



Regional Environmental Council, Inc.
of Central Massachusetts
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March 30, 2022

Congressman James McGovern, Chair
The Committee on Rules
U.S. House of Representatives
H-312 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman McGovern:

On behalf of everyone at the Regional Environmental Council of Central MA (REC), I extend our sincere thanks to you and the other members of the House of Representatives Committee on Rules for visiting with us here in Worcester, Massachusetts on March 4th to tour our facilities, meet our staff and program participants, and hear about our work.

We welcome the Rules Committee's efforts to understand and highlight the best practices of organizations like ours across the country that are engaged in efforts to end hunger and promote food security. We are enthusiastic about plans to convene a White House Conference on Hunger and will be delighted to participate in such an event.

The following testimony provides an overview of the nature of our organization and our work to expand food security and food justice in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts and in Central and Southern Worcester County.

Background Statement: A grassroots, nonprofit organization incorporated in 1972, the Regional Environmental Council of Central MA's (REC) mission is to bring people together to create a just food system and to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities in and around Worcester, Massachusetts. One of the REC's greatest strengths is our meaningful

connection to the communities in which we work, built over 50 years of urban environmental action. Our three current programs focus on building an equitable and sustainable local food system by connecting urban and rural sectors, developing entrepreneurial food projects at the grassroots level, investing in youth development and employment, and supporting urban agriculture and gardening.

REC Programs: 1. Begun in 1995 with 5 gardens, **UGROW (Urban Garden Resources of Worcester)** is a network of 60 community and school gardens and urban farms involving more than 500 gardeners and farmers and 2,000 public school students who produce over 15,000 pounds of food annually for their families and schools. 2. In 2003, REC initiated **YouthGROW (Youth Growing Organics in Worcester)**, a leadership development and employment program for teens from historically underserved and low-income neighborhoods. YouthGROW employs 35-45 low-income teens annually to maintain two urban organic farms while developing leadership, job, and life skills and deepening participants' understanding of sustainable food systems. 3. Established in 2008, **REC Community Farmers Markets** serve Worcester's most food insecure neighborhoods via 3 weekly farmers' markets and 2 Mobile Farmers Market vehicles that make 10 weekly stops in the cities of Worcester and Southbridge and the town of Webster, MA. These markets connect residents of these communities' lowest income, most food insecure neighborhoods with affordable, culturally appropriate, healthy food (including fruits, vegetables, meats, cheeses, and other value added products) from more than 25 local farms. These markets currently serve 5,000 unique customers annually, grossing \$190k. 87% of sales are made using subsidized payments, including WIC and Senior Coupons and SNAP. Our markets have participated in the Massachusetts Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) since its inception in 2017. This program, administered by the MA Dept. of Transitional Assistance, provides \$40-\$80 per month of fruits and vegetables to SNAP customers at participating farmers' markets, farm stands, and CSAs.

REC's programs are designed and implemented in partnership with participating community members. Community leadership and participant-driven program design are embedded in our work. YouthGROW uses a consensus framework for all major decision-making that enables youth participants to co-create the program curriculum in partnership with adult staff. YouthGROW's tiered leadership structure enables returning youth to gain additional

responsibility and autonomy each year they participate in the program. A network of 45 volunteer community and school garden coordinators help coordinate the efforts of 500 community gardeners and 2,000 school garden students across 60 garden and urban farm sites. Volunteers who serve on our Farmers Market Customer Advisory Board provide ongoing feedback that, along with customer surveys and focus groups, helps ensure our markets are responsive to the needs of our diverse customer base, and that our offerings are culturally appropriate, affordable, and accessible.

REC has also developed an extensive network of organizational partners from the non-profit, private, and public sectors that are engaged in all aspects of our work. These partners include dozens of community-based neighborhood organizations, social service agencies, hospitals and community health centers, municipal and state agencies, colleges and universities, youth serving agencies, faith-based organizations, and businesses both small and large (including many local, rural farms). REC serves on the steering committees of the Worcester Food Policy Council, Central MA SNAP Coalition, Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester, Central MA Youth Jobs Coalition, and the Worcester Mayor's Task Force on Food Security. REC Staff and Board completed a Strategic Planning process in 2020 which included an in-depth environmental scan of grassroots community members, funders, and partners. Core organizational strengths identified by external stakeholders through this process included: deep engagement with grassroots community members and volunteers, local leadership in the area of food access and youth development, and strong community partnerships.

