



**Testimony to the Montgomery County Council
Submitted by Manna Food Center
April 20, 2022**

Good evening, my name is Agar Mbianda, and work with the team of Manna Food Center to engage with our community as we work to eliminate hunger. Manna's vision is a community where all people, at all times—especially during a pandemic—have access to good food in welcoming spaces. President Albornoz, I want to thank you and all the members of the Council for being such important champions of food security.

Previous capital and capacity investments positioned Manna to bring food and programs across the County immediately when the Covid-19 public health emergency was declared. Public funding in the community was vital to our ability to pivot and innovate so that last year more than 5 million pounds of food could be shared throughout the community. In FY21 Manna directly reached 45,210 neighbors, 16,900 of whom turned to us for the first time. We operate 7 weekly distributions directly, and also offer home deliveries to seniors and those with disabilities. We conduct additional monthly drop offs at 16 satellite locations such as apartment complexes and offer occasional Pop-Up Pantries at partner locations. In addition to our own direct food assistance, we currently support 22 agencies that stepped up to the challenges of a surge in pandemic food needs, including consolidated service hubs. Our programs team, of which I am a member, created virtual and in-person learning opportunities in English and Spanish to help our neighbors shop on a budget and prepare culturally appropriate foods in healthy, tasty ways.

But I am not here tonight to talk about the past, I am asking your support of Manna as the food center of the future. As the pandemic landscape shifts and the prospects for economic recovery become clearer, Montgomery County is poised to see real movement in the needle of food insecurity in our community. The demands of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) continue and sharpen, and Manna is asking for increased support in order to fulfill the obligations of our mission and seize the opportunity to:

- Maintain our infrastructure and knowledge base to guarantee preparedness to mobilize in response to the next food and health emergency or other community crisis.
- Ensure that accessible food shared directly with the community continues to be appealing and helpful in preventing or combatting diet related illness.
- Serve an operational role in collecting and actualizing insights from both quantitative and qualitative data to contribute to the development of food security and resiliency strategies.
- Spur other economic growth by increasing participant access to benefits such as SNAP and expanding our pilot voucher program as a solution to food insecurity.
- Foster community through outreach and leadership development by providing space, opportunity, and resources for increased skill building for individuals and other

community groups. Manna will continue to share power within the community that we seek to impact.

When I came to Manna I was recently unemployed due to Covid down-sizing at an international development agency. I quickly learned about how Manna was working with community-based partners to respond in culturally appropriate and fair ways to offer a range of options to neighbors. I am very proud to now be serving as a Manager in the organization, participating in our strategic planning and working with community partners.

My experience with Manna in the community engagement program in partnership with 8 trusted community groups and 17 outreach workers have helped ethnic groups who have not normally come to Manna to ask for support, to be connected to our resources and other available resources in the County such as rental assistance, healthcare, etc. Those community-based partners have been supporting Manna by reducing some barriers such as language, documentation status, culture, and stigma. As an immigrant speaking English as second language, I know exactly what I am talking about. I volunteered with one of those trusted community-based organizations and now that I have this position, I am using our Pop Up Pantries to interact directly with people in the community to build trust relationship.

In collaboration with 4 local stores, Manna is responding to participants' needs in providing them with voucher as a supplement to our Food for Family program, which allows them to pick up necessary grocery items from select markets; each voucher redeemable one time in exchange for critical staple ingredients. The food voucher not only supports economic growth of small businesses, but also gives options to participants in terms of flexibility in their time, type of food, and quantity they would like to have. It important to highlight here that many participants are very interested in this program, but Manna cannot satisfy everybody in need because of unsecure funding of the program. We are looking to the County to help us expand our work so that everyone who needs food has access to it.

Since our founding in 1983 the County partnered with Manna, our staff, and volunteers. We now ask you to allocate \$1,000,000 in support of our food bank contract as we all work to create a new, better normal where there is Food for All. Thank you.