
**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE REGIONAL MEMBER (FARM) POLICY
COMMITTEE****MEETING SUMMARY (DRAFT)****April 8, 2022**

All presentations from the meeting, and the approved February meeting summary, can be found at: <https://www.mwcog.org/events/2022/4/8/food-and-agriculture-regional-member-farm-policy-committee/>

DECISIONS AND ACTIONS:

- Short Term
 - Farmers interested in potentially partnering with Capital Area Food Bank to supply local products can reach out to staff there. (Contact in Radha Muthiah's remarks on page 3.)
 - Capital Area Food Bank has forthcoming studies coming out on food security among youth and young adults, as well as older adults. Jurisdictions may request local data in addition to the regional information that will be provided.
 - COG will share SNAP enrollment data with interested FARM members for the region.
 - Chair Cheh requested that speakers forward any slides or reports related to their remarks to COG staff.
 - Maryland Hunger Solutions is finalizing a study on SNAP/School Meals/WIC participation in MD and will share this with COG to provide to the FARM Committee.
 - FARM members were challenged to visit a farmers market in the region prior to the June meeting. Vice Chair Stehle encouraged members to share a picture with staff and/or post a picture on social media. Members were encouraged to:
 - Talk with a farmer or others and share one learning: one new vendor, new thing learned, new food tried, etc.
 - Takeaways will be an icebreaker for June's in-person meeting.
 - New Work Groups will meet before next FARM Committee meeting.
 - Continued feedback on the *Healthy Food Access Compendium* and input on the FY23 Work Program and Budget are welcome, ideally by Mid-May.
 - The June meeting will include more information on FARM's visit to the Montgomery County Agricultural Reserve in September.
- Medium Term
 - Chair Cheh asked FARM members to consider what it would take for all jurisdictions to have free meals for students in terms of the jurisdictional commitment? With what might be received from the federal government? What would that look like?

WELCOME, CALL TO ORDER, AND ROLL CALL

DC Councilmember Mary Cheh, FARM's Chair, called the meeting to order at 11:02 am.

FARM PRIORITIES UPDATE AND MEETING SUMMARY APPROVAL

Chair Cheh shared an update the [No Senior Hungry Omnibus Bill](#) at the DC Council to address the high rate of food insecurity among older adults. The Bill is pending markup in the Committee on Housing. Her hope is that it will be voted on and passed by late summer or early fall.

Members approved the meeting summary with one abstention from a member not present at the February meeting.

Resources: Ona Balkus provided a link to a recently released report from the DC Food Policy Council on senior food insecurity: <https://dcfoodpolicy.org/reports/senior-food-insecurity-report/>

CAPITAL AREA FOOD BANK: NORTHERN VIRGINIA FACILITY AND OPERATIONS UPDATE

Radha Muthiah shared that Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB) is seeing increasing needs in Northern Virginia, particularly among immigrant community members. CAFB works with about 100 partner organizations in Northern Virginia out of a 10,000 square foot office and warehouse in Lorton. They are very space constrained, including on refrigeration which negatively impacts capacity to bring in frozen protein and other nutritious foods, including from Virginia farmers. There is little space to engage volunteers or to provide back-up storage requested by partners.

The new facility will be about 40,000 square feet with more racking space for shelf- stable storage and cold storage. It will accommodate a greater variety of CAFB's vehicle fleet, will include 3,000 sq ft of community engagement space, and be able to manage a much greater volume of food. The new building will also provide space for workforce and skill development, as CAFB seeks to support their clients in moving to greater financial stability.

The facility is anticipated to cost around \$35 million due to inflation. CAFB is working to raise half of this from Commonwealth of Virginia and local governments, and half from philanthropy. CAFB has had positive conversations with Northern Virginia jurisdictions and hopes to confirm support in the next few months. Fairfax County and the City of Fairfax have confirmed their contributions.

CAFB was distributing about 30 million meals worth of food a year across its Metropolitan Washington service area prior to Covid-19. It distributed 76 million meals in the first year of the pandemic. It is on track to distribute about 45 million meals this year – 50% more food than prior to the pandemic.

