

MONTGOMERY COUNTY FOOD COUNCIL

FOOD SECURITY COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD

IMPACT REPORT

APRIL 23RD, 2021

A summary of program
impacts, key issues
and recommendations

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BACKGROUND

In 2017, the Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC) co-created the Montgomery County Executive's 5-Year Food Security Plan (FSP), which outlines the path towards building a Montgomery County in which all people have access to safe, sufficient, and nutritious food, with dignity. The FSP estimated that in 2016, over 77,000 Montgomery County residents were experiencing food insecurity, and set a target of a 22% reduction in the number of food insecure individuals from 2017 to 2022. To create the FSP, Montgomery County government and the MCFC employed a collaborative community engagement process that involved over 300 stakeholders, including 11 listening sessions with local recipients of food assistance resources.

Following the creation of the FSP, it has been critical to continue this community engagement, and to ensure that implementation is informed by resident perspectives on issues that can contribute to food insecurity. Recognizing this need, the MCFC founded a Food Security Community Advisory Board (FSCAB) in December 2018 in order to engage with and listen to residents who are currently, or have in the past, experienced food insecurity firsthand. These perspectives are essential to evaluating the effectiveness of programs and identifying the gaps that remain to be addressed. The FSCAB is a vehicle for building the community's capacity to increase food access in Montgomery County in a manner that is inclusive and equitable.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, thirteen FSCAB Members participated in four meetings per year to share their insight and perspectives on food system issues and to develop policies and action plans to fight hunger in their communities. A similar meeting composition was followed in 2021. This year we will host four quarterly meetings and one December orientation. Of the 2021 FSCAB Members, 8% are men and 92% are women. 33% are African American, 25% are White, 17% are African, 9% are Latinx, 8% are Jamaican, and 8% are Afghani.

FSCAB meeting agendas regularly include informational training on topics such as community engagement and advocacy, presented by community leaders from local nonprofit organizations and the County government. Board Members also receive training to enhance their work as resource ambassadors in their communities. Throughout the year, MCFC staff connect FSCAB members with opportunities to speak and participate in Food Council events, meetings, site visits, and gatherings with elected officials.

In early 2021, the MCFC staff team worked collaboratively with all FSCAB members to develop individual personal Advocacy Plans, designed to meet specific advocacy goals, throughout 2021. Personal Advocacy Plans included projects such as sharing food assistance resources with members of their communities, through social media, church and synagogue newsletters, student government associations, and other social networks, and writing letters to legislators or sharing testimony at conferences and local meetings.

“Last year hasn’t been that great due to the restrictions and impacts of COVID-19, but it was joyous that we could have alternative means of serving our communities with their needs in terms of fighting hunger.”

- Matilda Adu, Current FSCAB Member

Food Security Community Advisory Board members gather for a meeting at Manna Food Center (2019).



2019 Program Year

The Montgomery County Food Council hosted one orientation and four quarterly meetings for the 11 members of the Food Security Community Advisory Board. Meeting topics and areas of focus included addressing high costs of healthy food, the importance of personal advocacy by sharing board members experiences, conducting food assistance outreach with inclusive language, and addressing the most effective food assistance provider and consumer relationship.

One notable speaker and training was during the October 17th meeting, which featured a special training by Evelyn Kelly of the Institute for Public Health Innovation on how to structure advocacy messaging when engaging County businesses, organizations, and institutions. Members role played scenarios in order to practice their pitches for two settings: (i) a meeting with the manager of a grocery store in an area of limited food access in which food prices are extremely high, and (ii) a meeting with the Montgomery County Department of Transportation to discuss the connection between bus routes and schedules and grocery stores. Members reflected that the training reinforced the importance of working as a community toward collective impact, and that using polite but firm language is most effective in real-world scenarios like these.

2020 Program Year

MCFC hosted 5 meetings, engaging 13 Board members and 9 community partners including Gaithersburg HELP, Manna Food Center, Silver Spring Christian Reformed Church, and Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). These partner organizations were considered stakeholders who joined the quarterly meetings, and shared insight on how nonprofits and other agencies go about their food security initiatives.

Meeting activities and discussions during the year focused on better understanding transportation barriers to access food, experiences facing food access during the COVID-19 pandemic, and expanding prepared meal access through federal nutrition benefits.

