

Thursday, July 14, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500-0005

Dear President Biden:

Thank you for the commitment shown by your Administration to addressing hunger, nutrition, and health, and for the opportunity to provide this input.

The organizations indicated below provide services and resources to thousands of farmers and businesses, and hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts households. They are each deeply committed to ensuring that the food system is:

- Equitable, in that those most vulnerable and those who have been systematically excluded and marginalized due to race, ethnicity, class, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, or other factors can build and exercise power, and benefit and prosper from the choices they make. An equitable food system ensures economic opportunity and high-quality jobs with living wages for all; safe working conditions; access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food; and environmental sustainability.
- Sustainable, in that businesses and institutions are financially sound, create economic opportunity, high-quality jobs with living wages and safe working conditions, operate in ways that protect and enhance the environment, and ensure that healthy food is accessible for all.
- Resilient, in that the food system is flexible, adaptable, and able to withstand crises and disruptions without collapse or significant or permanent damage to sustainability and equity.
- Connected, so that stakeholders – businesses, institutions, non-governmental support organizations, individuals, and others – in all parts of the food system are aware of how their work impacts and is impacted by other sectors and other systems, and work to find solutions that support and benefit the entire food system.

We believe that food security is more than simply ensuring that residents have enough calories to survive. True food security entails ensuring access for all to healthy and culturally appropriate food, to food system jobs, to the land and other resources needed to produce food, and to the power structures where policies are made that regulate and support the food system.

Massachusetts has a long history of innovative programming, policy, and investments in support of an equitable and sustainable food system.

More than 40 years ago Massachusetts began a program providing families that use WIC with coupons for fresh produce at farmers markets. After demonstrating success, that local program eventually was adopted nationally, becoming the USDA's WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, which later inspired the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Combined, the two programs have provided hundreds

of millions of dollars of local produce to low-income households, while supporting local farms and local economies.

Massachusetts also established the nation's first statewide program to permanently protect farmland. Today, the Agricultural Preservation Restriction program serves as a model for other states, and has protected nearly 75,000 acres of farmland in Massachusetts, helping to reduce the pressures of development on farmland and ensure that farmland will exist for food production in perpetuity. Additional programs implemented since then have further invested in farmland, preventing conversion to development, incentivizing management practices that protect and enhance soil and other natural resources, and helping farms remain sustainable and able to feed their neighbors, despite our region's high land, energy, and labor costs.

In 2015, the Commonwealth published the *Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan*, a set of policy recommendations developed by stakeholders from farmers and fishermen to food banks and retailers. The framework of the Plan represented a commitment on the part of state leaders to consider food system issues comprehensively, and address needs in each sector with consideration for the needs of other sectors. For example, the plan illustrates that public health issues interact with environmental ones, and that food production relates to food access, and that solutions to challenges in each of these sectors need not diminish the others, but rather that the strongest solutions are those that support the food system broadly. Today, the goals in the *Plan* guide the state's Department of Agricultural Resources in their programming and grantmaking, and many state investments and policy changes have been based on the proposals made in that document.

The White House Conference focuses on five pillars, and the programming we highlight below align with pillars one through three. As in our *Local Food Action Plan*, we've prioritized programming that works to address food access, health, and choice while also ensuring that the people who grow our food are supported.

Residents of Hampden County worked with the state's Department of Transitional Assistance in 2011 to develop a pilot program that demonstrated that providing SNAP residents with a 30% financial incentive on purchases of fruits and vegetables had a meaningful impact on their dietary choices and health. The findings of that program led to the establishment of the USDA's Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives Program, now known as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP). That effort has given hundreds of millions of dollars in grants to projects around the country, demonstrating with each one that incentivizing healthy eating has a significant impact on public health and on local economies. Here in Massachusetts the Healthy Incentives Program, catalyzed by a \$3.4 million investment from USDA as one of the first USDA grantees, has provided more than \$35 million in fresh, healthy, local food to SNAP households in just five years, with every dollar going to local farms.

When the COVID pandemic began in 2020 and national and global food supply chains were disrupted, it was Massachusetts farmers that proved to be the most reliable source for food in many cases. When state leaders recognized the strain that this crisis put on the local food system it acted quickly, launching the Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program, which has provided more than \$60 million in capital funding over two years to farms, food pantries, schools, fisheries, and other food supply chain

enterprises, to help them be better able to feed Massachusetts residents. These investments have allowed farms to build processing facilities to make value-added products, emergency food providers to launch new ways of distributing food to residents in need, and schools to build kitchens to allow for more scratch cooking and utilization of local foods, among hundreds of other projects.

There are many, many other examples of thoughtful and effective local food system work here in Massachusetts, that demonstrate how effective solutions come from forging connections between food system sectors.