CAFB expects it will take 3 to 4 years to ensure that the region's most vulnerable residents have recovered from the impacts of the pandemic. In addition to policy advocacy for key government policies and programs, CAFB will support clients in a few different ways.

This will be guided in part by forthcoming studies on childhood and young adults, and older adults. CAFB has broken out data by counties and can share information at this level with any jurisdiction that would like this information.

CAFB is diversifying its inventory to include more culturally familiar foods and will be placing a heavy emphasis on its “Food Plus Programs” and 10 pilots with food and healthcare. They are also supporting campus programs, including at community colleges across the region.

FARM members asked when the Northern Virginia facility will be operational, and where CAFB gets its food from.

- CAFB hopes the facility will be operational by the fall 2023. It will be constructed on the site of their current facility in Lorton.
- Pre-pandemic, 60% of CAFB’s food was donated from area retailers and wholesalers, 20% came from USDA, and 20% was purchased – generally produce and protein. During the pandemic, they were purchasing 60 to 70% of what they distributed. There was a lot of food from the federal government which helped with produce especially. Donated food is increasing again – it’s back up to about 30% of what they’re distributing. CAFB is likely to purchase 40% of what it distributes this year.

Additional: Farmers interested in potentially partnering with Capital Area Food Bank to supply local products can reach out to Krista to get connected with the right staff. Email: Kscalise@capitalareafoodbank.org

WHAT’S NEXT FOR SCHOOL MEALS AND OTHER FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR FOOD INSECURE STUDENTS AND RESIDENTS?

Councilmember Cheh shared two updates on federal priorities.

- FARM reached out to Congressman McGovern’s office in support of a bill that would require the White House to host a conference on food, nutrition, hunger and health.
 - Funding was included for the conference in the most recent Omnibus Appropriations Bill.
- FARM also sent a letter to the region’s congressional delegation asking them to include an extension of USDA’s nationwide waiver authority in the same bill.
 - Disappointingly this did not happen.

Crystal FitzSimons, Director of School and Out-of-School Time Programs at the Food Research Action Center, provided remarks [and these slides](#). She began by talking about the impact of the USDA waivers. Congress first gave the USDA this authority in 2020 when schools closed.

Today, more than 90% of schools report they're dealing with staffing issues. There are also supply chain problems that are increasing their costs. They’re struggling to make their programs work but the waivers have supported free meals and a higher reimbursement for them.

Food insecurity is always higher in the summer. Continued waivers would have allowed any community to serve meals through the Summer Food Program. They would have also allowed things like grab and go, multiple meal pick up by families – this is especially important when there's not summer programming.

This summer, those that don’t meet area eligibility requirements won’t be able to operate. (Area eligibility is established when a site is in an area where 50% of students are more qualify for free and reduced-price meals.) This will impact a lot of areas in Maryland and Virginia.

Ms. FitzSimons expects USDA to provide some flexibility in meeting the area eligibility requirement because schools have not been collecting meal applications in the way they were prior to the pandemic. Data may not accurately reflect the poverty in the community which is a big concern. Waivers were “a game changer” for participation in the summer meals. There was over a 100% increase in the number of kids served.

USDA can issue state waivers though this will be more administratively difficult than issuing nationwide waivers. It's within their authority to issue several, including Community Eligibility deadlines. States and USDA are working to overcome challenges to mitigate the loss of nationwide waivers to the greatest extent possible but not everything is within their authority.

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

Schools have been able to offer free meals to all students during the pandemic. FRAC believes that healthy school meals for all should be the norm. CEP is an option for high poverty schools to offer free meals to all students and is a mitigating strategy until school meals can be free to everyone. FRAC doing a series of webinars on how to do this.

CEP helps families in places like Metropolitan Washington where the cost of living is higher. Students in CEP schools, even when not eligible for free school meals, do receive free breakfast and lunch. All students in the school do. This also reduces stigma for kids who might not want to participate because it's perceived as something only low-income kids who do. CEP reduces administrative work.

