

## **Minutes – Howard County Food Council General Meeting**

Wednesday April 8, 2026 at 10:00 – 11:30am

Virtual via Zoom

### **Members Present:**

Benjamin Barnwell, Howard County Department of Community Resource & Services  
Brian Ralph, Howard County Public School System  
Carrie Ross, Community Action Council of Howard County  
Claudet Miranda, Maryland Hunger Solutions  
Danielle Clifford-Earles, Howard County Office on Aging and Independence  
Gerardo Benavides, Horizon Foundation  
Jackie Scott, Howard County Department of Community Resource & Services  
James McLane Zoller, Howard County Office of Agriculture  
Janice Schneider, Community Member  
Jessica Harris, Howard County Housing Commission  
Kathy Johnson, Howard County Office of Economic Development  
Laura Crovo, Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center  
Lauren Chilton, Howard County Office of Emergency Management  
Lauren McGee, Chase Brexton Health Care  
Linda Ashburn, Howard County Health Department  
Loni Cohen, Community Ecology Institute  
Maribet Rivera-Brute, Howard County Local Health Improvement Coalition  
Michael Maggio, Howard County Office of Agriculture  
Michelle Feng, University of Maryland, Extension - Howard County  
Missy LePage, Glenelg United Methodist Church  
Nikki Savoy, Accessible Resources for Independence  
Noreen Zaidi, Howard County Muslim Council  
Petra Guiland, Howard County Office of Human Rights and Equity  
Renee Afryka, Giant Food  
Rosemarie Jimenez-Rosales, Howard County Local Health Improvement Coalition  
Samuel Wilson, Korean Community Service Center of Greater Washington  
Tara Rupp, Howard Community College  
Thomas Mooring, University of Maryland, Extension - Howard County  
Xingxing Liu, Korean Community Service Center of Greater Washington

### **Staff Present:**

Nathan Glenn, University of Maryland, Extension - Howard County  
Reena Rambharat, Howard County Health Department

Topic/Agenda	Discussion	Action/Follow-up
<p><b>Welcome and Introductions</b></p>	<p>Ms. Reena Rambharat, Deputy Director of the Bureau of Assessment, Planning and Community Engagement at Howard County Health Department, called the meeting to order at 10:00a.m. She provided a welcome to members in attendance and indicated that the minutes will be shared after the meeting and available on the Food Council’s webpage. Ms. Rambharat reviewed info shared at the last Food Council meeting in February and stated that the goals for this meeting were to generate ideas to inform the development of the Food Council Action plan. Ms. Rambharat then invited members to share organizational announcements.</p>	<p>Howard County Food Council information can be found on the Local Health Improvement Coalition’s (LHIC) website: <a href="https://www.hclhic.org/uncil">https://www.hclhic.org/uncil</a></p>
<p><b>Member Announcements</b></p>	<p><b>The following announcements were shared by the group:</b></p> <p>Ms. Rambharat shared that the Food Council is now formally part of the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council. This group of appointed members work to enhance the State’s food system’s resiliency, sustainability and equity. Council members collaborate to develop strategic recommendations to the Maryland General Assembly.</p> <p>Ms. Rambharat also shared that the Food Council is implementing the Hydroponics in Schools program that came from input of farmers at the focus groups held in September 2025.</p> <p>Mr. Nathan Glenn shared that the University of Maryland Extension – Howard County was able to purchase the Hydroponic growing systems and that 11 schools will be involved and impacted through this grant (Elementary, Middle and Schools) and it’s a collaborative effort through the Food Council. Students will learn how to grow healthy foods and learn the education and science behind it.</p> <p>Mr. James McLane Zoller shared information from the New and Beginning Farmers Program. The program currently has 11 farmers that are starting to plant at the West Friendship park. The program is in the middle of installing tanks for irrigation, installing freezers for the farmers to assist with the lack of processors.</p> <p>Ms. Maribet Rivera-Brute shared in the chat that the next Full LLHIC meeting will be April 16, 2026 and shared the link for registration in the chat.</p> <p>Ms. Petra Guiland shared info about the AAPI Health Fair on April 12, 2026 between 2:30pm-5:30pm at the Harriet Tubman Cultural Center, as well as info in the chat about the Arab American Heritage month documentary screening at the 50+ Center.</p>	<p>Minutes from the previous meeting will be available one week prior to the next meeting date.</p> <p>Howard County Local Health Improvement Coalition registration: <a href="https://www.hclhic.org/">https://www.hclhic.org/</a></p> <p>AAPI Health Fair registration link: <a href="https://www.eventbrite.com/e/1985140741396?aff=oddtcreator">https://www.eventbrite.com/e/1985140741396?aff=oddtcreator</a></p> <p>Arab American Heritage Month documentary screening: <a href="https://www.eventbrite.com/e/1986804917993?aff=oddtcreator">https://www.eventbrite.com/e/1986804917993?aff=oddtcreator</a></p>

