

Montgomery County Food Council 2022 Policy Priorities



2022 POLICY PRIORITIES

The Montgomery County Food Council establishes policy priorities on an annual basis to direct our advocacy work. These priorities are created with input from our four public working groups, various subcommittees, volunteer councilmembers, members of our policy committee, and our Food Security Community Advisory Board. These priorities reflect our focus on equity, community, and economic and environmental sustainability. They were chosen based on the impact they will have in 2022.

Our Four Policy Priorities:

1. Increase federal nutrition benefit access, flexibility, and eligibility
2. Increase resident and commercial access to affordable land for food production
3. Increase local food and beverage procurement by residents and institutions
4. Support creative funding opportunities to increase economic development and food justice

PRIORITY 1: INCREASE FEDERAL NUTRITION BENEFIT ACCESS, FLEXIBILITY, AND ELIGIBILITY

The Montgomery County Food Security Plan recommends taking action to increase access to federal nutrition benefits for County residents. Recent data analysis by Maryland Hunger Solutions and the John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future found that only 36% of eligible Montgomery County residents receive SNAP benefits, the lowest SNAP utilization rate in the state of Maryland. As we transition to COVID recovery, local, state and federal resources for food assistance will decrease. The Food Council is prioritizing increasing access to federal food assistance benefits, such as SNAP, via the following strategies:

- Strengthen the line of communication between County staff and community partners to better coordinate services and advocate for local needs.
- Reduce barriers for residents who speak languages other than English to be able to more easily access federal benefits and utilize program pathways toward becoming a food producer.
- Establish state legislation aimed at expanding minimum SNAP benefits for families, children, university students, and the elderly, and federal legislation extending the expanded SNAP benefits for families and children (i.e., P-EBT) put in place during the pandemic.



PRIORITY 2: INCREASE RESIDENT AND COMMERCIAL ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE LAND FOR FOOD PRODUCTION

Montgomery County has a nationally celebrated model for conserving almost one third of county land for agriculture. However, fewer than 10% of total agricultural producers in Montgomery County identify as Black, Indigenous, Latino, or people of color compared to 57% of the county's population. This discrepancy is, at least in part, due to white supremacy culture which historically denied access to land and financing for people of color. In addition, although there are many community-based garden programs throughout the county, these initiatives have long wait lists and access to urban land for gardening and agriculture is limited. The Food Council is committed to increasing access to land to diverse local producers via the following strategies:

- Establish state and federal legislation that expands urban farming, community gardens, and public investment grants that target socially disadvantaged producers to start up food production on unfarmed land.
- Invest in economically and socially equitable land and lease arrangements similar to other areas of current County government involvement. Investments could include resident credits for gardening (similar to RainScapes Rewards Rebates), County distribution of supplies (similar to compost bins), and business credits for land access expenses (similar to MOVE Program).
- Foster community and resource sharing among local producers to create stakeholder networks capable of supporting our efforts to increase urban and rural land ownership by people of color for food production.

PRIORITY 3: INCREASE LOCAL FOOD AND BEVERAGE PROCUREMENT BY RESIDENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Montgomery County has many local food and beverage producers. However, these producers have limited access to local institutional market opportunities, such as schools and local government. Institutional purchasing of local food and beverage products would increase the sustainability of small farms and businesses because of the inherent stability and reliability of institutional markets. In addition, sourcing from local producers would decrease the environmental cost for institutional purchasers and Montgomery County residents. The Food Council is committed to increasing local procurement via the following strategies:

- Establish local infrastructure, such as aggregation and cut and wash facilities, to make local procurement more safe, efficient, and feasible.
- Provide resources for collaboration among farmers to address product viability, as well as their priorities and concerns regarding expansion of production for institutional procurement.
- Establish legislation and support federal and state programs aimed at expanding local procurement, specifically for food assistance, school meals, and supplying public institutions.



PRIORITY 4: SUPPORT CREATIVE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD JUSTICE

We recognize that current funding and resource development models are hard to access for small, community-based organizations and businesses. As COVID-specific financial resources begin to diminish, economic impacts continue to grow and strain service providers and local businesses. Creative strategies to grow our economy and maximize investment from a wide variety of sources are critical. Non-traditional and non-financial resources must be explored and better leveraged to create a more resilient and equitable food system.

- Model a program in Montgomery County similar to Washington, DC’s [Food Access Fund](#), which invests in entrepreneurs to create a more accessible and culturally appropriate food system in communities that are historically under-resourced.
- Provide a platform to advocate for philanthropic change aimed at increasing investments in staffing, flexible resources, development of evaluation metrics, and capacity building funds for food assistance and food systems organizations that demographically reflect the communities they serve.
- Support modes of economic development that build opportunities for income sufficiency, facilitate the redistribution of wealth, acknowledge the relationship between economic development and hunger, and address racial inequities.

WHO WE ARE

The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for the over 100,000 at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County’s farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources. We envision a vibrant and equitable food system in Montgomery County that is healthy for our community, economy, and environment.