

**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE REGIONAL MEMBER AD-HOC COMMITTEE (FARM)  
MEETING SUMMARY (DRAFT)**

JANUARY 8, 2021

**LINK TO ALL MEETING PRESENTATIONS AND MATERIALS:**

[HTTPS://WWW.MWCOG.ORG/EVENTS/2021/01/08/FOOD-AND-AGRICULTURE-REGIONAL-AD-HOC-COMMITTEE-FARM-FARMING-SUSTAINABILITY-URBAN-AGRICULTURE/](https://www.mwco.org/events/2021/01/08/food-and-agriculture-regional-ad-hoc-committee-farm-farming-sustainability-urban-agriculture/)

**DECISIONS AND ACTIONS:**

- Short Term
  - Councilmember Cheh encouraged FARM members to consider how they can use the information shared by speakers in their jurisdictions, what group can act upon regionally.
  - FARM Members approved areas of focus for February and April meetings,
- . Medium and Longer Term
  - Duke Storen, Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services, provided a set of actions for jurisdictions to take to eliminate food insecurity.
  - Councilmember Craig Rice encouraged FARM members to foster the synergy among local actors as exemplified by the Montgomery County Food Council, the Montgomery County Office of Agriculture, and other partners, to address food insecurity in their communities.

**1. WELCOME, CALL TO ORDER, AND ROLE CALL**

Councilmember and FARM Chair Mary Cheh called the meeting to order at approximately 11:02.

**2. FARM COMMITTEE UPDATES AND MEETING SUMMARY APPROVAL**

Councilmember Cheh reviewed minor changes to food and agriculture legislative priorities requested at December meeting.

She drew FARM Members attention to draft letter to USDA transition team sent via email. (FARM members identified this as a short-term action item from the December meeting.) The letter will be sent to the transition team and COG's Congressional delegation.

Members approved the summary of the 2020 December FARM meeting.

**3. FOOD SECURITY IN FOCUS: FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL POLICY UPDATES**

*Ellen Teller, Director of Government Affairs, Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)*  
*Dr. Beverley Wheeler, Executive Director, DC Hunger Solutions*

*Michael J Wilson, Executive Director, Maryland Hunger Solutions*

Councilmember Cheh encouraged FARM members to consider how they can use the information shared by the speakers in their jurisdictions and what the group could act upon regionally.

Ellen Teller provided a federal policy update. She indicated that Senate Agriculture Committee reorganizing, and that Chairwoman Stabenow anxious to get the Secretary of Agriculture confirmed and other nominees seated. There are many vacancies in U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Teller outlined some major items on dockets of Senate Ag Committee, the House Education and Workforce Committee Chaired by Virginia's Bobby Scott, and the Biden Administration.

- New administration expected to put out series of stimulus packages, some as reconciliation bills. In December, Congress increased maximum SNAP allotment by 15 percent until the end of June. Many would like this extended and ideally, get a permanent boost to make benefit more adequate.
- Reauthorization of Childhood Nutrition Programs. Due to COVID-19, there's Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), in all 50 states including District of Columbia. With this structure and infrastructure in place, advocates will push for EBT during summer, spring break and winter break – whenever kids are out of school for extended periods of time.
- Stabenow's staff indicated that it's not too early to start working on Farm Bill. They have underscored need to hear from communities of color which have been hardest hit by COVID, and to address food deserts and access to grocery.
- Many are looking to new administration to swiftly address the proposed actions from the previous administration that would gut accessibility to federal nutrition programs.

Beverly Wheeler shared policies that DC Hunger Solutions is looking at to support food security. Her organization will collaborate with many to get this done.

