

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing on Food Insecurity

April 30, 2021

Good Morning honorable Senate Committee and others interested in Food Insecurity and Food Sovereignty. My name is Andy Toy and I am the Director of Community Development at SEAMAAC in Southeast Philadelphia. SEAMAAC, an organization begun by Southeast Asian refugees and still headed by a Vietnamese refugee has been serving the community for 35 years. Our mission has broadened to, “support and serve immigrants and refugees and other politically, socially and economically marginalized communities as they seek to advance the condition of their lives in the United States.”

I am here to discuss how both Food Sovereignty and Food Insecurity can be addressed in the right situations with critical support and partnering to make it possible. SEAMAAC has been addressing food insecurity in the lowest income area of Southeast Philadelphia in a significant way as a partner in Step Up to the Plate providing daily meals, as well as weekly food boxes through partnerships with Share Food, Caring For Friends, Philabundance and others. Since the pandemic started, we are well over 400,000 meals and food boxes distributed closing in on ½ million. So we do know quite a bit about the issues of hunger and ways to address it.

SEAMAAC also runs the Growing Home Gardens, close to 100 individual community garden plots that serve over 200 people, mainly immigrants and refugees from Burma or Myanmar, Bhutan, and China. These gardens have been a lifeline to many, especially during the pandemic, when many have lost their jobs and immigrants have even less access to other support or opportunities. By definition, the Growing Home Gardens are a great representation of Food Sovereignty, defined as, “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally-appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”

What excites us about this work is that it has provided more access to indigenous crops from places like Bhutan and Southeast Asia including India Mustard Greens, Thai Red Roselle, White Garden Eggplant, Bangkok Pepper, and many more that don't have a formal English name. Many gardeners have told stories about how plants they grow at Growing Home are either entirely unavailable at stores in the US or are extremely expensive. Like other gardens, the plants provide another source of healthy nutrition for the many low income gardeners who might otherwise go hungry or not afford healthy foods. During the pandemic especially, the Gardens also provide a healthy social atmosphere for gardeners who may otherwise be isolated in the community with few safe intimate open spaces to congregate.

SEAMAAC is just finishing a complete restoration of the gardens that has replaced decrepit and often makeshift beds, building water lines into the site, attractive fencing and a new design including seating and gathering areas. We thank Representative Elizabeth Fiedler for helping to fund a good part of this very necessary work that will bring great value for years to come. And while the vast majority of gardeners are still immigrants and refugees, we are slowly picking up others, including local Black and White residents who add diversity and build a broader community through the gardens.

In addition to the physical improvements and organizing gardeners, like herding wild cats, SEAMAAC was very fortunate to have the Neighborhood Gardens Trust as a key partner. A major issue in the

community is that housing prices and demand have gone up tremendously in the last 10 years. What were once vacant and unwanted lots are now valuable plots for new development. Our goal has been to preserve some of this open community space as an amenity to many who have little to no backyards, rather than to see every lot in the community built upon as gentrification begins to quicken. With the great and hard work of Neighborhood Gardens Trust and Councilman Squilla most of the gardens have been preserved in perpetuity so gardeners are at ease that they have a long term connection to this community. There were hairy moments with a number of tricky property swaps and purchases that allowed the properties to stay as contiguous as possible rather than have a single tooth of a townhouse in the middle of gardens.

Today, we have these beautiful gardens that are a buffer to gentrification and a great source of nutritious and indigenous foods and that also serve as a community hub where people of all backgrounds can congregate and peacefully garden. We would be happy to share our experiences and encourage others to follow similar models to food security and food sovereignty.

Thank you for your time and attention to this work.