

The Food Trust

EST. 1992

ENSURING THAT EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, NUTRITIOUS
FOOD AND INFORMATION TO MAKE HEALTHY DECISIONS

Thank you Senators Schwank, Tartaglione and Street, Chairwoman Katie Muth, and the Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee for the opportunity to testify. My name is Mark Edwards, and I am the CEO of The Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit founded in 1992 that works locally and nationally to improve access to affordable, nutritious food.

I'm here today to talk about food insecurity in Philadelphia and across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as well as some of the work we do at The Food Trust to address this critical issue.

Rates of food insecurity have increased dramatically amidst the pandemic. According to a survey done this March by the USDA and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, some 18 million adults — 9 percent of all adults in the country — reported that in a given week, their household sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat. This figure is well above the pre-pandemic rate of 3.4 percent of adults who reported that their household had "not enough to eat" at some point over the full *12 months* of 2019.¹ This hardship has fallen disproportionately on families with children and communities of color. According to an analysis by researchers out of Northwestern University, between 19% and 29% of Black households with children have experienced hunger over the course of the pandemic. Latino families have experienced the second highest rates of hunger, ranging from 16% to 25% nationally. This compares with 7% to 14% of white American families. While these numbers have been improving in recent months, they are improving more slowly for people of color.² In Philadelphia, rates of food insecurity have far exceeded national averages. This is particularly troubling because food insecurity isn't just a hunger problem: It can negatively impact people's health and educational outcomes, as well.

Now against that backdrop, I want to discuss some of the strategies that The Food Trust employs to counteract those problems, and to improve health and reduce food insecurity among residents with limited resources, especially those who rely on SNAP benefits, or food stamps. We believe that, to have the greatest impact addressing this issue, we must use a comprehensive approach to ensure that healthy food is available, affordable, and accessible to all. In Pennsylvania, we operate farmers markets in under-resourced neighborhoods where healthy food can otherwise be hard to find, and during the pandemic we've seen the utilization of SNAP at those farmers markets jump significantly. We have incentivized new grocery store development and renovation in low-income communities through the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, and have expanded a successful "Food Bucks" program that provides free fruit and vegetable coupons to shoppers when they pay with SNAP at local farmers markets, grocery stores and other participating food retailers. In addition, our team of dietitians and nutrition educators is providing innovative and engaging programming through the Pennsylvania SNAP-Ed program, pivoting to virtual lessons during the pandemic to teach children and adults how to eat

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/apr/14/americas-year-of-hunger-how-children-and-people-of-color-suffered-most>

healthy, how to cook, and how to shop on a budget.

These programs are rooted in strong evidence compiled across a multitude of studies over many years. A couple of examples that stand out: In 2018, a study of a community in Pittsburgh by the RAND Corporation found that the development of a new grocery store in a previously underserved community was associated with less food insecurity and fewer new cases of high cholesterol and diabetes compared to a comparable neighborhood in the City after one year³. And surveys of participants at our Heart Smarts series of nutrition education lessons and health screenings at corner stores in Philadelphia have found that 80% plan to make changes to their diet, 40% of people with elevated blood pressure levels have improved in follow-up, and 43% report reducing the amount of sodium consumed.⁴

Consider the story of Edward Logan, a shopper at one of our healthy corner stores who participated in nutrition education. Edward makes a habit of visiting his corner store every day to buy lottery tickets or groceries. But when he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes in 2014, Edward knew he had to make some changes. Shortly after his diagnosis, Edward met two of The Food Trust's Heart Smarts educators, who were conducting a nutrition education class at his corner store. They offered him a sample of the black bean salsa they were preparing and gave him \$4 in Heart Bucks, to make healthy purchases at the store. For Edward, it was an important first step toward a healthier lifestyle. Nowadays, Edward's blood pressure is down, and his cholesterol is in check. Edward still walks to his corner store every day. But he credits Heart Smarts with helping him find healthy food he enjoys.