- Senior Hunger. DC is number one in senior hunger rates in the country. Looking at some No Senior Hunger legislation.
- College Hunger. There are nine colleges and universities in DC. They are looking at how students can get access to SNAP and how to convene these institutions on what can be done to address this.
- SNAP. There are two issues DC Hunger Solutions is working to determine a path forward on:
  - In 2010, DC raised minimum SNAP benefit from \$15 to \$30 a month by supplementing \$15 federal benefit with local funds. DC Hunger Solution wants minimum raised to \$45 a month.
  - Larger goal it to go from basing SNAP on the "thrifty food plan" to "low-cost food plan" as basis for benefits. This raises everyone's benefit level but it is a major lift. In short run, would require local dollars but this is right time to do this.

Michael J. Wilson at MD Hunger Solutions shared that they are excited about prospect of making more progress in Maryland because of what federal government will allow states to do with federal programs.

- Resources for schools in 2021 will be critical, as they will be for SNAP programs. Providing maximum benefit is critical for food security and local economic investment.
- Use of SNAP needs to be seamless and with least stigma possible. SNAP users need to be able to shop online and MD Hunger Solutions would like to see SNAP restaurant meals program implemented.
- Three things MD Hunger Solutions working on in 2021 with partners like Capital Area Food Bank, Maryland Food Bank, Montgomery County Food Council, Prince George's Food Equity Council, and others:
  - Heat and Eat (in SNAP). Those eligible for not just SNAP but utility assistance are eligible for additional SNAP benefits. There will be state legislation to encourage MD to participate though legislation is not required for this.
  - College Hunger. College students are not just 18 years old, leaving home to live on campus. There are older college students, veteran college students, college students with kids, students struggling with homelessness.
    - Working on Hunger Free Campuses with state representatives from Charles County and Baltimore.
    - The focus is not food pantries on campuses. These are important but short-term solutions. Need to elevate SNAP and address college campus support for students to access program.
  - A statewide food policy initiative to connect food work and sectors, like those on this call –to connect agencies and others about how the food system is working or failing.

Teller flagged college hunger as an opportunity for work with the new first lady given her commitment to community college students.

Supervisor Penny Gross reinforced that Dr. Jill Biden teaches at Northern Virginia Community College.

Board Member Libby Garvey recalled commitment of First Lady Obama and now First Lady Biden to veterans and veterans homelessness; pointing out that intersection between veterans and hunger is another area to pay attention to.

Supervisor Gross raised question about supply chain for food. What do we need to do to maintain the supply chain so we don't see a repeat of what happened last spring?

Wilson indicated that there's a lack of understanding about this and that it's critical to have farm and agriculture sector be a part of this conversation. We also need to talk about strengthening the system.

Councilmember Cheh asked what the obstacles are, first steps to educating ourselves about these.

Assistant Secretary Hertz identified lack of certification in Good Agricultural Practices or GAP as one barrier for Virginia farmers to accessing markets with grocers. The Department of Agriculture is looking at ways to assist growers with achieving this certification.

Jeremy Criss echoed these comment, sharing that it is similar in Montgomery County. Farmers have to control their production costs to have a return on investment. GAP certification can cost anywhere between \$3000 and \$4000. Criss has been exploring potential to offer cost sharing support to farmers on this.

There was discussion in chat box about GAP. This is clearly an issue that FARM is interested in.

Hugo Mogollon pointed out importance of farmers markets in responding to pandemic and connecting farmers with consumers. He was glad that DC and MD designated them as essential and would like to see this in Virginia too.

FRESHFARM sees a lot of people coming to spend SNAP dollars. FARM could talk about how we can enable people to use SNAP online at farmers markets for ordering like others are able to do.