Nationally, FRAC is working to promote healthy school meals for all. In the meantime, different states are doing this: California and Maine. Ms. FitzSimons encourages elected officials to consider how they can promote healthy meals for all at the state level, until we can get Congress to do this nationally.

Ms. FitzSimons provided an update on CEP deadlines which have been extended for states.

Pandemic Electronic Benefits (P-EBT)

Modeled after the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), P-EBT provides an EBT card to eligible children and students to replace the value of school meals. This will be a very important support for families this summer. States need to get their school age plans approved to be able to issue P-EBT. Virginia is the only one in the region that has its 2021-2022 school age plan approved thus far. No states in the region have approved plans for young children approved.

Last summer the P-EBT benefit was \$375 per child.

Regional Impact: In VA, about 800,000 kids received P-EBT. This was equivalent to \$253 million in support for school age kids, and young children received about \$43 million in benefits. In DC, about 52,000 kids received it: an expected total of \$27 million dollars to school age kids, and \$4.5 million to families with young children. In Maryland, P-EBT went to 552,000 kids - \$174 million dollars to school age kids, and \$33 million to families with young children.

FRAC really encourages states to get their school age and childcare P-EBT plans in. (Childcare plans are easier.) P-EBT is one of the most important mitigating factors for the loss of school meal waivers.

Update: Maryland has submitted the P-EBT State Plan for 2021-2022. It is being reviewed by federal partners for approval.

Michael J Wilson, Executive Director of Maryland Hunger Solutions, emphasized how important CEP is. Instead of asking families to fill out a free and or reduced meal application and return it, have schools spend staff resources to get the forms back, and USDA reaching out to ask about accurate forms; the direct certification process in CEP allows schools to use data on things like how many families receive SNAP benefits, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, how many are experiencing homelessness, and the federal multiplier for a more modern measure of poverty.

This allows schools, a group of schools, or entire school systems to offer free meals as CEP schools. MD is going to participate for the first-time next year in the Medicaid pilot program to get an even better picture of what poverty really looks like, and who is eligible for school nutrition programs to be able to provide improved access.

There was legislation in the Maryland General Assembly to have a state-based plan to cover healthy school meals for all students – as they've done in CA, Minnesota, and what they're trying to do in Vermont and other places.

- The bill was seeking a one year, bridge period to figure out how to move healthy meals for all forward
- Unfortunately, it does not look like these bills (SB 971, HB 857) will pass

Mr. Wilson also addressed *SNAP Emergency Allotments*. Normally, the monthly SNAP benefit is dependent on your household size, household income and household expenses. There's no set amount for everyone. With Emergency Allotments, anyone receiving less than the maximum amount for their household size receives the maximum amount.

Example: The minimum monthly SNAP benefit for a single household is \$20. Because of the emergency allotments, that household receives \$194/month.

- For a household of two, they now receive \$335/month.
- For a household of three, \$509/month.

Previous benefits were not sufficient. For anybody to have a healthy diet, these higher levels are needed but they are not indefinite. ***There is worry about when the emergency allotments end.***

- In April 2020, MD had 689,000 residents enrolled in SNAP – 1 in 10 residents.
- In February of 2022, 881,000 residents receive SNAP.
- In April 2020, 48% of SNAP beneficiaries were getting the maximum SNAP allotment by household.
- Now 83% of SNAP beneficiaries are.

Not only do these funds support families, they also support the local economy. SNAP brings over a one billion dollars into Maryland's economy. Emergency Allotments have been one of the success lessons of the pandemic.

Michael Ribar, a Deputy Administrator at D.C.'s Department of Human Services, provided a

perspective on the administration of SNAP benefits.

Mr. Ribar shared that in the District, SNAP Emergency Allotments have been providing an additional \$14 million to approximately 90,000 district households each month. This has been very helpful to ensuring that DC participants, especially seniors and people receiving disability benefits, have increased food assistance. Both often have unearned income that only makes them eligible for the minimum SNAP benefit.

The \$14 million in SNAP Emergency Allotments contributes \$21 to \$25 million to grocery retail/month ([research](#) indicates every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity). Emergency Allotments have been critical in the face of inflation and rising food costs.

