



RE: House Bill 540 Agriculture – University of Maryland Extension – Urban Farmer Assistance

DATE: February 22, 2022

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Farm Alliance of Baltimore **SUPPORTS** House Bill 540, which will ensure that the University of Maryland Extension includes two statewide extension agents dedicated to providing technical assistance and training for urban farmers. The agents will specialize in production methods and crop management, and urban farm and agribusiness management.

The Farm Alliance of Baltimore is a membership organization of urban farms, neighborhood growers, and friends. We use connection, resource sharing, and collective advocacy with respect to food, land and water to expand communities' self-determination and power. We currently represent 17 of the more than 20 urban farms within Baltimore City Limits, a dozen of the more than 80 community gardens in the City, and a number of individual residents.

Many of our members experienced labor shortages, illness, infrastructure challenges, and even displacement from their land during these two and a half difficult years of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are proud of the accomplishments of Farm Alliance staff and programs as we navigated these challenges alongside our members and pivoted our program work to support their resilience. We rely on our current Urban Agriculture Extension Agent, Neith Little of the University of Maryland, to provide much of the specialized knowledge and training that our members need on a daily basis. But she is stretched too thin, and the pandemic has underscored what was already an untenable shortage of Extension agents.

The good news is that there are more people farming in cities than there were ten years ago. This means that the need for technical assistance, training, and specialized farming knowledge now far outstrips any single Extension agent's capacity to provide these services, especially for urban farmers facing the pandemic. The USDA is shifting resources toward urban agriculture in recognition of the critical role that it plays in demonstrating the food-and-farming connection and the importance of local supply chains for urban residents. We hope and expect that with this bill, Maryland will do the same. We urge the committee to vote to APPROVE this legislation to move forward in this legislative session.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mariya Strauss".

Mariya Strauss
Co-Executive Director, Farm Alliance of Baltimore
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