#### **4. FOOD SECURITY IN FOCUS: VIRGINIA'S ROADMAP TO END HUNGER AND MAXIMIZING ENROLLMENT IN FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN 2021**

*Duke Storen, Commissioner, Virginia Department of Social Services  
Heidi Hertz, Assistant Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry or designee*

Assistant Secretary Hertz introduced Virginia Commissioner of the Department of Social Services, Duke Storen. He reminded FARM about the [Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger](#). Using tried and true, tested strategies, Commissioner Storen indicated that we can end hunger, however, the “magic comes in applying them at the same time in a community.” Here are the strategies he shared:

- For VA jurisdictions, sign up to form a Hunger Action Coalition if there isn't one already. Check out <http://www.feedva.org/>
- Conduct an annual statewide survey of food security, or an even more refined, local food security survey (use SNAP-Ed funds).
- Use day-to-day intake at service agencies (e.g., DMV, social service agencies) to screen for food insecurity. Then connect and refer impacted residents to services and benefits.
  - VA starting to integrate the two question, validated food security screener developed by Academy of Pediatrics into all intake processes.
  - VA uses the “Unite Us” platform to make referrals.

Provide more meals to kids and seniors. Many of these programs are 100% federally funded.

- Maximize school breakfast participation. The program is underutilized.
  - Get technical assistance from Food Research and Action Center and Share our Strength. Grants are available in some cases.
- Use Medicaid to fund home-delivered meals for low-income seniors (allowable service).
- Use TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) funds to support Summer EBT while waiting for federal action.
  - Short term, nonrecurring benefit is allowable.

- Eliminate reduced price meals category for school meals.
- Maximize the underutilized Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP).
  - For children in afterschool programs, daycare, and every senior in adult daycare.
  - Montgomery, MD has a great case study on CACFP.
- Maximize SNAP participation which is particularly underutilized among seniors.
  - Most effective and efficient way to address hunger is to increase a household's purchasing power.
  - VA undertaking Elderly Simplified Application Project, re-branding SNAP for seniors.
- Move low-income families to living wage jobs.

Due to time constraints, Assistant Secretary Hertz recommended sharing what Virginia is doing on WIC, Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition Program, and urban agriculture at later time.

Councilmember Cheh thanked Commissioner Storen for his remarks; indicating FARM would like to check-in with him on progress in implementing the Roadmap and recommendations that he shared.

## **5. FOOD SECURITY IN FOCUS: MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE**

*Craig Rice, Councilmember, Montgomery County and FARM Vice Chair*  
*Heather Bruskin, Executive Director, Montgomery County Food Council*  
*Jeremy Criss, Director, Montgomery County Office of Agriculture*

Councilmember Rice shared that Montgomery County recognized need to support food security at beginning of pandemic. The county's response started immediately with schools to support children but quickly moved to talking with food council and nonprofit partners about a broader response.

- Need in community prior to pandemic, however, crisis made many food insecure for first time, and they did not know how to navigate system.
- The system to support people was grappling with numbers never seen.
- County responded with new policies, resources, and partnerships.
- Montgomery County Food Council helped to manage and coordinate this; bringing diverse partners to the table.

Heather Bruskin indicated that Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC) is 501c3.

- Different structure than other food councils in the region, started eight years ago.
- Convener of many different stakeholders in county.
- Supported by a small staff of seven.
- Work shaped by 25 members of the council and board of directors.
- MCFC brings a systems approach to its work.

Montgomery County one of wealthiest counties in country, however, income inequality been growing.

- Cost of living is a key driver of food insecurity.
- A family of four needs \$91,000/year to cover all basic costs.
- This is more than double the maximum income limit to receive SNAP or WIC.

In 2016, MCFC worked closely with the County Council to create a food security plan.

- Spent last three years building processes and structures that have been key for mobilizing resources and an effective response to COVID-19.

COVID-19 has resulted in a dramatic increase in food insecurity in the county.

- Over 100,000 residents are experiencing.
- Estimated that there's sustained, 50% increase in number of residents seeking food assistance services.
- Food insecurity disproportionately impacting children and people of color.

Essential to have a coordinated systemic response given increase.

- If there is a silver lining it is that community has responded.
- Prior to COVID-19 there were about 75 food assistance providers, about half of these faith-based institutions.
- Now there are 120 food assistance providers, many which had never provided food before.