One meeting featured guest speaker remarks from County Councilmember Gabe Albornoz, who offered thoughts on county-level issues and policy pertaining to food insecurity, including ways in which the immigrant population has been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.



FSCAB member Rhona Reiss attends a lobbying day at the Food Research and Action Center Annual conference in 2019.

In December 2020, FSCAB members reported over 1,070 interactions with neighbors, friends, and social media contacts regarding food assistance resources. This included member activities such as sharing a blog post about food assistance resources available over the holidays over their social media platforms (679 people reached); presenting remarks at the annual Maryland Hunger Solutions legislative brainstorming event (50 people reached); testifying and advocating for the importance of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Cash Assistance program (TCA) before the Department of Human Services (DHS) Committee, at a hearing regarding the SNAP Program (17 people reached); and speaking at a televised town hall event hosted by Maryland No Kid Hungry.

2021 Program Year

Each regular meeting will focus on a level of policy: state, federal and county, timed to align with the legislature session of that level of government. The FSCAB met for an orientation in December, and continues to meet quarterly, with Zoom meetings in (January, April, July

and October 2021). The Food Council received a grant from the Healthcare Initiative Foundation to provide additional financial support to eight returning members for increased investment of time and expertise by FSCAB members in advocacy and outreach activities, through the "Advocacy Leader" role that was launched this year. Advocacy Leaders will receive a \$1,000 stipend in two installments to recognize the volunteer time and childcare, transportation, technology, and other costs that may be associated with participating in this program. Four new FSCAB Members will serve as Food Security Community Ambassadors. Their efforts include engaging in direct advocacy and outreach in the community, and providing advice and perspectives on the Food Council's food security work in FSCAB quarterly meetings."

Member outreach for the two tracks will be conducted across four categories of advocacy activities: Direct resident referral support (SNAP application support, food assistance resource navigation support through work with County Community Based Organizations); advocacy (testimony, engagement of elected officials, outreach to public officials); community information sharing (social media, listservs, newsletters, and bulletin boards); and conference and event participation. Both tracks will proactively engage in community networking and leadership opportunities to connect with neighbors, both virtually and in person.

December 2020: The MCFC kicked off the new year with an orientation meeting to welcome four new Board members and re-convene with eight returning members (12 Board members total). Maryland State Delegate Lorig Charkoudian shared her policy priorities for the upcoming Maryland General Assembly session, and highlighted opportunities for Board Members to be involved in state policy. Mary Gies of County Councilmember Sidney Katz's team also provided recorded remarks, noting how county legislation is developed and ways residents can engage in the policymaking process.

January 2021: Michael J. Wilson, Director of Maryland Hunger Solutions (MDHS), and Eden Durbin, Chief of Staff for Maryland State Delegate Jared Solomon, offered remarks on how the Maryland legislative process works, and how Board members can advocate for issues of importance to them. The Maryland General Assembly session that started that week, thus the meeting focused on Maryland State policy.

Recent Advocacy Highlights

Following the training opportunities noted above, Food Security Community Advisory Board members have engaged in a variety of advocacy efforts, policy development activities, and community outreach. We are excited to share some highlights from their many accomplishments:

- Rhona Reiss participated in the Food Action and Research Center's annual Anti-Hunger Conference in 2020, where she spoke with Montgomery County Congressional leaders and staff about opportunities to fight food insecurity with policy change. Mary Simons, Matilda Adu and Michelle Rogers attended the same conference in 2021.
- Matilda Adu and Rhona Reiss attended the Montgomery County Food Council's annual Legislative Breakfast, and contributed ideas and suggestions during the discussion with State Delegates and their staff members (November 2020).

"...What gives my life purpose and meaning during this horrible pandemic that we have been living through is working on the {FSCAB} projects with this Board."

- Rhona Reiss, member of the Food Security Community Advisory Board

"I try to attend every meeting because I enjoy them. You learn so much about the resources that are available."

