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Testimony

Submitted to The Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the United States Senate
Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research

Hearing

“Food as Medicine: Current Efforts and Potential Opportunities,” Tuesday, December 13, 2022

Witness

Leah Penniman, Founding Co-Executive Director of Soul Fire Farm Institute Inc, Author of Farming While Black and farmer for over 25 years

Statement

Chair Booker, Ranking Member Braun, and Members of the Sub-Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak before you today from my 25 years of direct experience as a farmer providing “food as medicine” to those in greatest need in our community. I am the co-founder, executive director, and farm manager of Soul Fire Farm in Grafton NY and a founding member of the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust and the National Black Food and Justice Alliance. I am also a mother of two.

As a mother I know of no greater yearning than the sacred imperative to feed our children. When Emet was a newborn and Neshima was just two, we moved to the South End of Albany New York, a neighborhood termed a “food desert” by the federal government due to the paucity of grocery stores, high poverty rates, and disproportionate rates of hunger, diabetes, and heart disease and other diet-related illness.

Our family struggled to feed our children fresh fruits and vegetables, not for lack of effort, but because there was no accessible public transportation, grocery stores, farmers markets, or community garden plots. We applied for assistance under the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides federal food grants to low-income pregnant women, breastfeeding women, and children under the age of five. But when I attempted to use my check at the corner store to purchase milk and eggs, the customer behind me spat on my shoes for holding up the line with the cumbersome redemption process. The only way we could get greens and tomatoes on the table was to join a costly CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) subscription system that rivaled our rent in terms of budgetary outlay. The CSA pickup was 2.2 miles from our home, so each week we packed Neshima into the stroller and I carried Emet on my back to make the long trek for groceries on foot.

There was a cruel irony to the fact that my partner and I had been laboring as farm workers since we were teenagers, from the urban gardens of Boston to the rural organic farms of central Massachusetts, but



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couldn't afford those crops for our own table. In getting to know our neighbors, we found that we were not alone in the struggle to nourish our children. In fact, around [40 million Americans](#) live in food deserts where we cannot access or afford the life-giving foods that make us whole. When our neighbors learned that we were seasoned growers, they asked, "Why not start a farm for us? A farm for the people?"

We took that challenge seriously and started exploring nearby lands to see which parcel would claim us as friends and stewards. In 2006, we wed ourselves to 80 acres of eroded and degraded mountainside land in Mohican territory which would become Soul Fire Farm. We spent years healing the soil with cover crops and mulch, regenerating the forest, building a straw bale solar-powered home and education center by hand, and assembling a team. Soul Fire Farm opened in 2010 from the collective yearning of Black, multiracial, and low-income families to feed ourselves. We established a sliding-scale doorstep vegetable and egg delivery program that allowed members to choose how much to pay. Starting with the South End of Albany, this "Solidarity Shares" initiative now covers four neighborhoods in Albany and three neighborhoods in Troy. The weekly box reflects the bounty of the land's 100+ heirloom and heritage crops, such as callaloo, plait de Haiti tomato, and fish pepper. Members grew inspired to learn to cultivate their own food, so we created a home gardens program that provides lumber, soil, plants, seeds, and mentorship to aspiring urban homesteaders. We surveyed our members annually and 100% reported that they were eating more fruits and vegetables, and that health indicators like blood pressure and cholesterol were improving. They also reported increased feelings of overall well-being, energy levels, and a sense of empowerment. Local health clinics took notice and started making referrals, as did the refugee resettlement program. We couldn't meet the demand for no-cost and affordable doorstep deliveries of vegetables. So, we started training other farms across the region in our method and soon Solidarity Shares were a multi-farm phenomenon. Corbin Hill Food Project, Rock Steady Farm, Poughkeepsie Farm Project, Schenectady Food Box, Sweet Freedom Farm, and Rocky Acres Farm are just some of the NY farmer-led "food as medicine" projects in our networks.

However, our farmers soon realized that their members struggled to afford even the lowest tier of the sliding scale pricing system, and when the pandemic hit, folks' capacity to pay evaporated completely. As farmers, we need payment for the crops in order to remain economically viable, but we could not charge our struggling customers. And we were not willing to drop members from the program because of their dire economic situation.

This is why federal nutrition programs are so important. The farmers in our network created partnerships and got involved with initiatives like:

- [SNAP \(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program\)](#)
- [USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program](#)
- [GusNIP Produce Prescription Program](#)
- [Farm to Food Bank Projects](#)



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These programs provide a way for farmers to access a steady and reliable revenue stream for their crops, while providing food to at-risk families. It's a win-win. The farmer is able to stay afloat and communities can access nutritious food.

In preparation for this hearing, I reached out to the 500+ Black, Indigenous, and people of color farmers in our regional network to hear about their experience with federal nutrition incentive programs. Every respondent who participated in these programs sung their praises, calling the programs "essential." For example:

Bil Thorn of Sky Island Farm is the largest Black producer in Washington State and said, "I participated in Farm to Pantry and the Prescription Program with our local hospital... I do believe that these programs are super important for the farmer and the recipient of the food. Locally grown food is oftentimes way more nutrient dense and organic, so people who can't afford locally grown should absolutely have access to this produce too and these programs are making it possible. These programs also help keep small to mid-size farms afloat. We primarily wholesale through these outlets and if they weren't there we would have to turn to distributors or stores which do not always take as much quantity and are not as reliable."

Bil and others also reported that they wish there was more outreach to small farmers and farmers of color about these programs, who are often looked over in favor of white producers and large aggregators. Farmers also reported that the timing of the grant cycles are often a mismatch for the growing season, for example - produce delivery scheduled in the winter months, or applications due in the middle of peak summer season.

The National Young Farmers Coalition recently published their [2022 survey](#), which received over 10,000 responses. Key findings echoed what I found in my informal interviews:

- 83% of young farmers are motivated by social concerns like ending hunger.
- 41% of all young farmers and 59% of Black farmers are struggling with revenue and access to capital.
- 49% of young farmers have not utilized any USDA program and 71% are unfamiliar with programs for which they qualify.
- Farmers of color are more likely to report an adverse experience attempting to apply for a USDA program than white farmers.

Farmers in this nation need our support - the producer population is aging and struggling to make ends meet. The [average age of an American farmer](#) has been steadily increasing to 57.5 years, with Black farmers averaging 61 years of age. Ninety-six percent of farming households rely on [off-farm income](#) to make ends meet, and that outside income comprises 82% of their annual revenue. At the same time, we have a growing health crisis of diet-related illness that was thoroughly presented during your last hearing.



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By fully funding and expanding farm-to-community nutrition incentive programs we benefit both the farmer and the consumer. By increasing outreach to young farmers and farmers of color, we invest in the future of American agriculture.

Those children that I mentioned at the beginning of my statement are nearly grown up, with my eldest in college studying sustainable agriculture. She wanted me to tell you that, “the food system is everything it takes to get sunshine onto our plates” and as civic leaders it's our responsibility to make sure that process is unimpeded. From the farmer, to the food business owner, to those with hungry bellies, it's our duty to move the sunshine along so that *everyone* can thrive.