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Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear County Council Members,

Community FarmShare advocates together with all organizations who are leading efforts in the county to increase funding for food assistance, given the increase (and expected increases) in need we all already see in the communities we serve. As the current challenges unfold in the country and county, Community FarmShare (CFS) has also been significantly hit by the developments, particularly with the recent cancellations of the Local Food Purchasing Agreement (USDA grant). CFS was a key implementing partner for Montgomery County, utilizing funds through a partnership with Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB). As described below, this LFPA funding served as a keystone to our operations; with this federal funding loss, the majority of our programs are at risk. While at the moment, it looks like LFPA24 funds may be available through the fall of this calendar year 2025, **LFPA 25 (for calendar year 2026) is definitely cancelled through the USDA which will greatly adversely affect our operations in 2026. CFS requests \$100,000 from MC to fill this “sweep” function (described below), which will enable CFS to leverage over \$500,000 to adequately stock our free choice mobile farm markets affecting at least 30 school and clinic partners and over 1,000 residents each week.**

CFS's mission to both address nutrition insecurity while also supporting local MC farmers to increase produce production through a market demand-driven aggregation model, is unique in our focus on community health impact. In 2024, 60% of Food Is Medicine participants indicated improved diabetes indicators and 90% of Farm to School participants reported their children increased regular consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. For an overview of CFS's programs and services integrated with many county partners, please see Annex I.

The need for a “Sweep” function in mobile markets.

Given the success of the free choice model, scalability, and trust in the community, CFS's mobile farm markets are now the focus of our work to meet community needs through our Farm to School and Food Is Medicine programs and serving partners through collaboration. In 2025, we are extending our outreach to provide access in more Montgomery County communities with our new refrigerated market truck. Last year we served Gaithersburg, Montgomery Village and East County; this year we plan to additionally serve Wheaton, Aspen Hill, Silver Spring and Germantown.

To ensure we have enough variety to provide choice and sufficient quantity to serve everyone with dignified high quality choice during planned operating hours, we intentionally over-stock our mobile markets abundantly with produce for each market location.

Keeping the market well-stocked during the whole time the market is open importantly distinguishes the markets from a typical food distribution location where food often runs out. CFS's markets are more of a farmers' market experience with a large variety of high quality produce available, even for those who come towards the end of the market. Further, through our (and our partners') grant contracts, not only do we just *want* to make sure we have enough produce for all participants, we are *contractually obligated* to serve a defined number of participants through pre-loaded MC Market cards for choice shopping according to agreements.

This set up, with markets purposely well-stocked, results in remaining produce at the end of each market day. Hardy produce is repurposed throughout the week, while some produce needs to be used more immediately. Since CFS pre-purchases all product, we also need to be able to sell everything to avoid taking a loss. However, unlike at a typical farmers' market where a farmer can adjust prices upward to cover anticipated losses of non-purchased product, CFS needs to keep prices as low as possible to remain accessible in the communities we serve. This underscores our need to **sell** all produce that can't be carried over to subsequent markets. Funding that provides this keystone "sweep" role of purchasing our market surplus is critical to our operational model. In 2024 (and 2025), CAFB was a fantastic partner serving exactly this role, with funding through the USDA Local Food Purchasing Agreement (LFPA). With this federal funding gone in 2026, we seek County support.

Data Analysis:

CFS cannot emphasize enough how crucial this market surplus purchasing is to our operations.

On the one hand, the beauty of this model is that a relatively small amount of funding leverages significant produce purchased for significantly greater community food access. In 2024, CFS used \$46,000 in CAFB LFPA dollars to buy CFS market surplus which leveraged \$115,000 of produce to reach families through free choice markets.

CY 2025 will be another year of growth for CFS. **With plans to purchase 325,000 pounds of produce for markets this year, CFS seeks to effectively purchase all of the available product grown for food assistance¹ in Montgomery County.**

With a combination of program growth and a shift towards expanding our market access points, we anticipate that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the 2025 product that CFS purchases would be needed for our markets (~ 215,000 pounds or \$525,000 value). The remaining 110,000 lb is budgeted/estimated for our bags and wholesale to small institutions activities.

