



April 20, 2022

Montgomery County Council President  
100 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, MD 20850

## **MONTGOMERY COUNTY FOOD COUNCIL TESTIMONY: COUNTY COUNCIL FY<sub>23</sub> BUDGET**

On behalf of the Montgomery County Food Council, I would like to thank Council President Alborno and the County Council Members for considering community perspectives in the County Council annual budgetary approval process.

The Food Council greatly appreciates the renewal of our existing base budget funds, including a cost of living increase, as well as the new additional funds allocated to permanently sustain our expanded levels of effort over the past two years. The pandemic laid bare many existing weaknesses in our local food system, and we as a community have made significant strides in building partner networks, including new communities for nutrition benefits enrollment and community gardening, and enhancing the capacity of local organizations through trainings, resource connections, and advocacy education. Our ability to quickly and effectively respond to the food access crisis in March 2020 as a cohesive sector was directly due to the County's investment in both strategy, policy, and coordination, as well as direct services. We enthusiastically support the many food system-specific aspects of this budget and encourage the County Council to continue prioritizing allocations that will help us create a more equitable and resilient food system.

### **Support for Office of Food System Resiliency**

It has never been more clear that dedicated staffing inside the County government is critical in order to create an equitable and resilient food system by building on recent progress and lessons learned through the pandemic. This is why we urge the County Council to support the funding appropriated toward the Office of Food System Resiliency. This newly-created office will improve the health of residents, the economy, and the environment. County employees would coordinate the efforts of County agencies internally and work with community-based nonprofits, such as the Food Council, to establish and implement the County's priorities. This would ensure that food systems issues, such as equity, food security, local food production, sustainability, and economic opportunity, are not addressed in a vacuum and cohesively focus on policy and systems-based solutions. Funding to support County staffing to conduct data collection, analysis, mapping and research will help to identify gaps in service, expand SNAP access points, and inform all food security programs. Additionally, the transition from transactional emergency food distribution to an intentional goal of food resilience and food sovereignty will be important for the equitable future of our County. Taking these steps will be crucial in order to maximize participation in benefits programs, and to create alternative pathways towards addressing and ending the hunger crisis in our community.



Important dedicated programs supported through this proposed office include:

- **Farm to Food Bank Initiative:** Piloted during the pandemic, this program has created strong links between local tablecrop farmers and food insecure residents. Funding through this initiative has also enabled local farms to begin infrastructure improvements to increase food production for years to come. This is a critical step toward local food resiliency, while also supporting our neighbors who need healthy food the most.
- **Market Money Grants:** These grants enhance an existing state resource that removes economic barriers for residents experiencing food insecurity, providing a dollar-for-dollar match for purchases made using federal nutrition benefits at participating farmers markets. Additional grants allow local residents to leverage these federal and state benefits even further, while supporting local farmers and small businesses.
- **Community Garden Grants:** Increased local food production is needed for a truly resilient local food system. Demand for existing community garden spaces and programs is extremely high, and there is an incredible opportunity to leverage available land to increase local resident food production.

### **Support for Agricultural Business Development Specialist Position**

Agricultural development and land use have an outsized impact on our potential for true food system equity and resiliency. That is why we urge the County Council to support the funds appropriated within the Office of Agriculture for a new Agricultural Business Development Specialist. This position will help implement the County's Climate Action Plan by supporting zero waste goals from farm composting, and will promote farm to foodbank initiatives and agrotourism.

### **Need for Dedicated SNAP Outreach**

In October of 2021, the Food Council became a funded Community Based Organization (CBO) with the Maryland Department of Human Services' SNAP Outreach Program to conduct direct SNAP outreach and assistance to Montgomery County residents. The Food Council is working to broaden and increase SNAP outreach and enrollment in marginalized communities by educating outreach workers, referral partners and anti-hunger organizations, prescreening Montgomery County residents for SNAP eligibility, and assisting eligible residents with SNAP applications. Since 2020, the Food Council has also convened the SNAP Benefits Enrollment and Outreach Work Group, which gathers together organizations that assist Montgomery County residents with SNAP.

Through this work, we have identified several opportunities for collaboration and investment from the County government, including improving communication in languages other than English, and increasing staffing at the County's SNAP assistance phone number. Montgomery County has the largest SNAP eligibility-to-participation gap in the state of Maryland. According to 2020 data from Maryland Hunger Solutions, 60% of Montgomery County residents who are likely eligible for SNAP are not enrolled. Due to pandemic enacted waivers, SNAP households have received the maximum benefit allotment for their household size. When the federal public health emergency ends, Montgomery County residents will fall off a hunger cliff as their SNAP benefits decrease. It is vital that the County works to ensure residents remain on SNAP during this transition.



Fundamentally, it is essential that partnership exists between the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services Office of Eligibility and Support Services and the Community Based Organizations that assist residents with SNAP. There are only 5 state-funded CBOs who serve Montgomery County residents, and CBOs only receive a 50% reimbursement for their work from the state of Maryland. Therefore more direct funding to CBOs who conduct SNAP outreach and assist Montgomery County with SNAP enrollment is needed.

### **Support for the Not-for-Profit Sector**

As the County finalizes the budget for FY 23, the essential role of strong nonprofits in the COVID-19 response efforts, and otherwise in our community, cannot be overlooked. Additionally, as a member of Nonprofit Montgomery, we join our voices with other leaders in the not-for-profit sector to urge the County to fund a 10% cost of living increase to nonprofit contracts. In this inflationary period with a difficult hiring and retention market, 10% is the minimum amount needed to keep up with cost increases and compensate staff fairly. Nonprofit organizations are small businesses with overhead and indirect costs that are often underfunded. Our location near the nation's capital also means we are competing with national-level nonprofits for local candidates, further shrinking the available talent pool. This funding is critical to ensure a continuation of efforts within the nonprofit community to work in areas of the County where residents have been most impacted by the pandemic, by poverty, disability, racial inequities and other social determinants of health.

By continuing to invest in the Food Council and in our partner organizations and businesses, the County will invest in a more self-sufficient local food system that ensures greater engagement of community voice and expertise in policy and programmatic work. Investment will also maximize the capacity of direct service provider programs, address hunger and financial barriers amongst County residents, and connect federal and state resources to local efforts.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, and for your leadership and support of a more resilient, sustainable, robust, and equitable food system in Montgomery County. We appreciate the County's investment and partnership, and we look forward to the future.

Sincerely,

Heather Bruskin  
Executive Director, Montgomery County Food Council