- A state-run grant program supports an extensive network of urban agriculture enterprises, which build community while growing food in areas where stores don't make fresh food available.
- A portion of the state funds that support food banks must be used to purchase food from local growers.
- A state-funded Food Trust provides grants and loans to retailers that serve communities with little or no access to fresh foods.
- An active network of food rescue organizations divert edible food from the waste stream and ensure that it instead goes to feed people in need.
- One long-standing organization is dedicated to working with school cafeterias to help them connect with local farms to source fresh food, while another provides funding and resources to classroom teachers who teach nutrition and agriculture to school children.
- Numerous organizations lead Food is Medicine programs, working with health care providers to connect patients with the healthy food they need to regain and maintain their health.
- Dozens of community-based organizations - from community farms to local food policy councils to organizations committed to growing the direct-to-consumer market so that farmers can command fair prices for their food - help build Massachusetts residents' understanding of and engagement with the food system, so that policies and services are shaped by an informed public.

Yet despite all of these efforts and their successes, Massachusetts is still not food secure. Economic strains continue to widen the gap between the costs of production and the prices residents can afford to pay. Climate change threatens our ability to produce food. Decades of national agricultural policies have supported the growth of the largest farms and forced smaller family farms to close. Our innovative responses to challenges demonstrate resilience and can serve as models, but all too often we are working against larger food systems and policies that suppress our efforts. Federal action is needed to ensure true food security.

The federal government invests heavily in our food system - direct government aid accounted for 39% of all US farm income in 2020. But few of those investments are in local and regional food systems that focus on raising fruits, vegetables, and proteins that contribute to public health and to local food security. Instead they are spent on commodity crops that are used primarily for processed foods, many of which contribute to the same dietary-related health issues this Conference is trying to illuminate and prevent, and most of which are processed through a system that demonstrated remarkable fragility

during the pandemic. Redirecting resources to local and regional food systems would help resolve these imbalances.

Nationally, food system workers are eligible for SNAP at a higher rate than those in any other industry. From drivers to retail workers to factory workers to farmworkers, the wages for people who make our food are inexcusably low, in the name of keeping food inexpensive and food corporations' profits high. Any conversation about hunger must recognize that the solution does not lie in making food less expensive, because further reducing the cost of food by insisting that workers be further exploited is not an acceptable option.

Instead, the focus should be on systemic solutions that give consumers better physical, educational, and financial access to healthy food. Retail infrastructure that ensures consistent availability of fresh produce and protein, accessible to all via public transportation systems. Nutrition education for children in all schools, as well as for adults through their health care providers. And income supports that ensure that no family has to choose between paying rent or eating healthy food.

Finally, the solutions generated by this process must prioritize regional food systems, supporting local production, processing, distribution, and access that is equitable, sustainable, resilient, and connected. It must illuminate and address root causes of hunger, and acknowledge the connections between food insecurity and systemic racism, low wages, poor access to child care, and a lack of nutrition and food system education. And it must invest heavily in transformative measures that place power and land and jobs into the hands of people of color who have been excluded from equitable participation in the food system.

We look forward to working with the administration as you craft and implement policy to affect these changes.

Sincerely,

All Farmers, Springfield
American Farmland Trust - New England, Northampton
Berkshire AHEC, Berkshire County
Berkshire Bounty, Berkshire County
Berkshire Grown, Inc., Great Barrington
Berkshire Hills Regional School District, Berkshire County
Boston Area Gleaners, Acton
Central Mass Grown, Worcester County
CISA (Community involved in Sustaining Agriculture), Franklin, Hampden, & Hampshire counties
Coastal Foodshed Inc., Southcoast
CommonWealth Kitchen, Boston
Community Servings, Jamaica Plain
Eastie Farm, Inc., East Boston
Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center, Inc., Central MA and MetroWest
The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin, and Berkshire Counties

Food For Free Committee, Inc., Eastern Massachusetts
Food Link, Eastern Massachusetts
The Food Project, Inc., Greater Boston
FoodCorps, National
Franklin County Community Development Corporation, Western MA
Grow Food Northampton, Inc., Hampshire County
Guido's Fresh Marketplace, Berkshire County
Hampshire County Food Policy Council, Hampshire County
Just Roots, Greenfield
Land For Good, Statewide
Mass Farmers Markets, Statewide
Massachusetts Farm to School, Statewide
Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, Statewide
Massachusetts Fruit Growers Association, Statewide
Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, Boston
MetroWest Food Collaborative, MetroWest
Mill City Grows, Lowell
Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, Northern and Central Massachusetts
Mystic Valley YMCA, Malden
Nuestras Raices, Inc, Western Massachusetts
Regional Environmental Council of Central MA (REC), Worcester
Revere Farmers Market, Revere
Somerville Food Security Coalition, Somerville
Southcoast Food Policy Council, a program of The Marion Institute, Southeastern Massachusetts
Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership, Southeastern Massachusetts
Sustainable Business Network of Massachusetts, Cambridge
The Urban Farming Institute of Boston, Boston
The Western MA Food Processing Center at the Franklin County Community Development Corp.,
Western Massachusetts
Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center, Franklin County
Worcester County Food Bank, Worcester County

Coalition contact: Winton Pitcoff, Director, MA Food System Collaborative, winton@mafoodsystem.org