

DC Central Kitchen Testimony
January 2022

My name is Michael F. Curtin, Jr. and it is my honor to serve as the CEO of DC Central Kitchen. As the nation's first and leading community kitchen and a globally recognized social enterprise, DC Central Kitchen is grateful for the opportunity to testify today and share what we have learned through 33 years of fighting hunger in our nation's capital. We applaud this committee for bringing together a variety of perspectives, issue-area experts, and community leaders to identify solutions to hunger in America and for bringing a renewed sense of urgency to this fundamental question.

In 1989, DC Central Kitchen set out to turn the traditional soup kitchen model on its head. We were founded not by a social worker, career nonprofit executive, or even a chef. We were founded by a businessman, a young nightclub manager who saw what was broken in the usual approach to charity in America. After one experience serving meals alongside well-intentioned volunteers to lines of men and women living on the streets of DC, this young man, Robert Egger, reached a striking conclusion: that most of what we call charity in this country is more about the redemption of the giver than the liberation of the receiver. As long as 'doing good' was more about feeling good than solving the root cause of the problem, Robert reasoned, we could serve an endless number of meals to an endless number of people and never liberate our neighbors from the conditions of hunger and poverty that forced them to stand in line in the first place.

Instead of resigning himself to cynicism and self-interest, Robert took a uniquely American next step: he went home and wrote a business plan. His plan called for recovering food that was going to waste in his community, aggregating it at a central kitchen, and using those disparate ingredients to prepare better meals for more people for less money. Instead of distributing the meals itself, his new enterprise would provide meals to mission-driven organizations pairing food with other essential services aimed at the root causes of hunger like mental health counseling, housing assistance, job training, and addiction recovery. Most importantly, he placed a low-barrier job training program at the center of his new operation, making the process of recovering and preparing food a chance for people to reclaim their lives and share in the prosperity generated by DC's hospitality sector. He called his new project DC Central Kitchen, intentionally creating an inclusive space where people from all walks of life could come together in one kitchen to share in conversation, serve others, and challenge one another to think just a bit differently.

Combining donated food, marginalized people, and a rotating cast of volunteers in a crowded kitchen didn't sound to many people like a recipe for success, and many existing nonprofits and established philanthropies questioned DC Central Kitchen's viability. Robert made a splash on the Kitchen's first day of operations when he recovered all the excess food from President George H.W. Bush's Inaugural celebrations. Slowly, Robert's belief in the power of food to unite people and transform lives took root and evolved into a globally acclaimed nonprofit and social enterprise.

Thirty-three years later, our organization has served more than 40 million meals, recovered more than 33 million pounds of food, and trained more than 2,000 people for culinary careers. We employ nearly 180 people as a legitimate job creator in our own right and generate more than \$80 million in measurable benefits to our community each year. We've spread the concept of

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safe and intentional food recovery and re-preparation across the country, established the nation's leading farm-to-school program, reimagined the role of corner stores as sustainable access points for healthy, affordable food, and led the way in shifting narratives about reentry and returning citizens. We opened our first social enterprise café in 2019, providing a hands-on training environment for culinary students in a neighborhood in dire need of retail food options, and we will be opening our second café in downtown DC's flagship public library in the coming weeks.

While our operations are diverse – ranging from serving scratch-cooked meals at schools and shelters to stocking nutritious foods at corner stores and providing delicious foods at our cafes – they are united around a common commitment to creating job opportunities for members of our community who have not shared in the economic promise of America. Our graduates come to us with histories of incarceration, homelessness, addiction, and trauma, and a growing number are young people who have become disconnected from both work and school. Through our unique combination of teaching 'knife skills and life skills,' we equip our students to pursue meaningful careers at DC-area restaurants and hotels or right here at DC Central Kitchen. Today, more than 100 graduates of our training program work for us full-time at living wages with industry-leading health and retirement benefits aimed at closing the entrenched gaps in generational wealth in our community.