	<p>Ms. Jessica Harris shared information in the chat regarding the Howard County Housing Commission Resident Services/THRIVE Together Resource Fair for Seniors and Families taking place on April 17, 2026 from 4pm-6pm at 7601 Woodpark Ln., Columbia, MD 21046.</p> <p>Mr. Brian Ralph shared information in the chat regarding HCPSS Open Site Summer Meals Program that will run from June 24 to July 31, 2026 at 11 sites from 12:30-2:00pm. Meals will be provided at no cost to any children aged 18 years and under. Advertisement to follow.</p>	
<b>Food Council Overview</b>	<p>Ms. Rambharat provided an overview of the Food Council's Organizational Structure, Mission, Vision, Guiding Principles, Goals and Sectors represented.</p>	
<b>Action Plan Brainstorming</b>	<p>Ms. Rambharat provided a background on the development of the Food Council's efforts, data and timeline for the Action Plan, development and implementation. Ms. Rambharat and Mr. Glenn asked the group to participate in an exercise to brainstorm some of the problems and possible solutions to the question of the most important food system challenges and opportunities in our community right now.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b></p> <p>Dependency on SNAP and disruption through federal policy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Issues with documentation</li> <li>● Inability to qualify for funding or qualifying to work</li> </ul> <p>Executive function-the ability to think/plan/organize ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unaddressed mental health issues-stress, depression, etc.</li> <li>● Many people are overloaded with handling the stress of life</li> <li>● Cost of living is expensive and increasing</li> <li>● Social safety nets are discouraged and underfunded-adds stress</li> <li>● Many are misinformed about how social safety nets work</li> <li>● Elected leaders not acting in public interest</li> </ul> <p>Food accessibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Grocery outlet chains have recently gone out of business</li> <li>● Buying food based on budget, not nutritional value</li> <li>● Limited healthy options or access to health options</li> </ul>	

- Demographics create different challenges for different people
- Disparities in food accessibility based on “who we think deserve help”
- Threat to well-being; the threat to the immigrant population and those adjacent may not feel safe to access food.

**Cost of Land and production for growing local food:**

- The Office Agriculture New and Beginning farmer program is a start, but how do we make affordable locally grown food sustainable?
- Input costs are rising, but revenue for farms are staying the same
- Funding for connecting farms and food to people in need
- Underutilized land resources for local food
- Coming together a community to share resources and impacts

**Stigma and Education:**

- Education on cooking raw and nutritious ingredients
- Understanding what is nutritious-a lot of misinformation about what actually is healthy, especially for young people.
- Added pressure on schools for Free and Reduced Meals
- Free and Reduced Priced Meals (FARMs) are stigmatized where participation numbers are less than expected.
- Communicating with parents is the major issue here.
- Perhaps there is fear of participating in these types of programs, in communities with the political/societal atmosphere

**Solutions:**

Ms. Renee Afryka shared information regarding Giant Food such as offering a Guiding Stars program that will alert a shopper to nutrition-rich foods (marked with a star) and their Rewards program where shoppers can earn points to be used for gas or discounts towards food.

Ms. Loni Cohen shared information on programs that The Community Ecology Institute is running for students and groups.

