

March 23, 2023

**2023 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
HB 152: Department of Agriculture -
Urban Agriculture Grant Programs -
Alterations**

BILL: HB 152: Department of Agriculture-Urban Agriculture Grant Programs-
Alterations
COMMITTEE: Senate Education, Energy and Environment
POSITION: Testimony of Support of House Bill 152

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 152.

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 Michael J. Wilson, Executive Director of Maryland Hunger Solutions and Co-Chair of the MD FSRC's Communications and Coordination Committee. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Council, and do not necessarily represent the views of MARBIDCO, Maryland Hunger Solutions, 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 is to develop 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 152 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 2025 through FY 2029.

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 a certain percentage 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%).¹ 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 152. House Bill 152, 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

Michael J. Wilson
Co-Chair, Maryland Food System Resiliency Council's Communications and Coordination Committee

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