPP for all screening and connections:
  ○ Identify a champion in each organization
  ○ Send organizations reminders to update information on CAREAPP platform
  ○ Create "how to" videos for CAREAPP use
• Use CHWs, faith-based organizations, volunteers like MRC
• Conduct outreach and community engagement
• Create a directory of county, state, and volunteers for interpretation
• Work with "THE HUB" at the University of Maryland Horowitz Center and HC Office of Human Rights to create a communication policy and checklist and create culturally competent training in plain language
• Connect with ethnic grocers and civic and parochial institutions
	• Build trust by encouraging programs to have multilingual staff; translators (network of volunteer translators at events); free translation resources for smaller organizations; and engage communities to get their perspective (voice).
	• Help organizations to integrate CAREAPP into their workflow (include discharge, help end-users, share postcards, put link in signature line, brochures in different languages, tech help, door to door promotions, ads)
	• Create a clear communication policy and checklist to ensure culturally responsive community access
	• Create a website to show mobile pantries' locations
		• Community Action Council of HC
		• Community Health Workers
		• Community-based Organizations
		• Educators
		• Ethnic Markets (to reach communities)
		• Faith-based Organizations
		• HCPSS
		• Health Care Workers
		• Hospitals / Clinics
		• Libraries
		• Outreach Workers
		• "The HUB" UMD Horowitz Center
			• Lack of coordinated communication
			• Dependent on funding and federal / state policies
			• Difficult to locate existing best practices for cultural competency and plain language
			• Transportation - physical access, shuttles, use volunteer groups, limited number of people with commercial driver's licenses

EDUCATION

To reduce food insecurity, outreach to providers and community members needs to include an increase in culturally appropriate, inclusive, and accessible education. Expansion and enrollment of community members in classes on financial literacy, nutrition literacy, cooking skills, and gardening skills are crucial components.

Key Theme: Education			
Goal: Increase training			
Actions		Resources	Challenges
Short-Term	Long-Term/Policy		

• Train staff:
  ○ Cultural competency and plain language
• Train residents:
  ○ Financial literacy
  ○ How to use benefits
  ○ Nutrition literacy
  ○ Gardening skills
  ○ Cooking skills
	• * Advocate for policy changes around food offerings to address culture and diversity
	• * Increase access to diversified food options by partnering with new retailers and working with existing retailers to diversify their offerings
	• * Streamline translation system
		• Accessible Resources for Independence
		• Community Action Council of HC
		• Community Health Educators
		• Community Health Workers
		• Community organizations
		• Department of Social Services
		• Ethnic markets (to reach communities)
		• K-12 teachers
		• Faith-based organizations
		• Howard Community College (HCC)
		• HCPSS
		• Health professionals
		• Hospitals/ Clinics
		• Libraries
		• Outreach workers
		• University of Maryland Extension:
		  ○ SNAP-Ed
		  ○ Nutrition Health Wellness
		  ○ Financial Educators
		  ○ Family and Consumer Sciences
		• Social workers
			• Lack of coordinated resources among the many partners
			• There are established materials that need to be translated into multiple languages. To do this, partners need funding to hire additional culturally diverse staff and interpreters
			• Combat misinformation
			• Venues, time, staffing, funding, land space for gardens, community gardens, vetting materials, and having standards in place

Implementation required through Food Council

SCHOOLS

For schools to provide access to affordable and nutritious food for all students, the Howard County Public School System, the Howard Country Health Department, Department of Social Services, the School Board, County Council, elected leaders, and the Department of Agriculture must be coordinated. The most effective policy solution for reducing food insecurity is universal school meals. Other policies include auto-enrollment of families in SNAP based on their tax returns and increasing SNAP eligibility for other funding programs. Many of the other policy solutions for schools are cross-cutting and address working with growers to accept SNAP, having gardens in all schools that are tied in with nutrition education and use in school meal programs. Also, consider waste, including promoting proper storage and distribution of perishable foods.

Key Theme: Schools			
Goal: Ensure all students from early childhood, through HCPSS and HCC have access to affordable and nutritious food.			
Actions		**Resources**	**Challenges**
Short-Term	**Long-Term/Policy**		
* Work across organizations to share lists of eligible people for auto-enrollment ○ Create categorical eligibility ○ Families receiving WIC or SNAP are automatically eligible for other food resources * Register all students (have all paperwork filled) - Provide online support so students can find information about required forms and more programs they might be eligible for * Provide additional staff, social workers, and financial support for students lacking food - Use CAREAPP in the schools so teachers can inform students	* Create school system policies to address skill building around nutrition - Invite stakeholders to the table to understand the barriers * Coordinate budget analysis and research on universal school meals, (models CA, CO, IL, MI, MN, AZ (planning) * Create a policy on free universal school meals	- Free/reduced meals for eligible families - School food pantries in 20 of the 77 HCPSS schools - Pupil Personnel Workers /Social workers /nurses who can make referrals to community resources for food security - HCC on-site food pantry	- Funding ($600,000 in school meals debt) - HCC difficulty maintaining adequate food stores with their food pantry - HCPSS researching food waste reduction - Lack of stakeholder voice - Need workforce - Need community buy-in and to raise awareness of needs - Schools need dedicated space for freezers and refrigerators - Funding and policies not aligned with student and family needs

Implementation required through Food Council

Conclusions

There are many organizations providing resources to address food and nutrition insecurity in Howard County. However, there are still many gaps and needs remaining as identified by the 2023 Howard County Food and Nutrition Security Survey. The HCLHIC Food Security Committee convened two roundtable discussions to determine collaborative partner solutions to address these gaps.