- Charmaine Howard, member of the Food Security Community Advisory Board

- Mary Simons and Rhona Reiss shared their recommendations for local- and state-level policy opportunities to fight hunger at the annual Maryland Hunger Solutions policy brainstorming session (November 2020).
- Michelle Rogers gave remarks at a town hall event hosted by No Kid Hungry, engaging the public and media. The event convened a panel of experts and advocates who discussed the unprecedented challenges facing families this winter and the urgent

need to provide relief. Michelle shared her story, and advocated for programs that support families experiencing food insecurity. [Coverage of the event can be found here.](#) (December 2020).

- Rhona Reiss testified to the HHS Subcommittee of the Maryland General Assembly House Appropriations Committee, to request that Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits be modified to include cooked and prepared meals. This modification would enable seniors and persons with disabilities who may not be able to prepare food to take advantage of SNAP. (December 2020).
- Vanessa Pierre testified in support of HB0101, the “Heat and Eat Bill,” in the Maryland General Assembly (February 2021). The “Heat and Eat” program is an existing Federal program that allows certain SNAP-eligible residents to qualify for additional benefits. Through this program, SNAP eligible households that pay utility costs in their rent can receive an annual Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP or MEAP in Maryland) benefit. This benefit automatically qualifies recipients for a “standard utility allowance,” which increases the likelihood that they will be eligible for greater “shelter deductions,” that in turn can give the household access to additional SNAP benefits. In essence, this program supports households with lower incomes by providing both energy and food assistance.
- Camila Pinares testified in support of the HB891 “Higher Education-Hunger Free Campus Grant” bill, before the Maryland General Assembly House Appropriations Committee (March 2021). This bill seeks to address the on-going challenge of food insecurity on college campuses, which historically and disproportionately affected students of color, older students, former foster youth, parenting students, students who experienced childhood food insecurity, and first-generation college students, according to the Food Research and Action Center.

Food Security Community Advisory Board members discuss hunger issues at a quarterly meeting (2019).



Community Outreach Highlights

- Matilda Adu, a Board member who is an active advocate in her community, shared information about food assistance resources throughout 2020. Using NextDoor, Matilda reached out to her 700+ connections, providing information about food assistance organizations that are located in convenient locations for her neighbors. Matilda researched service hours, locations, and intake processes and then made referrals for several members of her community. Prior to COVID-19, Matilda regularly visited shops and church gatherings in her community, sharing information about local food assistance resources and services.
- Three members of the Community Advisory Board participated in grant review committees in 2020, in partnership with the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force, including the Food Access Grants, Capacity Building Grants, and Community Gardening Grants.
- Members of the Community Advisory Board partnered with the MCFC in sharing the newly released Resident Food Access Survey (February 2020).
- Camila Pinares provided critical Spanish-language support to the County's Food Access Call Center (FACC), where county residents receive personalized connections to food assistance resources. Camila spoke to nearly 150 residents, predominantly Spanish speaking community members (early 2021).
- Several Board members have attended virtual trainings led by the MCFC throughout 2021, including a tour of Manna Food Center and Maryland General Assembly.

Findings and Recommendations

Since the Board's founding, the following findings and recommendations have been raised by Board members through Food Security Community Advisory Board meetings, trainings, events, or other opportunities:

1 Create More Opportunities to Grow the Food We Need, in Our Own Communities

Government and nonprofit entities should work collaboratively to increase opportunities to grow food at home and in community managed spaces. Growing food at home, and in community, is a way to build power while working toward better health outcomes for all residents. As Vanessa Pierre stated recently, as she advocated for more homesteading practices and gardening opportunities: "I want to empower specifically Black and Brown people to regain their self-sufficiency through food, because I fundamentally feel that if you cannot take care of the basic needs... how do we expect people to worry about starting a business [...] if they can't put food on the table?"

2 Lack of Cooking Equipment to Prepare Food

Government and non-profit organizations should expand and create new programs that connect residents with cooking equipment to prepare food. Food Security Community Advisory Board Members have shared the challenge of having the necessary equipment to prepare meals when receiving food from food assistance partners or food they purchase with their federal nutrition programs.

- A few FSCAB members suggested asking equipment manufacturers to provide donations of gently used or rejected equipment, or seeing if thrift stores have equipment to purchase at a reduced rate. There was also an idea to create an equipment resource directory to connect those who may lack equipment or have extra items to share.

