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FOOD AS MEDICINE: CURRENT EFFORTS AND POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES

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Good Morning and thank you, Chairman Booker and Ranking Member Braun for this opportunity to talk about the opportunities that Food as Medicine presents for Kentuckians.

My name is Martin Richards and I have the honor of being the Executive Director of Community Farm Alliance for the past twelve years. Community Farm Alliance is a grassroots membership organization formed by tobacco and dairy farmers during the Farm Crisis of the 1980s.

Before I became Executive Director, I served on CFA's Board, as its Board Chairman, and as a CFA Fellow in 2000 when Kentucky passed HB 611 that dedicated Master Tobacco Settlement funds to diversifying Kentucky agriculture and improving Kentuckians health.

Before any of that, I was just a traditional Kentucky cattle and tobacco farmer who saw the writing on the wall and began to grow food, organic food. I joined CFA when CFA and the Burley Tobacco Growers Coop helped form an organic farmers cooperative.

An apple a day may keep the doctor away. Unfortunately, Kentucky consistently ranks in the bottom five nationally for diet-related disease, as well as leading the nation in rates of food insecurity with 673,672 (15.1%) Kentuckians living in food-insecure households. Kentucky also ranks 50th in consumption of fruit and vegetables, with only 4.7% of the state's population reporting eating two or more fruits or three or more vegetables each day. As a former farmer, this is unacceptable. Kentucky is a proud farm state with over 74,000 farms, sixth most of any state in the country, and we should be able to feed our neighbors.

My organization Community Farm Alliance (CFA) was proud to launch Kentucky Double Dollars (KDD) in 2014 and Fresh Rx for Mothers on Medicaid in 2019 as strategies for increasing the consumption of Kentucky-grown healthy foods for Kentucky families. These programs have been incredibly beneficial to recipients utilizing SNAP, WIC, and the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program to increase their buying power at farmers markets, Community Markets, and retail locations.

From 2017 to 2022, over \$939,478 in KDD leveraged an additional \$939,478 in federal funds, putting over \$1,878,955 in Kentucky farmers' pockets and creating over \$3.1M in economic impact for Kentucky communities. From the farmers surveyed who accepted KDD, 76% agreed

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that participation in KDD increased farm income overall, 50% indicated that they increased the number and type of products offered at the markets, and 36% of farmers increased employment due to the KDD program. In short, the KDD had diverse, positive impacts on farms. While these impacts were experienced by the smallest producers, all size classes saw benefits.

Equally important, 99% of the KDD customers surveyed noticed positive changes in at least one of the seven food related behaviors we measured: increased physical activity, less consumption of processed foods, weight loss, better digestive health, better food preparation skills, greater nutritional awareness, and greater awareness of food sources and farming. 95% of customers experienced positive changes in 3 or more of the behaviors measured, 85% reported that they had positive changes in 5 or more of the behaviors measured, and 49% reported positive changes in all seven behaviors.

Over the past three years Kentuckians' food security was severely impacted by COVID and extreme weather events. Approximately 54% of KDD customers said that COVID made it more difficult to access fresh and healthy foods. Yet, 82% of respondents said they began visiting farmers markets more often. Over half of the surveyed farmers market vendors with KDD in Kentucky either maintained or increased sales overall during this time and the majority saw increases in sales related to the KDD program. The KDD program provided both consumers and producers in Kentucky with an important safety net during this time of uncertainty.

The physical and human infrastructure developed around KDD also played an enormous role in mitigating recent crises. During COVID, CFA, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, and other organizations were able to quickly provide farmers markets with additional resources and technical assistance that enabled many Kentucky farmers markets to not only remain open but to be safe places for shoppers.

Following the historic floods of 2022, this infrastructure proved to be an important mechanism for getting food to those most impacted while also supporting local farmers. Immediately following the flood, support organizations coordinated efforts and funding streams to launch "free markets" in four of the counties most impacted by the floods. The free markets were the result of intentional and strategic coordination of agricultural support organizations, institutes of higher education, local farmers, and private funders. This well-connected network of support organizations was able to secure significant donations of fresh produce from farmers across the state whose operations had not been impacted by the flood. These donations were then distributed to participating markets along with significant funding from private sources. Utilizing these resources, groups were able to tailor the structure of their free markets based on what might work best in their community, and in the process were able to impact food insecurity brought on by the flood, with many markets directing some – if not all -- of the private funding into the pockets of farmers whose farming operations had experienced significant disturbances. The only reason that the free markets worked was because of the existing infrastructure and networks that

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were established well before the floods. This provides an exceptional look into the potential for community food systems to exhibit resiliency in the face of adversity.

Though Community Farm Alliance administers Kentucky Double Dollars, the Program is the collaboration of many, many organizations. Besides the 46 farmers markets, 12 community markets, and 5 retail KDD outlets, 26 organizations (including NGOs, state agencies, and other food system stakeholders) make up the KDD Advisory Council to provide oversight and input to improving the KDD program.

Funding for KDD has also been diversified with almost a dozen federal, state and private philanthropic organizations contribution to KDD over the past eight years, including the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, the Blue Grass Community Foundation, the Foundation for Appalachian KY, the Greater Clark Community Foundation, WellCare, BB&T/Truist, Passport-Molina, the Education Foundation of America, and Grow Appalachia. The program's two largest and committed funders have been the Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund (KADF) and the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), which have been critical catalysts in helping many Kentuckians access healthy food. Both of these programs require a 1:1 match.

Sustainability for food as medicine programs, like KDD and Fresh Rx MOMs, is an ongoing challenge. The USDA GusNIP grant program has been critical for CFA. However, with only \$38.7 million available in 2022, just eight GusNIP Nutrition Incentive projects were funded. Unfortunately, Kentucky Double Dollars, along with many other applicants, did not receive awards that would have had an extraordinary impact on our community's food and nutrition security.

Without those much needed GusNIP resources, we find ourselves asking how to sustain our work. The opportunity to utilize food as medicine to help Kentucky farmers, communities and those who are dealing with diet-related diseases is incredible, but federal funding for this work is critical. I would strongly urge the Senate Agriculture Committee to scale up the GusNIP program and reduce the match requirement in the next Farm Bill so that more food as medicine projects in Kentucky and around the country can continue their work in both rural and urban communities.

In this moment we find ourselves being asked to sustain what is going well, and to also continue to think outside of the box. I would add that the issues may be the same in urban and rural America, but the solutions can look very different.

Establishing food as medicine as acceptable, even prioritized in Medicare and Medicaid, would potentially have short and long-term impacts for not only the nutritional health of Americans but also for our farmers.

To learn more about Kentucky Double Dollars: <https://kentuckydoubledollars.org>

To learn more about Fresh Rx MOMs: <https://cfaky.org/freshrx/>

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A short video from the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky: <https://youtu.be/cYpghLDJcgQ>