Most of the proposed solutions require extensive collaboration across food system sectors to include senior government entities, non-profit organizations, and residents experiencing food insecurity. Realistic implementation of these solutions requires the establishment of a Food Council in Howard County.

Other key findings from the roundtable discussions included the need for: increased coordination among the many partners; effective communication of eligibility for existing programs by building trust and garnering community input; education of staff and building of community member skills; and development of policies to make nutritious food more readily available. The need for household items was mentioned with the need for increased availability of staples and other items (through solicited donations, etc.). The most critical policies include land use incentives for more community gardens, policies to reduce food waste and policies for integrating gardens into schools and providing universal meals for all students.

The HCLHIC Food Security Committee spearheaded many collaborative initiatives as part of a State Partnerships Improving Nutrition & Equity (SPINE) grant from the Maryland Department of Health (MDH). However, additional funding will not be available from MDH to support the coalition's food and nutrition security work in 2024.

Currently, there is no single entity in Howard County focused on reducing food and nutrition insecurity through the Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change framework. There is a lack of coordinated effort and upstream policy solutions to address the root causes of food insecurity that is having an impact downstream with the increased demand experienced by the Food Bank and food pantries.

The extreme demand for food and basic household items is placing a strain on families' ability to thrive in the county. The Food Bank is exploring setting up another location to handle the demand for food among those eligible and facing barriers to transportation. Families who are just above the threshold for eligibility are also facing hardships feeding their families and covering basic needs.

Establishing a Howard County Food Council would address the key findings from this report and facilitate the recommended actions and policy changes. Without a Food Council, most of the proposed solutions would not be implemented and this would increase the burden on the Food

Bank and food pantries that are already overwhelmed and currently experiencing donor fatigue. A Food Council would also foster connection with key stakeholders and include the community voice of individuals with lived experience of food insecurity as part of the decision-making process to represent diverse cultures and values that make up the population in Howard County.

Key Stakeholders

The following key stakeholders participated in one or both roundtables:

- Alice Harris, Horizon Foundation
- Alison Gerber, Howard County Department of Community Resources & Services
- Alli Milner, Laurel Advocacy & Referral Services
- Annabelle Beavan, LindaBen Foundation
- Antigone Vickery, Howard County Health Department
- Aziz Hurtado Olson, University of Maryland Extension
- Bernadette Bindewald, Howard County Health Department
- Beverly J. White Seals, Community Foundation of Howard County
- Brian Ralph, Howard County Public School System
- Cari Gast, Howard County Library System
- Carrie Ross, Community Action Council of Howard County
- Chynáe Vicks, Howard County Health Department
- Connie Ford, Howard County Health Department
- D'Paul Nibber, Horizon Foundation
- Elizabeth Jones, Horizon Foundation's Healthier Choices Coalition
- Emily Phillips, Howard County Health Department
- Erika Chavarria, Columbia Community Care
- Erin Ashinghurst, Accessible Resources for Independence
- Glenn Schneider, Horizon Foundation
- Jackie Scott, Howard County Department of Community Resources & Services
- James Zoller, Howard County Office of Community Sustainability
- Jason Bashura, Board of Health
- Justin Chen, Community Ecology Institute
- Karen Basinger, University of Maryland Extension
- Kim Eisenreich, Howard County Department of Community Resources & Services
- Laura Henderson, Howard County Health Department
- Lauren McGee, Chase Brexton
- Linda Ashburn, Howard County Health Department
- Linda Zumbrun, Department of Social Services
- Lindsay Hall, Howard County Health Department
- Lisa de Hernández, Howard County Health Department
- Lisa Dolce, Glenelg United Methodist Church

- Lois Joellenbeck, Howard County Health Department
- Lynn Rubin Traversa, University of Maryland Extension
- Matt Wilson, Howard County Health Department
- Michelle Clark, Howard County Health Department
- Natalie Hall, Howard County Health Department
- Nikki Savoy, Accessible Resources for Independence
- Oluwatosin Olateju, Food and Care For All, Inc.
- Razan Sahuri, University of Maryland Extension SNAP-Ed
- Shannon Blount, Howard County Public School System
- Sherry March, Elkridge Food Pantry
- Sonya Lloyd, Howard County Health Department
- Tracy Broccolino, Community Action Council of Howard County
- Vanda Lerdboon, Howard County Health Department