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EIN: 86-1311884

RE: County Council Testimony to Support the County's Nutrition Security Strategy to Enhance Community Health and Support Local MC Farmers to Increase Food Production for a Resilient Food System.

Date: 4/9/2024

Dear County Council Members, County Council Staff,

Community FarmShare (CFS) is supportive of the Office of Food Systems Resilience (OFSR) FY25 Strategy Budget Summary which includes Staples Programs as well as grant opportunities for:

- Community Food Assistance
- School Based Partnership Grants
- Food is Medicine
- Resilient Infrastructure (aggregation)

Community FarmShare views all 4 of those grant priority areas as clearly fundamental to supporting healthy communities and a resilient food system. CFS particularly notes that in the recent FY24 grants put out by OFSR, that there was prioritization in the rubric for applicants to source foods from local MC farms - this was a great idea and sends a strong signal to both the food assistance provider community as well as our local farmers, that increasing local food production is a priority in the County. Community FarmShare strongly supports this approach, particularly noting that through our aggregation hub (though, as you know, we need a larger location), as well as our online farm market (making weekly aggregated MC produce available for organizations and institutions to purchase), that we are looking forward to partnering with farmers and food assistance providers, having the physical infrastructure and the needed technology in place to achieve efficiency and impact.

In calendar year 2024, CFS expects to purchase well over \$500,000 in produce from MC farmers, I believe making CFS the single largest buyer of Montgomery County farm produce that is targeted to addressing nutrition insecurity in the county. In addition to committed dollars to fund our core Farm to School and Food Is Medicine programs (providing no-cost fresh produce to our target population), we expect to sell \$150,000+ in wholesale produce to community based organizations/food assistance providers which includes Capital Area Food Bank (through their LFPA federal grant program), as well

as another dozen food assistance providers through our “True Cost of Food” matching grant program and to fulfill other community based organization fresh produce orders, such as through SNAP-Ed and other programs. The partnership with CAFB is essential from a purchasing/distribution/logistics perspective, as it provides us great flexibility to order needed produce for our core programs, the wholesale channel and the mobile market, yet know that additional surplus produce that farmers list on the online market platform, will also be able to be sold and distributed to CAFB partners who choose what they need, leading to a zero waste, maximized farm benefit and maximized community benefit outcomes.

To further broaden and meet community needs for free choice options, CFS will operate our mobile farm market (aka “FARMacy”) in healthy food priority areas, starting this year at three schools and one community healthcare clinic. While this testimony is meant to be an overall support for current food systems priority areas as outlined by OFSR, CFS also puts forth a specific “ask” as this year’s Operating Budget is being finalized:

Increasing SNAP purchases of MC Farmer Grown Fresh F/V in Healthy Food Priority Areas

Community FarmShare seeks a \$50,000 increase to our current county contract (\$132,000 Farm to School program). The purpose of this funding is to leverage federal SNAP dollars and state Maryland Market Money (MMM) match funding to increase fresh produce access and consumption in healthy food priority areas at our mobile farm market locations at schools and community health clinics during the agricultural season. Through regularly scheduled mobile market days, the mobile market will provide reliable fresh produce access to residents beyond those enrolled in our core free produce bag programs. The mobile farm market accepts SNAP, WIC and Summer EBT benefits. In our pilot program year, the mobile markets will reach 250 market stand shoppers per week (reaching 1,600 household members/week).

The requested \$50,000 will be used to discount the produce price at the mobile market by 25% to make produce affordable to residents lacking access (particularly school communities over the summer), while allowing CFS to pay farmers fair market price for their produce. Without a price subsidy, the local fresh produce will still be out of reach for most residents in the mobile market communities. The strength of this model is that it enables the County to invest approx. the same amount of money per pound into fresh produce procurement as compared to large scale food programs, but has the added benefit of leveraging 4 times the funds into our local farms, and communities benefit from the highest quality nutrient dense produce. With this discount in place, any community resident - targeting communities to reach SNAP and Summer EBT benefits participants - will be able to purchase produce at the market. SNAP and Summer EBT dollars are further matched by Maryland Market Money up to \$30/farm stand visit. Through this leveraging of federal and state dollars, the proposed \$50,000 investment to subsidize local produce at the farm stand will create an additional \$150,000 dollars through SNAP, Summer EBT and MMM. This means that in total \$200,000 of produce will be purchased from local farmers, (strengthening their business and increasing their production) and that ~80,000 lb of local fresh nutrient dense produce will reach families with school children and low income residents managing diet related chronic disease at a fraction of the cost to the county budget.

Besides the volume of produce procured and distributed, the higher nutrient value of local fresh produce has a greater positive health impact on residents facing chronic illness, leading to happier, healthier communities and lower health care costs to the overall healthcare system. Further, CFS values the environmental and climate change benefits of local farmers using regenerative farming practices, supporting the county's climate change goals.

We expect an additional benefit to be that word will spread in the community about the high quality affordable fresh produce (in very high demand) which will then incentivise residents who are not enrolled in SNAP to look into SNAP eligibility (CFS will make referrals to authorized SNAP enrollment CBOs). For example, people enroll in affinity card programs at a retailer to get the "deal"; likewise, with discounted produce and the MMM produce match "deal" present in their communities, this may incentivize residents to enroll in SNAP and use their Summer EBT at the three school based mobile markets.

An additional benefit of this proposal is to demonstrate the "business" benefit of farmers becoming SNAP vendors and selling their produce in healthy food priority areas. Typically, there are two barriers to farmers accepting SNAP benefits: 1) the bureaucracy/arduous process around getting SNAP vendor approval, and general paperwork associated with the whole process, 2) the misconception that there isn't a "market" in low income communities that would buy from a farmers' market. To scale this concept, CFS envisions other farmers to sell directly at their own farmstands in communities where the need is great. We intend to support farmers through the somewhat challenging process of getting authorizations, permits, etc., and demonstrate that this model can be sustainable, even profitable for farmers to encourage additional local farm produce access points throughout the county's Healthy Food Priority areas.

Community FarmShare's intention is to demonstrate a creative, scalable, sustainable path to increasing healthy fresh produce access in communities where it is most needed, while also supporting our local farmers through fair price purchasing. Leveraging federal and state resources/nutrition benefits programs supports long-term sustainability and affordability to the county. Funding this modest \$50,000 increase in our current County contract will support Montgomery County's goals for food systems resilience, childhood hunger, health equity and climate change - all while reducing the county's expense on food procurement, and leading to a further financial positive outcome when considering the health benefits to families, cost savings to the healthcare system and the financial benefits of strengthening of our local farm businesses to achieve greater food production scale. We're innovative, community partnership centric, and we make healthy food happen - where it needs to most- to reach school families and low income residents managing diet related chronic disease.

Thank you,



Jennifer Freeman

Executive Director, Community FarmShare