- One Board member suggested that food assistance programs should look to partner with companies who create and sell cooking equipment, where the equipment is distributed at the food assistance provider distribution sites, so residents can pick up food along with appropriate equipment with which to prepare food.

3

Expand Food Access to College Students

Background: Since 2019, the FSCAB program has included at least two college students each year. Several members have engaged in advocacy efforts with a focus on supporting higher education institutions' programs to increase food security. Many college students on the Board collaborate directly with on-campus food pantries or mobile markets, through volunteer efforts, and in some cases through advocating for changes such as increased availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, at the mobile markets. Some Board members have been beneficiaries of programs on-campus, and worked in tandem as members of the Student Council at their institutions to support college food insecurity initiatives. Board members also are engaging with elected officials on these issues. As stated above, in March 2021, Camila Pinares testified in support of the HB891 "Higher Education-Hunger Free Campus Grant" bill, before the Maryland General Assembly House Appropriations Committee.

The Board offers the following recommendations to expand food access to college students:

- Recommendation: Higher education institutions and should incorporate programs to increase students' access to food and to food assistances resources, through strategies such as:
 - Engaging students and asking for feedback on accessibility and cultural appropriateness of food that is made available
 - Clearly sharing information about federal nutrition assistance programs, and ways to enroll (in languages commonly spoken by students)
 - Instating programs that allow students to share meal points with each other, to facilitate the building of mutual aid networks and student-to-student support on campus.

- Establishing a Hunger-Free Task Force, and including student representatives in the Task Force.
- Consider successful models implemented by organizations such as Swipe Out Hunger, and the mobile market currently operating at Montgomery College.

4

Expand Access to Prepared Foods, and Other Improvements to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

- Increased funding is necessary for programs that improve access to prepared meals, particularly for residents living with a physical disability or experiencing homelessness. Currently, prepared foods (such as roasted vegetables or a cooked rotisserie chicken) cannot be purchased with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Several Board members are actively engaged in this issue, and are advocating for the State of Maryland to 1) actively implement the Restaurant Meals Program, per [SB752](#), and 2) expand that program to include purchasing prepared foods at grocery stores.
- Residents need more accessible ways to collect information about SNAP benefits such as the status of benefits, the amount one has access to at a given time, and recertification status. Timely communication to residents enrolled in SNAP can be improved, and materials provided in several languages need to be made more available, to overcome language barriers for residents who may speak languages other than English.
- Increased funding is necessary for programs that improve access to prepared meals. Community organizations, agencies and community members should work together to clarify information availability and communication about Federal benefits eligibility, particularly to reduce confusion regarding the role immigration status plays in applying for Federal benefits. The group recommended creating messaging about the

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“I am grateful I have an opportunity to serve in this Board to advocate and brainstorm solutions for students who face food insecurity in our campus. The perspectives offered come from a diverse group to ensure no one is left behind in this war to eradicate food insecurity in Montgomery County.”

-Mikal Abraha, 2020
FSCAB member

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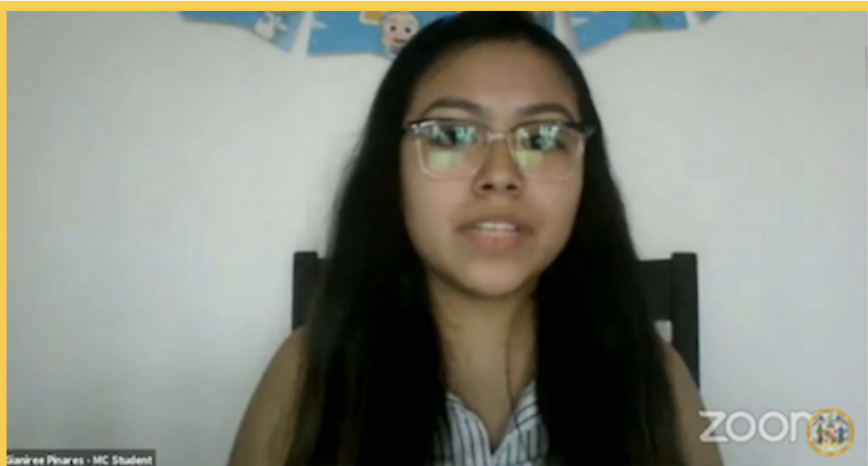
public charge rule, and other immigration factors that may deter residents from applying. The rule has been overturned in early 2021, and communication is critical to spread the word that the Public Charge is no longer in effect. FSCAB members often shared their concern for community members who may not access SNAP benefits due to the fear of immigration status.