The following organizations are representative of our many community partners:

World Farmers (Lancaster, MA): World Farmers' mission is to support small farmers in sustainable agriculture and marketing to connect culturally relevant produce to viable markets. World Farmers gives more than 200 refugee and immigrant growers access to land in Lancaster and Sutton, MA, to grow and sell produce. Through their "Flats Mentor Farm" project, 40 member farms sell their produce at regional farmers markets. If funded, World Farmers will work with REC Farmers Market staff to identify high-demand ethnic crops and will support a minimum of 4 Flats Mentor Farms to learn appropriate growing techniques, incorporate these ethnic crops into their growing plans, and source these crops wholesale to the REC Mobile Market.

Worcester Common Ground (Worcester, MA): WCG is a community development corporation and community land trust. They are the property owner of 3 urban farms in the REC's UGROW community garden & urban farm network called EAT (Educational and

Agriculture Training) sites (See Appendices.) These urban farms will provide space in the city for New Americans to grow for market.

Central West Justice Center (Worcester, MA): The Central West Justice Center provides free legal help to low-income and elderly residents of Central and Western Massachusetts with a focus on cases involving humanitarian-based immigration law, employment rights, housing and homelessness, and access to public benefits. CWJC co-chairs the Central Massachusetts SNAP Coalition. They will partner with REC to coordinate HIP education and SNAP outreach efforts to increase utilization of HIP for existing SNAP recipients and support enrollment in SNAP as well as support community participation in the Central MA SNAP Coalition.

Central MA Grown, Northeast Organic Farming Association, Worcester County Conservation District (Worcester, MA): All three of these organizations support farming education as a component of their mission and have committed to partnering to offer workshops and training at the YouthGROW farm for this project.

Worcester Food Policy Council (Worcester, MA): WFPC involves dozens of nonprofit, municipal, and private sector groups working to build a healthy and just food system. REC has served as a steering committee member since 2006. The WFPC has worked closely with REC to support passage of the Worcester Urban Agriculture Zoning Ordinance. The Healthy Retail Pilot is a project of the Worcester Food Policy Council with REC serving as one of the local food providers.

Worcester Community Action Council (WCAC) (Worcester, MA): The federally mandated anti-poverty agency for Central Massachusetts, WCAC operates the YouthWorks Summer Jobs Program (YWSJP), through which 300 low-income Worcester teens are employed annually, including 35 youth positions at the YouthGROW program growing food and gaining urban farm training and food system leadership skills.

Worcester Division of Public Health (DPH) and Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester (CHGW) (Worcester, MA): The Worcester DPH works in collaboration with the Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester to implement public health efforts outlined in Worcester's Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). REC is a steering committee member of the CHGW and chairs the working group for the 2021 CHIP in the focus area of Mobilizing Services.

Looking Forward

REC aims to create an equitable and sustainable approach to community-based food security in Central Massachusetts and to enhance economic opportunities for populations including low-income people of color, underserved youth, and immigrant and refugee communities. We have learned a considerable amount over the past 50 years of community-based advocacy and program delivery and over the past 27 years since we began to work in community food security. As you know, there are a great many effective and innovative organizations across the United States that have been focusing on issues of food justice and food security in their

communities for decades. We are pleased to count ourselves among them, and believe our experience positions us well to share our understanding of best practices, challenges, and opportunities available now and in the future to expand community food security through interventions that emphasize community engagement, leadership, and empowerment and that prioritize values of social justice, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. We are grateful for the opportunity to share our work with the House of Representatives Committee on Rules, and we would welcome further opportunities to be of assistance to this committee and its efforts to identify opportunities at the federal level that could support innovative and effective efforts to end hunger and expand food security throughout the United States. Existing grant programs at the USDA, including the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program, Farmers Market Promotion Program, Local Food Promotion Program, and Farm to School Grant Program, have been absolutely critical to supporting this work in our community and across the country. We would welcome an expansion of such programs and additional investments of financial resources by the federal government to effectively expand food security and end hunger in our communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration and for your leadership on these issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Fischer', written in a cursive style.

Steven Fischer
Executive Director



REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL



Farmers Markets



YouthGROW



UGROW