	<p>Ms. Nikki Savoy shared ideas regarding accessible transportation options. Possible incentivized programs for businesses or entrepreneurs to assist in this mission.</p> <p>Ms. Nooreen Zaidi mentioned that schools could offer curriculum-based items related to food, nutrition, and Home Economics. Community garden plots may also be an idea, especially in areas where there are food deserts.</p> <p>Ms. Michelle Feng mentioned in the chat that having some standard nutritional education including gardens in schools for students and families is highly important for Policy, System and Environmental Change work. More accessibility to nutritional education with partners serving our communities is needed.</p> <p>Ms. Rosemarie Jimenez-Rosales mentioned in the chat that Community Health Workers (CHW's) could be trained in food education and maybe go into the schools and educate them in healthy food choices and even preparation.</p> <p>Ms. Kathy Johnson mentioned in the chat that they have started the Roving Radish program which also makes donations to the food bank. Many of their farmers donate fruits and vegetables to the food banks throughout the growing season. Also mentioned the hope that the county will add a new community garden in the Elkridge area.</p> <p>Ms. Lauren Chilton mentioned in the chat that apart from HoCo RapidRide and traditional RTA routes, the group could find other options for transportation, (free ones, certain days) dedicated to grocery stores. May be able to coordinate in partnership with grocery stores.</p> <p>Mr. Michael Maggio mentioned that there may be a lack of collaboration between like-minded programs in the county.</p>	<p>Giant Stores information: <a href="#">Healthy Living   Giant.</a> <a href="mailto:healthyliving@giantfood.com">healthyliving@giantfood.com</a></p>
<p><b>Summer Event Planning</b></p>	<p>The next Food Council General Assembly meeting will be on June 10, 2026 from 10:00 – 11:30 am. Ms. Rambharat solicited ideas for the next meeting Activity from the group. Some ideas presented were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Roundtable-style activity</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Volunteering opportunities could be for the group to promote beforehand an opportunity for residents to have garden plots or help people start container gardens.</li> <li>● Partnering with the Maryland Food bank to see how they process their food donations, volunteer to pack food kits/boxes, etc.</li> <li>● Partner with schools to get young people to help or as a summer jobs initiative.</li> <li>● Collaborative idea to create or hold food demonstrations at the upcoming Long Reach Community Fair. Sharing information regarding healthy food sources at these events.</li> </ul>	
<b>Next Steps and Action Items</b>	<p>Ms. Rambharat shared the next steps for the Action Plan development:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discuss Priorities + Goals + Strategies with Steering Committee</li> <li>2. Share Draft with Food Council Members</li> <li>3. Form Two Workgroups based on Priorities: Co-Chairs for each <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Draft the objectives, activities and timeline for each Priority</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Draft plan and gather feedback</li> <li>5. <b>Final Plan:</b> FY 27 → Vote + Adopt</li> </ol>	
<b>Wrap Up and Adjournment</b>	<p>Ms. Rambharat announced the conclusion of the meeting and thanked the participants for joining.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shared plans to distribute meeting minutes, details regarding the summer event and updates for the upcoming meeting.</li> <li>● Expressed gratitude and bid farewell.</li> </ul> <p>Ms. Rambharat adjourned the meeting at 11:27am.</p>	

Respectfully submitted by  
Ms. LaTonya Love  
Administrative Specialist II  
Howard County Health Department

**Future Meeting Dates:**

Food Council General Meeting (2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday every 3 months) \*

- Wednesday, June 10, 10:00 – 11:30 am; (In-Person) TBD Activity/Volunteering/Day of Service
- Wednesday, August 12, 10:00 – 11:30 am; (Virtual) Zoom Meeting
- Wednesday, October 14, 10:00 – 11:30 am; (Virtual) Zoom Meeting
- Wednesday, December 9, 10:00 – 11:30 am; (Virtual) Zoom Meeting

*\*In case of inclement weather, in-person meetings will switch to virtual or cancelled if the Howard County Health Department and the University of Maryland, Extension – Howard County are closed.*