The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has created massive disruption for college students. Across the country, colleges and universities have closed their campuses and switched to virtual learning for the rest of the semester. Some colleges have only given students up to 24 hours to vacate their campus housing.

These preventive measures taken by colleges can stop the spread of COVID-19, but for low-income students, this has meant the loss of housing, employment, health care, and access to safe, nutritious food.

On Thursday, March 19th, the University of Maryland System (USM) Chancellor Jay A. Perman announced that the state’s institutions will move to virtual learning for the rest of the semester. This decision affects twelve public universities, three regional higher education centers, and over 172,214 students.

USM has been supportive of refunding room and board as well as various university fees on a prorated basis. Maryland universities have also been looking for ways to provide students with laptops and arrange free Internet service through different providers.

Additionally, the federal government’s passage of the CARES Act provides a $7 billion investment in emergency financial aid to college students to help with food, housing, childcare, healthcare and more.

These efforts are important to ensuring that Maryland students are protected from unexpected campus closures, but MORE CAN and SHOULD BE DONE!

We call on Maryland public and private colleges and universities and the Governor to utilize their institutional and executive powers to take the following measures during the State of Emergency so that Maryland students are protected:

**University-Related Actions**
1. **Provide emergency financial assistance to students.**
   - Universities should start an emergency fund to help students during this crisis. Many students rely on their college for work, housing, and food. Students did not anticipate their campus being closed and need financial assistance to pay for unexpected loss of housing and/or childcare. Students are also incurring unanticipated travel and technology expenses in order to complete course requirements.
   - Schools should provide up to $500 in emergency assistance funding for students that apply. Students should be able to apply online for emergency assistance. Applications must avoid requiring onerous documentation of students’ need for assistance. Emergency funds should be delivered to students within five to seven business days.
   - Maryland institutions should model their efforts on the emergency funds created by George Mason University, New York University, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. These schools’ emergency funding are open to all students (part-time, full-time, undergraduate, and graduate) and requires students to explain the unexpected financial hardship they’ve faced resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak such as loss of income and unexpected expense of travel home.
     - George Mason University notifies students about funding approval via email within five business days of submitting the online emergency assistance funding application. Additionally, George Mason University disburses funds in one of the following ways: check made payable to a student, Visa gift card, deposit to a student’s account at George Mason University, etc.
     - The University of North Carolina-Charlotte’s emergency fund provides up to $500 per student as a one-time payment to cover essentials during the crisis.

2. **Extend emergency housing options up to domestic and international students**
   - Closing resident halls and dormitories is important to limiting the spread of COVID-19, but also impacts students who don’t have the ability to go home. Some students are unable to return home because of personal safety concerns. For international students, forcing them to return home during a global pandemic is troublesome and distressing.
   - Maryland universities must extend housing availability for students who would otherwise be housing insecure.
   - Additionally, colleges must ensure that emergency housing assistance is also extended to students who live in off-campus university-affiliated apartment complexes that are closing because of the university’s response to COVID-19.
These students should be provided refunds for rent payments, moving, and storage.

3. **Refund room and board, dining plans, and mandatory fees for students**
   - Maryland campuses are shutting down for the remainder of the semester. Students should be reimbursed for their unused meal plans, on-campus housing, and mandatory fees for programs that are not relevant to students learning and building community online, such as gym and athletics fees.

4. **Offer alternative dining options for students**
   - For students residing in emergency on-campus housing, universities should provide alternative dining options and explore the possibility of offering pre-packaged or take away meals from dining halls.

5. **Allow the campus food pantry to remain open and provide supplemental resources**
   - For students living in off-campus housing who are food insecure, additional assistance is needed to avoid hunger.
   - Campuses should work to maintain or expand support services to help food insecure students, including allowing campus food pantries to remain open and if safe staffed.
   - Institutions should also provide gift cards to students who are Pell Grant recipients or eligible for work study to pay for groceries, cleaning supplies, and medicine.
   - The University of California-Riverside is providing gift cards to students and distributing them at their campus pantry, health center, resident facilities, and counseling center.

6. **Establish or expand laptop loaner programs for academic use**
   - Moving to virtual learning for the remainder of the semester creates a barrier to academic success for students who do not have computers or Internet access.
   - Maryland institutions must establish or expand existing laptop loaner programs to allow for students to complete their courses for the semester.

7. **Have professors and faculty promote existing resources to students**
   - Professors and faculty will be in constant communication with students regarding their courses during this time.
   - Institutions should make sure that professors are notifying students of campus resources and support available to them.

**Maryland Governor Executive Actions**

8. **Must extend unemployment compensation to student workers (not contingent on students’ immigration status)**
   - Currently, Maryland’s unemployment compensation excludes student workers. Students have lost their employment and wages because of school closures.
Extending unemployment compensation eligibility for students is crucial to helping students.

9. Increase emergency aid for universities to help students during COVID-19
   - Historically, many Maryland higher education institutions have been inequitably funded. Now, more than ever Maryland colleges need additional funding to support emergency efforts to help students at this time.

10. Suspend Central Collection Units’ (CCU) collection on student loan debts and other student-related debts
   - Maryland must halt the collection of student loan debt and other student related debts owed to the state and sent to the state debt collection agency.
   - Recently, New York’s Attorney General temporarily stopped the collection of student debt owed to the state. Temporarily suspending the collection of student debt owed to the state will help mitigate the adverse financial impact that the COVID-19 outbreak has had on student borrowers.

We need to remove as many as financial barriers for students during this period. We urge Maryland universities and Governor Hogan to take these steps and make sure that students are protected from the devastating impact of COVID-19. Efforts are needed to protect students and allow students to meet their basic needs while continuing their education.

Sincerely,

CASH Campaign of Maryland
Central Scholarship
CCCSMD
COVID-19 Student Task Force
Fair Housing Action Center of Maryland
Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition
Maryland PIRG
MaryPIRG Students
Office of Delegate Debra Davis, MD General Assembly
Towson University SGA