The strategies that are being implemented in Pennsylvania — access to healthy food, nutrition education, and nutrition incentives — are not only changing eating habits and preventing diet-related diseases like hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes, but they are also creating jobs and spurring economic development in struggling urban and rural communities. Over the last decade, we have seen incredible success in incentivizing grocery stores, farmers markets, and other healthy food retail solutions to meet the need for better access through public-private partnerships. In Pennsylvania, thanks in large part to now-Congressman Dwight Evans, our Fresh Food Financing Initiative — or PA FFFI — funded 88 grocery projects in urban and rural areas and created or retained 5,000 jobs. This program improved healthy food in regions across the state, from Philadelphia's Progress Plaza, where a Fresh Grocer supported by the program restored grocery access to a community that hadn't had a full service grocery store in over a decade, to rural Blossburg, where the PA FFFI helped an entrepreneurial local couple purchase and operate a local grocery store that was on the brink of closure. These stores are still supporting the communities they serve today. And the state reinvested in the program in 2018 with support from the legislature, in particular from Senators like Vincent Hughes. This recapitalized program has already supported 22 additional healthy food retail projects across 15 counties, and we're actively supporting healthy food retail development across the state. For example, the initiative recently helped Leopoldo Sanchez, owner of Super Natural Produce, to open a new supermarket in downtown Reading, and also supported a community-run farmers market located in Butler County that will bring fresh, healthy food to a community where residents currently need to drive 30 minutes to access the closest

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1047279717302934>

⁴ <http://thefoodtrust.org/administrative/heart-smarts-toolkit/6>

full-service grocery store.

Regions across the country are replicating Pennsylvania's successful model. We now have two federal Healthy Food Financing Initiatives (HFFI) – one through the U.S. Department of the Treasury and one through the USDA, in addition to similar programs in states across the country including California, Kansas, Michigan, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Colorado, and several other states.

Lastly, I want to discuss nutrition incentives that encourage families using SNAP to try healthier foods and that make healthier choices more affordable. As I mentioned, The Food Trust launched our first Food Bucks program in 2010 at Philadelphia farmers markets, and it has been a huge success, now expanding to a statewide program and securing significant federal grants. These Food Bucks are redeemable for free fruits and vegetables at over 100 retail sites, now including grocery stores in addition to farmers markets. Research has shown that using Food Bucks leads to increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, as well as increased SNAP and produce sales at participating retailers. Making healthier food more affordable makes it easier for lower-income families to take risks when trying new foods. Many parents want their kids to try a juicy peach or a crunchy cucumber, but can't risk any food going to waste. Imagine if you only have enough money to afford one plate of food – the decision to try new things becomes much more difficult, especially when fresh, healthy food can be more expensive. During the COVID-19 crisis, programs like Food Bucks have become a lifeline for parents struggling to get healthy food on the table. In 2020 alone, Pennsylvania residents were able to purchase over \$400,000 for fresh fruits and vegetables using Food Bucks, an 82% increase from 2019. And an added benefit was the increased revenue for farmers and small businesses during a health and economic crisis. Notably, legislation recently introduced by Representatives Cruz and Pashinski – being considered by the Pennsylvania House of Representatives – would increase the State's investment in the program. It couldn't be more important. Consider the words of Janel, one of the participants in our Food Bucks Program: "I've been using Food Bucks since September. My kids have been eating a lot at home and been eating a lot from the vendors here. They look forward to it. They love the fresh ciders and apples. I like giving back to the small businesses and that this gives them an opportunity to sell in a healthy, safe environment."

In closing, the impact of hunger on communities is significant, and multiple studies have found links between food insecurity and a range of health problems, such as an increased likelihood of diabetes, and hypertension in adults, as well as anemia, and cognitive problems in children.⁵ But we don't have to accept the current situation. We take important steps to better connect people to federal programs like SNAP that are proven to reduce food insecurity, and strengthen and dedicate additional resources to some of the proven programs we operate at the Food Trust, like Fresh Food Financing and Food Bucks, so they can reach more people. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I look forward to your questions.

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<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0645#:~:text=The%20majority%20of%20research%20examining,9%20and%20aggression%20and%20anxiety.>