In April, county's emergency management office convened food security task force, recognizing that the food security crisis would last beyond a year.

- MCFC is co-lead of Montgomery County Food Security Task Force (FSTF) along with the county's health and human services department, and office of emergency management and homeland security. County Council, many others are key partners in FSTF work.
- In May, FSTF released food security response strategy. This is guiding resource for action and investment.
- FSTF leveraged CARES Act, county funding, and partnership with the Greater Washington Community Foundation to launch [Food for Montgomery](#), a nationally unique effort to match \$10 million in county funds with \$5 million in private sector dollars.
- For more information on the food security response strategy, please contact [mocofoodcouncil@gmail.com](mailto:mocofoodcouncil@gmail.com)

The food security strategy uses diverse sourcing which bolsters local businesses and uses technology to more efficiently connect more residents to more food in accessible and community coordinated ways.

- Rather than all organizations procure food on own, county has leveraged large volume purchases and allocated this to them to distribute.
- In 2020, the county made \$5.8 million in wholesale purchases from local suppliers in shelf stable products and produce.
- Additional \$2.8 million in purchases of shelf stable products in partnership with Capital Area Food Bank and Manna Food Center which were also allocated to food provider network
- There are also eight new community hubs connecting residents to food, diapers, housing assistance, and Covid testing.
- To address supply shortages of key staples, particularly in household sized packages, FSTF purchased more than 800,000 lbs of rice, beans, and lentils; working with community organizations with access to kitchens to repackage.

For Bruskin's complete remarks, please reference this [PowerPoint presentation](#) that includes data on number of pounds of food, prepared meals, USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program, and more. distributed in the county through December 2020.

- When Farmers to Families Food Box Program numbers dropped, county pivoted to purchasing large quantities of culturally appropriate produce. Community partners to break down large amounts and distribute to residents.

- County granted more than \$2.8 million through 5 different grant programs, including Farm to Food Bank, infrastructure grants to food assistance providers which will build community resilience over the long term, a resident and community gardens grant program, and grants to organizations to do SNAP outreach.

More than 4,100 residents served through county's Food Access Call Center in multiple languages.

- Most calls are over 45 minutes each.
- This week, county launched online platform so residents don't have to call 311 call center.
- Saw a 1000% in requests just this week.

Jeremy Criss talked about county's Farm to Food Bank Program which awarded almost \$325,000 to county's producers in 2020.

- Tremendous opportunity for farmers in the Agricultural Reserve to produce more local food, including for people in need.

Twenty years ago if the farmer didn't have on-farm market, other place they could sell their food was through farmers markets.

- More recent trend in Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), there's opportunity for farmers to use a model where customers and payment are set in advance.
- This minimizes risk and uncertainty to farmers and guarantees return.
- Farm to Food Bank (FFB) is modelled after CSA with a pricing sheet for products so that farmers know what they will receive.
- Program worked with six farmers in 2020 and 22 farmers are signed up for 2021.
- Partnership that the Office of Agriculture, MCFC, and Manna Food Center.
- Farmers are excited about the program. Invoices are paid within a week of product receipt.
- Challenge ahead is to determine how to keep funding the program.

Councilmember Rice encouraged FARM members to foster the synergy among local actors as exemplified by the Montgomery County Food Council, the Montgomery County Office of Agriculture, and other partners, to address food insecurity in their communities.

- This is what has led to success of county's efforts to address food insecurity.
- Farm to Food Bank is great model for addressing food insecurity.

Councilmember Cheh concluded presentations by thanking all presenters again. Today's presentations and discussion produced what she was hoping it would: sharing of ideas, sharing of programs, that members can take back to their jurisdictions. FARM is also building foundation for connections within the region.

## **6. FARM COMMITTEE PRIORITIES AND MEETING SCHEDULE**

*Lindsay Smith, Regional Food Systems Value Chain Coordinator*

The Biweekly Food Security and Food Access call schedule not been set, however, COG is working with partners to offer a meeting on Planning for Emergency Food Distribution in Cold and Inclement Weather. We will also be talking with several members about a regional conversation on farmers markets during one of the calls.