5 Resource Navigators are Needed Within the Community to Connect Residents with Food Assistance Resources

Background: As ambassadors for food assistance resources in the community, FSCAB members have provided insight about how, where and when residents are learning about food assistance (including federal nutrition programs, such as SNAP). These insights are critical in shaping future outreach endeavors.

In partnership with FSCAB members, the Food Council identified several issues experienced by residents who were enrolling or re-enrolling in the SNAP Program and facilitated a discussion with MDHS around SNAP recertification issues. Issues identified included: delayed updates on changes to enrollment status, long wait times when calling a SNAP information line to seek support and information, lack of outreach or awareness on recent policy changes related to federal nutrition benefits, and language barriers. In spring and summer of 2020, two FSCAB members worked as short-term consultants to the Food Council to provide SNAP outreach and other information about food assistance available in Montgomery County, through a partnership with Maryland Hunger Solutions (MDHS). After attending training, these members referred residents to food assistance resources

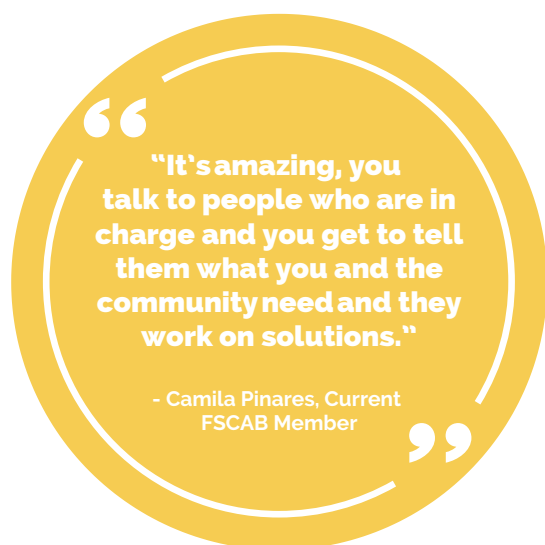
FSCAB member Vanessa Pierre provides a tour of her home garden, where she grows vegetables, herbs, and flowers in raised beds.



Gianiree Camila Pinares testified in support of the HB891 "Higher Education-Hunger Free Campus Grant" bill, before the Maryland General Assembly House Appropriations Committee (March 2021)

and scheduled them for one-hour phone SNAP application appointments. In total, members called 908 individuals, and scheduled 170 SNAP application appointments and facilitated 160 food assistance referrals. In 2021, five Board members attended a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) training session hosted by MDHS to receive an overview of the program. After attending the training, Camila Pinares participated in SNAP outreach with MDHS to support Maryland residents, reaching more than 170 residents.

Building on these experiences, and Food Security Community Advisory Board members' continued outreach in the community, the Board offers the following recommendations to support community capacity for Resource Navigators who can connect residents directly with food assistance resources, including the SNAP Program:



- The FSCAB recommends that non-profit organizations, government agencies, and philanthropic organizations create paid opportunities for residents who can be trained to support individuals experiencing food insecurity. These “Resource Navigators” could provide information about local food assistance resources, Federal nutrition benefits, and other services to meet basic needs, when necessary. This need has been identified consistently, throughout three years of program implementation, as a way to better understand the community needs and hear from those who are directly impacted by programs to fight hunger.
- The FSCAB recommends that nonprofits, government agencies and philanthropic organizations utilize specific strategies to reach underserved populations, including: partner with organizations that serve these communities, post information on bulletin boards at shops or supermarkets, and share information at meetings at schools, churches and other congregate settings. These suggestions were captured at the July 18, 2019 FSCAB meeting, and in following discussions with the Board.