DHS is very concerned about when the Emergency Allotments end. It has been a priority to figure out how to continue them. Doing so requires both an active federal, public health emergency, and a local public emergency declaration for the month when DHS requests approval from the USDA to issue these.

The federal public health emergency, and DC's current public emergency are set to expire April 16th. The expectation is the federal public health emergency will be extended. Staff has been working internally with legal counsel, and with USDA to figure out how to continue emergency allotments if the Mayor's declaration expires.

Update: As of April 16, the Federal public health emergency was extended to July 15, 2022. A local declaration due to COVID-19 was established to allow DC to continue issuing Emergency Allotments through at least July (pending monthly approval by USDA).

DHS is planning with other agencies for when the SNAP Emergency Allotments end, so that customers are notified well in advance, can prepare for a dramatic benefits cliff, and can be referred to other programs.

A good example is the Women Infants and Children (WIC) Program - this is underutilized in DC but this could be an opportunity for referrals. DHS is setting up a referral form between its call center and WIC, so that if somebody calls who may be eligible, they can be automatically referred. DHS is also looking at some of its senior food programs, some at CAFB, and others run at other agencies.

Many people are talking about returning to normal. The reality is that DHS is still in an emergency mode and has been since March 2020. It's taken a significant toll on staff. Flexibilities from USDA have helped manage the caseload by not requiring recertification processes for SNAP customers, however, that will be unwinding this month. Recertification will start this month. The good news is that there has been work with USDA to help streamline those processes, however, Medicaid renewals will also restart in the near future adding to the caseload. DHS processes Medicaid as well. DHS has been in the process of hiring a lot of new case workers. These programs are extremely complex and getting new case workers up and running takes time.

Andrea Nannery, SNP Coordinator, Office of School Nutrition Programs, Virginia Department of Education provided a perspective on school meals.

Ms. Nannery indicated that while there is some pending federal legislation which could extend some

meal waivers, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, they're working to ensure that school divisions are as prepared as possible. If the waivers are not extended, schools will need to be prepared for normal summer operations to start up again, and for normal back to school operations to begin for fall.

- There will be a transition over to the Summer Food Service Program, including the Seamless Summer Option
- There is also a VA regulation that requires meals to be served to students during academic summer school.
 - For sites not eligible for the summer feeding programs which feed students at no cost, those schools will have to operate the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program at their summer schools.
 - If possible, these schools are being encouraged to use any of funding available to them outside of the school nutrition fund to cover the cost of meals so that students can continue to eat for free throughout the summer.
 - If not, they will need to collect meal applications to see which students would qualify for free, reduced price, or paid meals.

There's also heavy emphasis on encouraging any schools eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision to operate this program wherever possible.

Virginia Department of Education is also developing a Back-to-School Toolkit. This covers everything from processing school meal applications to the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, to how to deal with staffing challenges and supply chain issues, and some best practices.

Virginia schools are very dedicated to serving students and have been working tirelessly during pandemic to do so.

Chair Cheh thanked the speakers and asked FARM members to consider what it would really take for all jurisdictions to have free meals for students. What would it take in terms of the jurisdictional commitment? With what might be received from the federal government? What would that look like? Shouldn't this be our goal?

LOCAL AGRICULTURE PERSPECTIVE: SAVING SPRING CROPS FROM ERRATIC WEATHER

Mr. Shlagel commended the Committee for working on childhood food insecurity. No child should ever go to bed hungry. He pointed out that we have too much food in our country that is not used.

Mr. Shlagel thanked FARM for the opportunity to talk about his farm. He, along with his three adult sons operate their small diversified, Maryland Century Farm. They are located in northern Waldorf in Charles County. The farm was bought by his grandfather in 1911 and it has been continuously farmed by his family since then.

Shlagel farms operates on their 300 acres and rents an additional 200 acres. Their main products are fruits and vegetables, and they also have a small herd of Black Angus cattle that they market as freezer beef. They grow grain and hay for cows and equine.

They are most known for their pick-your-own-strawberries which they have offered for the last 22 years. They enjoy the stories from some of the thousands of customers that come through their doors each year. It is their highest risk and reward crop.

