

March 30, 2022

**2022 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY  
HB 1216: Department of Agriculture -  
Urban Agriculture Grant Fund**

**BILL:** HB 1216: Department of Agriculture-Urban Agriculture Grant Fund  
**COMMITTEE:** Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs  
**POSITION:** Testimony of Support of House Bill 1216

Honorable Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record in support of House Bill 1216.

This letter is submitted by Stephen McHenry, Executive Director of the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) and member of the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council (MD FSRC) and Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC), Co-Chair of the MD FSRC. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Council, and do not necessarily represent the views of MARBIDCO, MCFC, or the State of Maryland. The Food System Resiliency Council was established by the Maryland General Assembly during the 2021 legislative session to bring together 33 appointed council members from across the state, all with different points of entry and expertise to work toward a more resilient food system and address the food insecurity crisis due to COVID-19.

One of the key mandates of this Council was to develop, by November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, equity and sustainability policy recommendations to increase the long-term resiliency of Maryland's food system.

One way this can be achieved is by supporting and promoting urban agriculture. Urban agriculture offers increased access to healthy, fresh, culturally appropriate food while also creating job opportunities and helping to support local economies.

During the 2021 session of the General Assembly, House Bill 286 was enacted which created an Urban Agriculture Grant Fund Program for Baltimore City. House Bill 1216 expands the existing Baltimore City Urban Agriculture Grant Fund Program, which is currently unfunded, into a statewide program and provides the program be funded at \$250,000 annually in FY 2024 through FY 2028. Moreover, Supplemental Budget No. 4 includes \$500,000 in general funds to support the Urban Agriculture Grant Program in fiscal 2023, contingent upon the enactment of this bill. Grants would be available to agricultural producers, non-profit organizations, and institutes of higher education.

The bill establishes a review committee to implement a competitive grant application process that prioritizes applications that benefit socially disadvantaged farmers in urban areas. Furthermore, non-profit organizations that receive grant funds through this program to distribute to agricultural producers must distribute 85% to agricultural producers in low-income census tracts or designated food deserts.

Supporting the growth of commercial urban farming in Maryland will help preserve green space within developed areas and can provide access to healthy food to residents that live in Healthy Food Priority Areas (formally called food deserts). According to a recent study, 146,000 Baltimore City residents (23.5%) live in Healthy Food Priority Areas. Children and black residents are also disproportionately

affected. According to the report, children are the most likely of any age group to live in a Healthy Food Priority Area (28.3%) and black residents are the most likely of any racial or ethnic group to live in a Healthy Food Priority Area (31.5%).<sup>1</sup> Urban farming can provide another access point for healthy fresh food, as urban farmers often sell their product in the local community. Urban farms also may provide community benefits such as education and job training opportunities. And they can be the community focal point of a neighborhood.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support of HB 1216. House Bill 1216, if passed, will significantly assist with the growth of urban agriculture across the State by making financial support available to both the urban farmers directly and the nonprofit organizations that provide training and technical assistance to them.

Stephen R. McHenry  
Executive Director, MARBIDCO

Heather Bruskin  
Co-Chair, Maryland Food System Resiliency Council

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<sup>1</sup> [\*Report: 'Food Desert' Gets a Name Change in Response to Baltimore Community Feedback\*](#), Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, January 17, 2018.