

TESTIMONY OF: Maddy Booth
Food Insecurity Policy Hearing
PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Friday, April 30, 2021 at 10:00 A.M.

Good Morning PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee Chair Muth, Sens. Schwank, Tartaglione, and Street and all of the members of this Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss this important topic. I would like to extend a special thank you to PA Sen. Tartaglione, who has been an advocate for Vetri Community Partnership (VCP), for her invitation to testify before this Committee.

My name is Maddy Booth and I am here today representing Vetri Community Partnership as Chief Operating Officer. Vetri Community Partnership (VCP) is a non-profit organization founded in 2008 by Chef Marc Vetri with the mission of empowering children and families to lead healthier lives through fresh food, hands-on experiences and education. Our goal is to help children and families experience the connection between healthy eating and healthy living through hands-on experiences that increases participant exposure to nourishing foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

VCP works with 75 school and community partners across Philadelphia and Camden each year, 12 of which are in Sen. Tartaglione's district and 14 are in Sen. Streets district, reaching more than 20,000 participants each year. The majority of our work concentrates in North and West Philadelphia, often neighborhoods that are food deserts with heightened levels of food insecurity. In my work with VCP, I witness first-hand the food insecurity issues that are plaguing our city and this hearing is critical for the proper review of it in Philadelphia and beyond.

Poverty, food insecurity, and poor nutrition have serious consequences for the health and well-being of children, adults, and older adults.¹ In 2019, the City of Philadelphia Department of Public Health reported that 34% of adults are living with hypertension and up to 33% of adults and 20% of youth ages 5 to 18 are living with obesity.² In many communities throughout Philadelphia, food insecurity and diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease disproportionately affect the health of individuals who identify as non-Hispanic Black. According to research conducted at Penn Medicine, increasing rates of food insecurity in counties across the United States are independently associated with an increase in cardiovascular death rates among adults between the ages of 20 and 64.³

Contending with the complexities of social determinants of health demands collaborative solutions; At Vetri Community Partnership, our approach is, what we like to call, the "second level of food access" – building motivation, knowledge, confidence, and skills necessary to get those nutritious foods into people's bodies. Our focus is on ensuring that all Philadelphians have access to high-quality nutrition and culinary education from a young age. We work with participants, most often children and those experiencing food insecurity, to teach how to build affordable, approachable, and delicious meals utilizing accessible ingredients and tools.

¹ Food Research & Action Center. *Hunger and Health*, "The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being." December 2017. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>

² City of Philadelphia Department of Public Health. *Philadelphia's Community Health Assessment*. "Health of the City" <https://www.phila.gov/media/20201230141933/HealthOfTheCity-2020.pdf>

³ Penn Medicine News: "Penn Medicine Researchers Find Link Between Food Insecurity and Cardiovascular Death Risk." November 9, 2020. <https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-releases/2020/november/penn-medicine-researchers-find-link-between-food-insecurity-and-cardiovascular-death-risk>

Involvement in cooking has long been associated with healthier diets and eating behaviors among adults and adolescents. In a 2018 study, researchers found that if participants in emerging adulthood described their cooking skills as “adequate” or better, they were more likely to have better health outcome indicators over a decade later including more frequent food preparation using vegetables and less frequent fast food consumption.⁴

Food insecurity is especially detrimental to the health, development, and well-being of children, including a greater risk for chronic disease and poor mental health.⁵ There are many great organizations, several of which are represented here today, who are successfully connecting Pennsylvanians with food, increasingly fresh fruits and vegetables.

At Vetri Community Partnership, we use the kitchen as a classroom through our four core programs to empower participants to build culinary skills, strengthen nutritional knowledge, and gain confidence through fun and engaging experiences. Our programs include models that serve youth both in school and during out-of-school time and connect with adults in school and community settings. These programs include:

EAT360: A Pennsylvania SNAP-Ed partnership that aims to improve the likelihood that families eligible for SNAP benefits make healthy food choices through hands-on cooking classes, a school garden curriculum, fruit and vegetable promotion, and movement-break training.

Vetri Cooking Lab: A 10-lesson, out-of-school time program for students in 4th grade and up that combines cooking and STEAM-based teachings to build the “next generation of educated food consumers.”

Culinary Medicine: A collaboration with local medical schools, hospitals, and wellness programs to encourage physicians, medical students and the public to think about the impact of food on health outcomes through the preparation of recipes that support targeted health populations.

Mobile Teaching Kitchen: A fleet of vehicles and online resources that mobilizes our mission by bringing hands-on cooking and recipe tasting opportunities to schools, community events, grocery stores and food distribution sites.

Through each of our programs, we aim to create a welcoming learning environment for diverse groups from all skill, knowledge, and income levels. Our goal is to help our neighbors, especially those that are food insecure, develop valuable life skills that can be used to help build a healthier future and community. By increasing exposure to nutritious foods and teaching practical cooking skills to prepare those foods in delicious ways, VCP’s goal is to nourish the minds, bodies, and futures of our community members. At VCP, our tagline is: “Eat. Educate. Empower.” because we love all three of those things – food, learning, and sharing with others.

I look forward to the continued dialogue on this important topic and welcome you to call upon me as a resource to you and your Committee. Thank you to all of the great organizations represented here today and to PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee Chair Muth, Sens. Schwank, Tartaglione, and Street and all of the members of this Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

⁴ Jennifer Utter, et al. *Self-Perceived Cooking Skills in Emerging Adulthood Predict Better Dietary Behaviors and Intake 10 Years Late: A Longitudinal Study*. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 2018; 50: 494-500. 2018.

⁵ Food Research & Action Center. *Hunger and Health*, “The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being.” December 2017. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>