

February 25, 2022

**2022 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
HB 855: Agriculture-Urban Agriculture
Water and Power Infrastructure Grant
Program and Fund-Establishment**

COMMITTEE: **BILL: HB 855: Agriculture-Urban Agriculture Water and Power Infrastructure
Grant Program and Fund-Establishment
Environment and Transportation**
POSITION: **Testimony of Support of House Bill 855**

Honorable Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record in support of House Bill 855.

This letter is submitted by Stephen R. McHenry, Executive Director of the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) and member of the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council (MD FSRC) and Heather Bruskin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC), Co-Chair of the MD FSRC. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Council, and do not necessarily represent the views of MARBIDCO, MCFC, or the State of Maryland. The Food System Resiliency Council was established by the Maryland General Assembly during the 2021 legislative session to bring together 33 appointed council members from across the state, all with different points of entry and expertise to work toward a more resilient food system and address the food insecurity crisis due to COVID-19.

One of the key mandates of this Council was to develop, by Nov. 1st, 2021, equity and sustainability policy recommendations to increase the long-term resiliency of Maryland's food system.

One way this can be achieved is by supporting and promoting urban agriculture. A significant barrier for urban farms and gardens is access to electrical power and water for irrigation and the costs associated with accessing them. To address this issue, HB 855 establishes the Urban Agriculture Water and Power Infrastructure Grant Program and Grant Fund. The stated purpose in the bill is to increase the viability of urban farming and community gardens and to improve access to urban-grown foods. The fund may be used to provide matching grants of up to 87.5% to urban agricultural producers and qualified non-profit organizations for the purchase and installation of: water meters, water pipes, irrigation hoses, electric meters, electrical lines or any other equipment associated with water supply and irrigation or electric power access, as determined by MDA. The bill requires a \$500,000 appropriation in fiscal years 2024, 2025, 2026 and 2027.

Supporting the growth of urban farming in Maryland by reducing some of the cost barriers offers residents increased access to healthy, fresh, culturally appropriate food while also creating job opportunities and helping to support local economies. According to a recent study, 146,000 Baltimore City residents (23.5%) live in Healthy Food Priority Areas. Children and black residents are also disproportionately affected. According to the report, children are the most likely of any age group to live in a Healthy Food Priority Area (28.3%) and black residents are the most likely of any racial or ethnic

group to live in a Healthy Food Priority Area (31.5%).¹ Urban farming can provide another access point for healthy fresh food, as urban farmers often sell their product in the local community.

Urban farms also may provide community benefits such as education and job training opportunities. And they can be the community focal point of a neighborhood. Urban agriculture also helps to preserve greenspaces in urban areas which is good for the quality of life and reduces the distance food must travel. House Bill 855 supports the growth of urban agriculture by providing grant funds to urban farmers and non-profits to lower the costs of water and power infrastructure needed to operate urban farms and community gardens. It supports the MD FSRC's goal to increase the quality and quantity of production of local food in urban settings.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support of H.B. 855. This bill would benefit urban farmers by reducing their costs to produce local food.

Stephen R. McHenry
Executive Director
MARBIDCO

Heather Bruskin
Co-Chair, Maryland Food System Resiliency Council

¹ [*Report: 'Food Desert' Gets a Name Change in Response to Baltimore Community Feedback*](#), Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, January 17, 2018.