



**Statement of**

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**before the**

**Council of the District of Columbia**

**Committee of Health and Human Services**

**Performance Oversight Hearing**

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**The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute,  
its trustees, or its funders.**

## Washington, DC's Produce Plus Program

Good morning and thank you, Councilmembers, for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the Produce Plus Program. My name is Megan Thompson, and I am a Research Assistant in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute. The views I present are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Today I testify before you to discuss how the Produce Plus Program benefits recipients, the community, and the local food system. My conclusions are based on research I recently completed after volunteering for the Produce Plus Program this past summer.

In urban areas like Washington, DC, farmers' markets can help reduce the barriers to fresh food access faced by low-income residents. The Produce Plus Program demonstrates how local government can partner with nonprofit organizations and farmers to address public health and food access in low-income neighborhoods. It achieves the Department of Health's goal of "increase[ing] access to healthy and nutritious food options for income eligible District residents... [and] promot[ing] the presence and benefits of Farmers' Markets, with the ultimate goal of improving health outcomes."<sup>i</sup> The Produce Plus Program cultivates diverse community spaces, increases access to fruits and vegetables for low-income residents, supports local farmers, and creates a more equitable and sustainable local food system.

The Produce Plus Program is the only local farmers' market nutrition program in the country that not only allows SNAP and WIC recipients to participate in farmers' market programs, but also allows TANF, SSI, Medicaid, Medicare, and E5 and below Veterans to access the program. Produce Plus is also the only program that offers participants \$10 per market visit and does not require participants to spend their own money or subtract from their benefits.

Currently, 18.2 percent of DC residents live in poverty,<sup>ii</sup> 13.4 percent of households in DC report low or very low food security,<sup>iii</sup> and 21.4 percent of children in DC are obese<sup>iv</sup>— this is the third highest child obesity rate in the country. The Produce Plus Program is an effective method of reducing the increasing rates of poverty, food insecurity, and child obesity in Washington, DC.

## **Community Partnerships**

The Produce Plus Program depends on collaboration between two government bodies, two nonprofit organizations, volunteers, and for-profit farmers. The DC Council approves funding that is then given to the Department of Health. The Department of Health creates the Produce Plus checks and gives the checks to market managers at FRESHFARM Markets. DC Greens trains volunteers on how to properly administer the checks and is responsible for much of the outreach for the program. Participants can use the checks to purchase items at the market, and farmers then deposit the checks into their bank accounts.<sup>v</sup> This dynamic relationship enables government to reduce administrative costs and gain legitimacy by using nonprofit organizations to organize and administer the program. Further, it demonstrates how a public, private, and nonprofit partnership can work to help bring greater food access to low-income DC residents.

## **Community Gathering Spaces**

The Produce Plus Program creates positive community gathering spaces for low-income residents by making markets accessible, creating incentives for people to return to markets, and creating diverse social spaces for DC residents. The convenience of market location and hours has been cited as a major factor in low-income customers' decisions to shop at farmers' markets.<sup>vi</sup> FRESHFARM Markets that participate in the Produce Plus Program are open every day of the week at varied hours, and most are located near bus stops or Metro stops.<sup>vii</sup> Researchers agree that low-income residents and minorities feel that farmers' markets are too expensive, often limiting their participation at farmers' markets.<sup>viii</sup> The Produce Plus Program also incentivizes participants to continue returning to farmer's markets. The Produce Plus Program enables farmers' markets in DC to create opportunities for socialization between diverse groups of residents who may not otherwise participate in community activities together.<sup>ix</sup>

## **Support of Local Farming**

Community participation at farmers' markets directly supports and promotes the sustainability of local farmers. Some farmers' markets in DC, like the Aya Community Markets in Southwest, rely almost entirely on business from the Produce Plus Program to keep running.<sup>x</sup> The Produce Plus

Program also enables residents to engage in an intimate exchange with the individual who produced and distributed their food, thus creating interactions that do not exist in a regular supermarket.<sup>xi</sup> The DC government uses local farmers and markets to encourage thousands of families to be healthier.<sup>xii</sup>

## Concluding Statement

In conclusion, my research has shown that the Produce Plus Program is an important contributor to building community partnerships and spaces, increasing access to fruits and vegetables through local farmers, and creating a more equitable and sustainable local food system in Washington, DC.

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<sup>i</sup> “Produce Plus Program,” District of Columbia Department of Health, accessed December 4, 2015, <http://doh.dc.gov/service/produce-plus-program>.

<sup>ii</sup> Based on 2010–14 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, available at American FactFinder, [factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov), accessed January 11, 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian Gregory, and Anita Singh, *Household Food Security in the United States*, Report 194 (Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2015).

<sup>iv</sup> Jeffrey Levi, Laura M. Segal, Jack Rayburn, and Alejandra Martin, *The State of Obesity: Better Policies for a Healthier America 2015* (Washington, DC, and Princeton, NJ: Trust for America’s Health and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2015).

<sup>v</sup> Sabrina Lewis (public health advisor, DC WIC Program), interview with the author, December 5, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Local Food Research Center, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, “Farmers Markets for All: Exploring Barriers and Opportunities for Increasing Fresh Food Access by Connecting Low-Income Communities with Farmers Markets” (Asheville, NC: Local Food Research Center, 2012).

<sup>vii</sup> “Produce Plus at DC Farmers’ Markets,” DC Greens, accessed February 17, 2016, [http://dcgreens.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Produce\\_Plus\\_Flyer\\_2015-Corrected-format.pdf](http://dcgreens.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Produce_Plus_Flyer_2015-Corrected-format.pdf).

<sup>viii</sup> D.C. Hunger Solutions, “Food Stamps Accepted Here: Attracting Low-Income Consumers to Farmers’ Markets” (Washington, DC: D.C. Hunger Solutions, 2007).

<sup>ix</sup> Molly Bernsten (local food systems fellow, D.C. Greens), interview with the author, December 10, 2015.

<sup>x</sup> Molly Bernsten, December 10, 2015.

<sup>xi</sup> Project for Public Spaces and Columbia University, *Farmers Markets as a Strategy to Improve Access to Healthy Food for Low-Income Families and Communities* (New York: Project for Public Spaces, 2013).

<sup>xii</sup> Whitney Pipkin, “These \$10 Vouchers Are Changing the Face of D.C.’s Farmers’ Markets,” Civil Eats, December 15, 2015, <http://civileats.com/2015/12/15/these-10-vouchers-are-changing-the-face-of-d-c-s-farmers-markets/>.