Mr. Shlagel has farmed all his life and shared that change is constant: one always has to be prepared to adapt and make changes.

Agriculture is a low profit margin business. He talked about how the business has changed over the last 100+ years. Shlagel Farms no longer raises hogs, tobacco, or runs a sawmill like his father did. They sell retail, wholesale, pick-your-own, have a form of a CSA, and make sales to the food bank.

They were very fortunate to be approached by Giant Food in 1993 when they launched their local program - innovative at the time. The relationship helped the Shlagels grow their business – he is proud to still be a partner.

In the spring of 2020 when the pandemic came to the forefront, like every other business, they had no idea what would happen, and which business partners would remain solvent. Their crop plans and schedule for each season are based on who they sell to, and the previous year's volume. They had no idea if there would be buyers but knew that people have to eat and planted.

The pandemic taught them about the importance of flexibility and adaptability. They set-up an e-commerce platform and provided several new contactless ways to get food to customers on the farm and at other locations – something he never anticipated.

It showed customers how important local was “as supply chains became stretched beyond imagination.” They may not retain all of the new customers but hope to retain through good customer service and high-quality product.

They kept the farm open through the pandemic for food access, modified the pick-your-own operation for social distancing, and made changes to the sales barn and instituted a mask policy. People were really happy to be outside picking with their families.

Shlagel Farms as worked with multiple organizations that facilitate pop-up farmers markets in communities that rely on SNAP, WIC, and FMNPP federal benefits. They've also worked with organizations to accept matching dollars. At their first pop-up market in Baltimore, they heard from residents who shared that they felt like they had been forgotten about and did not have transportation to get to other markets.

Mr. Shlagel also talked about unpredictable weather and how the farm dealt with recent temperature drops which threatened their strawberry crop. ([Shlagel Farms' Facebook](#) or [Instagram pages](#) provide images and videos of the farm.)

Early strawberry blooms are particularly vulnerable to freezing weather. The nights of March 28th and March 29th required a day of preparation to cover, then irrigate the crop. As the ice freezes, it releases heat and can be used to raise the temperature of the blossoms inside the covers. They were successful in saving the crop but additional frosts are possible.

FARM Committee Discussion and Questions:

- Chair Cheh talked about FARM's goal to ensure that farmers remain in a position where they can continue to farm and be resilient. A goal is to increase regional self-sufficiency in the food we grow and consume.
- Chair Cheh highlighted Mr. Shlagel's mention of Giant Food and also commended the retailer for the work they've done in DC as a partner on DC's Food as Medicine Program in Ward 8.
- Mr. Shlagel talked about the importance of also buying local at the grocery store. For Giant, this takes work, commitment to work with multiple farmers, rather than just going to one source outside of the region.
 - Is there a way to reach Giant's buyers for farmers who don't have a historic relationship with them like the Shlagels?
 - It's likely that Giant will be instituting another push to buy local, including beyond produce to include value-added products. It doesn't sound like suppliers will have be so large that they can service all the stores. Believes there will be opportunities.
 - Chair Cheh asked for ideas about expanding local farm products into grocery and retail.
- FARM members asked about what was most helpful to pivot online during the pandemic. Mr. Shlagel credited his oldest son who developed and set-up their e-commerce site. He continues to maintain this.

FARM MEMBER UPDATES AND DISCUSSION

Zachari Curtis, Operations Director at Dreaming Out Loud provided a brief update on the USDA Urban Agriculture Federal Advisory Committee that she has been appointed to. The Committee's charge is to provide policy recommendations for the USDA on how to treat and promote urban agriculture and innovative production which is broadly defined.