Proposed topics for the next FARM meeting in February are a follow-up on today's meeting, farmers markets, and school meals. April would be agriculture. FARM Members approved these topics. COG will have a Regional Agriculture Work Group meeting to start planning for the April meeting. Given discussion about GAP certification today, part of April's meeting could examine this.

Chesapeake Bay Policy and Water Resources committee is very interested in holding a joint conversation on challenges that BIPOC farmers face.

## 7. LOCAL UPDATES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Kate Lee, DC's Urban Agriculture Director announced forthcoming Request for Applications for DC's [Inaugural Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program](#). RFA result of conversations with DC's urban farmers, the DC Food Policy Council's Urban Agriculture Working Group.

New Office of Urban Agriculture at USDA creating [an Advisory Committee](#). Kate will apply and encourages others to do the same. USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture is hiring a director as well.

Please share Chesapeake Bay and Water Resources Policy Committee's CBPC **Academic Paper Competition** for students in the region. This year's competition focus is water quality. A social media graphic and flyer with can be found on [the CBPC meeting website](#).

## 8. ADJOURN

Councilmember Cheh adjourned the meeting just before 1 pm.

The next meeting is Friday, February 8<sup>th</sup> at 11 am.

## ATTENDANCE

Mary Cheh, Chair, District of Columbia  
Jon Stehle, Vice Chair, City of Fairfax  
Craig Rice, Vice Chair, Montgomery County  
Matt de Ferranti, Arlington County (alternate)  
Reuben B. Collins II, ESQ, Charles County (alternate)  
Libby Garvey, Arlington County  
Penny Gross, Fairfax County  
Amy B. Jackson, City of Alexandria  
Tom Ross, City of Fairfax (alternate)  
Ann B. Wheeler, Prince William County  
Ona Balkus, District of Columbia Food Policy Council  
Heather Bruskin, Montgomery County Food Council  
Jeremy V. Criss, Office of Agriculture, Montgomery County  
Rachel Clark, Office of Councilmember Cheh (alternate)  
Heidi Hertz, Assistant Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry for Virginia  
Meredith Ledlie Johnson, Virginia Cooperative Extension  
Kate Lee, Office of Urban Agriculture, District of Columbia  
Hugo Mogollon, FRESHFARM  
Sara Pollock Hoverter, Harrison Institute for Public Law, Georgetown University



Julie Oberg, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, State of Maryland  
Victoria Treski, Bainum Family Foundation  
Chris Van Vlack, Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District  
Michael J. Wilson, Maryland Hunger Solutions

**Other Participants**

Elizabeth Bennett-Parker, City of Alexandria  
Stacey Carey, Office of Supervisor Kershner  
Sharon Ledner, Office of Councilmember Rice  
Ellen Teller, Food Research and Action Center  
Dr. Beverley Wheeler, DC Hunger Solutions  
Duke Storen, Virginia Department of Social Services  
Kim Haun, Arlington County Department of Parks and Recreation  
Aaron Tolson, Prince William Food Rescue/GPW Food Council  
Steve McHenry, Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO)  
Martin Proulx, Charles County Economic Development Department  
Thomas Bolles, Virginia Cooperative Extension  
Stuart Vermaak, Virginia Cooperative Extension  
Aisha Salazar, Virginia Cooperative Extension  
Julia Groenfeldt, Prince George's Food Equity Council  
Alex Cordova, U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Kim Rush Lynch, Prince George's Soil Conservation District  
Nick Stavely, FRESHFARM  
Evan Dupree, University of West Virginia  
Rebecca Gates  
Marci LeFevre

**COG Staff**

Steve Bieber (Host)  
Tom Gates  
Christine Howard  
Brian LeCouteur  
Lisa Ragain  
Lindsay Smith