Mr. Chairman, we were honored to host you and Congresswoman Holmes Norton for an in-person visit last summer where you were able to see these transformational efforts in person. You toured Kelly Miller Middle School in DC's Ward 7, where we have served healthy, high-quality school meals for a decade thanks to pioneering DC legislation that raised the bar for local sourcing and nutrition standards while creating a chance for a small local operator like us to enter DC's cafeterias. You met our graduates who are now school foodservice professionals, and who have successfully navigated school closures, classroom quarantines, modified lunch hours, and supply chain issues without ever missing a meal. You observed our partnership with a nonprofit called Dreaming Out Loud and its urban farm adjoining the school, highlighting what's possible when we use the farm-to-table process to educate children, engage senior citizens, and use sustainable practices like composting and local sourcing to create an array of community benefits.

Together, our two organizations have served more than 6.5 million meals during the pandemic, working with more than 200 nonprofits, small businesses, corner stores, and schools to get healthy food where it was most needed while generating millions of dollars in critical revenue for hard-hit local farmers and food entrepreneurs. We are enormously proud of what our two social enterprise nonprofits have achieved during this difficult time, and we would not have risen to the occasion without the support of the Federal government. The flexibility provided in where, how, and in what format we provided school and summer meals to children during the pandemic was absolutely essential to our ability to adapt to changing conditions, modified operating hours, and product shortages.

From Kelly Miller Middle School, we traveled to a nearby corner store called A-1 Grocery. As you know Mr. Chairman, the DC neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River have long struggled with food access issues. While these communities are home to more than 160,000 people, the

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scarcity of grocery stores means many families and seniors must travel long distances to reach a supermarket, or rely on corner stores for their food needs. Since 2011, DC Central Kitchen's Healthy Corners program has worked with small corner stores in these neighborhoods to help them make healthy, affordable food more central parts of their business model. Without our contributions as a wholesaler, technical assistance provider, and marketing partner, this network of 53 stores would be unable to consistently stock and sell fruits and vegetables even though consumer demand for these items exists. That's the definition of a market failure.

Thanks to the US Department of Agriculture and its Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, we have, since 2018, doubled the purchasing power of SNAP customers. In 2021, we introduced WIC benefits at these small businesses for the first time, further enhancing consumer purchasing power and helping parents of young children ensure healthy food is on their table. This win/win scenario has transformed these small, independent retailers and inspired dramatic changes in their store environments; we continue to see store owners swap out slushie machines and candy displays for our refrigerators filled with fresh produce in order to keep up with growing customer demand. Our years of experience show that the perception that low-income Americans aren't interested in eating healthy is false. In fact, our lower-income residents are increasingly demanding access to nutritious options out of concern for their health and a sense of basic fairness. Our data shows that when we make the necessary investments in making healthy options accessible and affordable for everyone, we can create opportunities for small businesses and local farmers to thrive while improving public health. This Healthy Corners model is proven and exceedingly replicable in urban and rural communities.

As we look to the future, our food system and workforce system is ripe for further innovation. The role of food and nutrition in ensuring American public health, military readiness, and academic achievement has never been clearer. Meanwhile, the business and employment models of restaurants, hotels, food delivery providers, and wholesalers have all been disrupted substantially. DC Central Kitchen believes we have an opportunity to take what has worked well during the difficulties of the past two years and double down. Later this year, DC Central Kitchen will be moving out of the crumbling shelter basement we've called home for thirty years and open the most ambitious community kitchen and urban food hub in the United States. We have named this 38,000 square foot facility the Michael R. Klein Center for Jobs and Justice because what our city – what our country – needs are more people in better jobs and a redoubled commitment to justice.

The pandemic should have reminded us all that hunger, food insecurity, and poverty are not the natural result of moral failings. It is not fair what COVID-19 and its resulting economic effects have done to schoolchildren, foodservice workers, or isolated seniors. And it is not fair that in a country that has achieved so much, one's ZIP Code and one's skin color still have a determinative impact on one's very life expectancy. Here in the District of Columbia, our local problems are often overlooked or dismissed or used as opportunities for political grandstanding in faraway states. But our local successes and assets are worth sharing and learning from. We have built a robust model for how nonprofits, businesses, local government, and the Federal government can all work together to build a more resilient, sustainable, and healthy food system.

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One that creates economic opportunity from seed to table, prevents waste, reduces healthcare costs and recidivism, addresses long-standing disparities, and increases consumer choice. That's what a more just food system can look like here in our nation's capital and across our country.

Mr. Chairman, we are grateful that you took the time to observe our front-line efforts first-hand, and we look forward to doing more than ever before in the year to come. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.