- The Committee was convened for the first time this year with 12 members from around the country.
 - March 23rd and 24th was the first public meeting
 - The Committee heard from USDA officials
 - Members of the public were also allowed to submit comments
 - Ms. Curtis will keep FARM informed about opportunities to submit comments
- A lot of ideas were shared. Some that came up include:
 - The use of waste products on urban agricultural land.
 - Fairness and equity in terms of treatment of farmers and families by the USDA
 - Support for different communities, niche communities in agriculture.
- Ms. Curtis is interested in some of the policy ideas that could go into the 2023 Farm Bill which is reauthorized every five years
 - There will be a year to provide input and advocate for policy measures like nutrition programs. Ms. Curtis believes the FARM Committee should provide input.
 - Another idea is on the creation of governing bodies called county committees. These USDA committees exist in rural areas and make resource decisions. They are starting to have these in urban areas.
 - Ms. Curtis believes there is a great opportunity to increase the participation of families who receive SNAP on these, by widening who can vote and be on county committees.

- She will provide a longer update at a future meeting.

FARM COMMITTEE: ADMINISTRATIVE UPDATES

COG staff shared the following:

- The *Healthy Food Access Compendium for Metropolitan Washington* will be released at the June meeting. Additional review and pictures for the document are welcome.
- FARM's new Work Groups will meet before the end of the month
- Ahead of June's FARM Committee meeting, staff will reach out about planning for the fiscal year 2023 work program.

Vice Chair Stehle challenged all members to visit a farmers market before the June meeting and bring one anecdote to share as an icebreaker. More details about this, and other administrative updates, are in the follow-up actions on page 1.

NEXT MEETING

The next FARM Committee meeting is Friday, June 10th at 11:00 am. It will be in-person with a virtual option.

Action Item: FARM members will be asked to register ahead of time for a head count.

Chair Cheh adjourned the meeting at 12:54 pm.

ATTENDANCE:

Mary Cheh, Chair, District of Columbia
 Jon Stehle, Vice Chair, City of Fairfax
 Kenny Boddye, Prince William County
 Reuben Collins, Charles County (alternate)
 Marybeth Connelly, City of Falls Church
 Kate Kennedy, City of College Park
 Maria Mackie, City of College Park (alternate)
 Carrol McBryde, City of Bladensburg
 Kate Stewart, City of Takoma Park
 Tom Ross, City of Fairfax (alternate)
 Bill Bailey, City of Laurel (alternate)
 Ona Balkus, District of Columbia Food Policy Council
 Zachari Curtis, Dreaming Out Loud
 Jeremy Criss, Montgomery County Office of Agriculture
 Kate Lee, District of Columbia Office of Urban Agriculture
 Radha Muthiah, Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB)
 Selena Mendy Singleton, Montgomery County Council (alternate)
 Nick Stavely, FRESHFARM (alternate)
 Victoria Treski, Bainum Family Foundation
 Chris VanVlack, Loudoun Water and Soil Conservation District
 Michael J Wilson, Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ariel Ardura, Office of Councilmember Cheh

Kristin Tribble, Office of Councilmember Rice
Arlee Harris, Office of Supervisor Kershner
Kim Haun, Arlington County Department of Parks and Recreation
Brittany Cook, Maryland Department of Emergency Management (MDEM)
Cassie Edner, Virginia Hunger Solutions
Becca Hentges, CAFB
Adam LaRose, CAFB
Cynthia Singiser, CAFB
Annmarie Hart-Bookbinder, Montgomery County Food Council
Gretchen Greiner-Lott, Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation
Sarah Hashmall, Cafritz Foundation
Steve McHenry, MARBIDCO
Mark Michael, Harvard University
Aaron Tolson, Northern Virginia Food Rescue
Rebecca Gates, Northern Virginia Food Rescue
Max Broad, DC Voters for Animals
Yuki Kato, Georgetown University
Robert Love, City of Laurel
Larry Schaefer, Schaefer Global Management LLC
Lavon Sajona, The Green Anarchist
Brittani Riddle, Food Research and Action Center
Debra Tropp, Debra Tropp Consulting
Julia Groenfeldt, IPHI and Prince George's Food Equity Council
Alex Cordova, US Department of Agriculture
Two call-in participants

Speakers

Crystal FitzSimons, Food Research and Action Center
Michael Ribar, Economic Security Administration, D.C. Department of Human Services
Andrea Nannery, Office of School Nutrition Programs, Virginia Department of Education
Russell Shlagel, Shlagel Farms

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