

1/28/22**Crossroads Community Food Network Testimony to House Rules Committee**

Crossroads Community Food Network is building a healthier, more equitable food system in the Takoma/Langley Crossroads, a primarily immigrant community that straddles Prince George's and Montgomery Counties outside of Washington, DC. At the heart of this integrated network of food growers, makers, and consumers is Crossroads Farmers Market, where an innovative "double dollar" program makes it easier to bring home more healthy food, and helps support local farmers -- most of whom are also immigrants. Crossroads also provides community-based culturally-appropriate healthy eating education, microenterprise training for low-income food entrepreneurs, and an affordable community kitchen and related programming geared toward helping them succeed.

We envision a community where all people have access to fresh, nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food; where the food system is more reliant on local production and just as important, there is a parity of opportunity for those who wish to grow, make, or sell healthy food; where the food supply chain respects all workers; and where there is a robust public demand for healthy food. The goal common to all of Crossroads' programs is to connect and empower people through healthy food. Our Fresh Checks incentives matching program at Crossroads Farmers Market makes healthy food more affordable in Maryland's International Corridor. Our Healthy Eating initiatives bring farm-to-fork programming to our diverse community. And our Microenterprise Training Program connects food business entrepreneurs with community resources, mentorship, and skills development -- further improving community food security by bringing more affordable foods into the local market.

While there are many area organizations that feed hungry people, promote healthy eating, or support local farmers or start-up food businesses, Crossroads is unique because its programs touch on all these necessary components of a sustainable local food system. The benefits are interrelated and multifold: increasing access to healthy food and knowledge about making

healthy food choices contribute to improved overall public health; creating a consistent demand for fresh fruits and vegetables has helped make local, small-scale farming more economically viable; and facilitating the transition to self-employment via entrepreneurship fosters financial stability. By connecting and empowering those who grow, make, and eat healthy food, Crossroads is helping a historically marginalized community attain food equity and self-sufficiency.

Throughout this pandemic, we've sought ways to deepen our support of customers and farmers at Crossroads Farmers Market. We increased our weekly Fresh Checks match to \$50 from \$20 each week, enabling shoppers using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other federal nutrition benefits to bring home more healthy food as they increase revenue for local farmers.

And now we are taking another step. This fall, we launched a pilot project to expand the Fresh Checks program to allow shoppers to buy additional SNAP-eligible foods beyond fresh fruits and vegetables, such as eggs, bread, coffee beans, and honey. This has been the practice at the 40+ farmers markets participating in the state-wide Maryland Market Money matching dollars program since 2012. And increasingly, it's what our shoppers and market vendors have told us they want.

Fifteen years ago, Crossroads' Fresh Checks initiative was founded on a simple idea: make fresh, healthy foods more affordable, and people will buy them. And yet, in June the US Department of Agriculture reported that 88% of families using SNAP still face barriers to eating healthy food. The most common barrier? The cost. That's why we undertook the Fresh Checks expansion pilot. It's a win-win: shoppers have access to a wider variety of healthy, affordable foods, and food vendors have access to a new customer base, bolstering sales during this challenging time. And we all win when we strengthen local supply chains, which is just as critical now as it was in March 2020.

In 2007, Crossroads innovated this choice-based model to reduce food insecurity in our community by connecting shoppers directly with farmers—a model that has been replicated nationwide. Expanding the Fresh Checks program further prioritizes shoppers' freedom to buy more of the kinds of healthy foods they want for their families at accessible prices. Over the last 15 market seasons, more than \$730,000 in SNAP, WIC, P-EBT, and WIC/Senior FMNP benefits have been spent at Crossroads Farmers Market by nearly 24,000 people. We've matched that with another \$730,000 in Fresh Checks incentives, and all of this money has gone directly into the hands of immigrant and minority farmers and vendors.

We strive for a strong social safety net for all in this country, and we believe that choice-based solutions provide the most dignified options to secure culturally-appropriate food. We need increases in SNAP at the federal and state levels, and we support our partners as they advocate for SNAP increases for college students, for young families, and for seniors. We believe WIC programs need to be expanded at the State level. We also want to see more innovation in WIC deployment, similar to what occurs at Crossroads Farmers Market: our local WIC office sets up a booth outside the farmers market to distribute Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) vouchers to parents. Shoppers simply pick up their vouchers, then they can walk into the Farmers Market to get their fresh produce purchases doubled. This is innovative because it reduces the travel burden on WIC users, and makes it easier for their WIC FMNP vouchers to go farther.

We also know that farmers need more support to be able to utilize and implement these programs. We know many farmers who want to provide their fresh produce and agricultural products to their lower-income neighbors, but don't have the capacity to do so due to labor needs, technological delays, or onerous registration processes. We want to support them by reducing barriers to participation in these programs. One example is reducing or eliminating fees associated with accepting WIC at Farmers Markets. These improvements would go a long way to strengthen local and regional food systems, and would help farmers get more of their produce into the hands of folks who need it.