6

Transportation Gaps— and Opportunities

- While Montgomery County has many grocery stores, specialty markets, and farmers markets, many of these food resources in our food landscape are not easily accessible by public transportation. Transportation barriers have been noted by FSCAB members, in particular barriers faced by residents who may be living with a physical disability or other challenges that may make it difficult to carry a heavy load of groceries, on a long bus ride and then on a significant walk before reaching the resident's destination. Government agencies, particularly transportation and urban planners, should work closely with community members and community-based organizations to address these challenges.
- The “last 100 feet” can pose challenges, particularly when food delivery services or food assistance resources are delivered to a specific location, such as an apartment building entrance. For residents living in an apartment complex or senior living facility, coordinating deliveries and transporting groceries from the public entrance to their own front door can present significant challenges.
- In July 2019, members were asked to use a “transportation log” in English and Spanish. The transportation log was designed to capture snapshots of people's journeys to and from the grocery store, to better understand the time, effort and cost it takes for people to purchase their groceries. When members returned for the October 2019 meeting, one member explained it usually took her forty minutes (round trip) to get to a grocery store or food assistance provider, and her journey usually includes a bus ride plus some walking. Board members also raised the fact that residents living with a disability that impacts mobility might experience greater challenges, when taking mass transit to a food assistance site or grocery store. For example, traveling to the grocery store using a walker and taking the bus, while balancing several grocery bags, can pose challenges for residents.

7

Facilitate Opportunities for Community Members to Testify or Engage with Elected Officials

- Elected officials and non-profit organizations must consider the following, and develop programs to address these challenges:
 - Technology barriers can create challenges for residents who seek to engage in virtual hearings or community gatherings. Many of our members experienced challenges with technology that limited their participation in FSCAB meetings when the format transitioned from in-person gatherings.
 - Community members are ready to testify, and engage: Board members regularly elevate issues important to them at policy gatherings and in smaller meetings with State Delegates. In a survey asking about what kind of actions Board members want to pursue through their advocacy plans, 70% of Board members noted their interest in testifying in a hearing. 90% of FSCAB members indicated that they want to write letters or emails to elected officials.
 - Support for facilitating testimony from residents is critical. Montgomery County Food Council staff assist each Board member to sign up to testify, provide an outline to use when writing testimony, facilitate practice sessions, and watch the testimony.



8

Expand Access to Culturally Appropriate Foods

- Food assistance organizations and government partners should make more culturally appropriate foods available to residents. Several Board members have dedicated time to advocating for increased accessibility of culturally appropriate foods, especially for immigrant communities in Montgomery County. One member encouraged a local food assistance organization to survey residents to find out if the food being distributed was preferable, and culturally appropriate, to their clients' needs.

Conclusion

The Food Security Community Advisory Board was founded with the goal of listening to resident perspectives on food insecurity issues, and using the advice from this Board to directly inform programs and policy throughout Montgomery County. These recommendations are guidance to be able to support other community members, and make sure the needs and challenges are being addressed by those who are directly impacted by food security initiatives. Partners, stakeholders, and community members should take into account these ideas when doing their own food security work. Please note this report is not comprehensive, and instead offers a summary of some points of feedback from a select group of community members who have generously shared their expertise and personal perspectives, with the Montgomery County Food Council staff team and partners.



Jenna Umbriac of Manna Food Center speaks with members of the Food Security Community Advisory Board (2019).

Acknowledgements

The Montgomery County Food Council thanks the Healthcare Initiative Foundation and the Albertsons Companies Foundation/Food Research & Action Center for their invaluable support of our Food Security Community Advisory Board program. We are also extremely grateful to the the following funders for their support of the Food Council's food security initiatives: the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, the Montgomery County Council and the Office of the County Executive, Burness Communications, the Greater Washington Community Foundation, Nationals Philanthropies, Mead Family Foundation, No Kid Hungry, and additional community supporters.

Photo Credits

Pg 12, Right: Identity Inc. Source: <https://identity-youth.org/2021/03/15/identity-youth-testifies-before-maryland-general-assembly/>.

Left: Vanessa Pierre in her home garden where she grows vegetables, herbs, and flowers in plant beds. (Photo credit: NPR).

Source: <https://www.npr.org/local/305/2020/11/13/934608568/why-one-maryland-resident-wants-communities-of-color-to-try-homesteading>

Pg 2, 4, 7, 15: Montgomery County Food Council