Notably, we anticipate significant efficiency gains in our operations this year, due to the increased number of markets, benefits from the refrigerated truck, improved staffing structures, etc. Therefore, although we plan to increase our markets from \$115,000 of produce purchased (needing \$46,000 in LFPA funds to buy surplus) to \$525,000, we anticipate we **only need \$100,000 in market surplus "sweep"** to leverage the \$525,000 to stock our 8 markets well. I.e., thanks to efficiency gains, we can move from a leverage ratio of 1:2.5 to 1:5 in 2025 and 2026. Note that the requested \$100,000 "sweep" funds does not include administrative costs; **100% of the funds will be used to purchase end of**

¹ 300,000 pounds is CFS's 2024 estimate of produce available for sale to food assistance programs (this does not include produce farmers sell at markets, CSAs, or other retail and non-CFS wholesale channels). 300,000 pounds of produce (not including protein or grain) is the total produce purchased by F2FB and CFS in 2024.

market produce and delivered to food assistance providers. The delivery mechanism that we could use to donate our mobile market surplus (subsidized/purchased through this proposed “sweep” funding) to food assistance providers could include a partnership with the Farm to Food Bank program which has an existing system in place for moving produce donations and end of market surplus.

Importantly, 60% of our anticipated food purchasing budget in CY 2025 is non-county budget dollars, meaning we are focused on bringing in valuable external resources during a tight fiscal year and plan to continue these efforts ongoing.

While the analysis above focuses on CY25 data, for FY26, we anticipate increased growth again as more partners learn about our work and how we help support the County’s (OFSR) strategic grant initiatives where purchasing local farm produce is highlighted in the NOFOs.

FY26 Budget Request: CFS purchases \$525,00 of produce from 20+ local farms to provide 800 program participant households (3,500 impacted county residents) with weekly free choice seasonal produce through \$120/month vouchers. **CFS Requests MOBILE MARKET “SWEEP” funds of \$100,000 added to our existing County Contract to ensure this highly effective program can continue.**

Thank you for considering this important request,

Jennifer Freeman

Community FarmShare

ANNEX 1. Overview of CFS Programs and Operations, our impact model and how we support County priorities.

Summarized below is an update on Community FarmShare's impact and approach to supporting County priorities related to food systems resilience and childhood hunger initiatives.

Our Commitment: Prioritize Local food procurement to meet demand and facilitate increased production and simplify aggregation and logistics to address county food insecurity through community partners and through strong relationships with our farm partners. Our programs are centered around Food Is Medicine and Farm to School, both prioritized areas of the Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger that we deeply support.

Our mission simultaneously supports local farmers through fair price contract purchasing reducing production risk, and supports improved farmer profitability through taking on many of the administrative tasks - invoicing, logistics, cold storage, packing, delivery, and communication to ensure buyers (social services organizations/FAPs) receive the **amount and types of choice produce** needed to meet their community's needs on the day and time they need it.

In 2024, CFS purchased 165,000 pounds of produce from a dozen small scale Montgomery County farmers, utilizing our online market platform (Local Food Marketplace) to enhance efficiency and scalability.

In 2025, we anticipate investing approx. \$800,000 through contract purchasing with 20 local produce farms, purchasing approx 325,000 lb of produce reaching residents and families through Farm to School programs, Food Is Medicine programs and many other partner food distribution channels.

Out of our 20 farm partners, 3 are new/beginning farmers who are growing this year exclusively for CFS. 11 of our farm partners from last year will continue to grow for CFS in 2025, on average committing to increasing their production by 20% to meet demand.

Additionally, 6 existing MC farms heard about our work and reached out to become partners and sell to us this year; that farmers are seeking us out indicates demand for our work. When farmers know they have a guaranteed buyer for their produce, they can confidently start farming and existing farmers can increase production.

Our Expertise: Local produce aggregation, distribution and key healthy food access program support.

Local small scale farmers face many challenges in meeting quantity, quality and reliability needs of buyers (partner food assistance providers, schools and clinics). CFS bridges all of these challenges through our aggregation model - purchasing from 20 farmers throughout the county, and buying outside the county to meet needs only if Montgomery County produce is not available.

As the only Montgomery County based aggregator, CFS is unique in having the capacity to offer flexible distribution channels to meet partner needs, providing fresh produce through three distribution options.

- 1) Bulk Produce** - Buyers can order "bulk produce", selecting the amounts and types of produce preferred by their community served; CFS then packs produce orders in boxes and delivers

them when needed. This method is generally preferred by organizations that already have free choice pantries set up or who create their own bags/boxes and wish to include fresh produce.

- 2) **Pre-packed Produce Bags** - Buyers can order pre-packed produce bags and can even select the seasonal produce items they would like in the bags. This method is preferred by FAPs that lack the space or staff/volunteers for packing or may have cold storage limitations.
- 3) **Free Choice Mobile Markets** - Organizations can provide their clients with pre-paid card “vouchers” for free choice shopping at any of our mobile farm markets in the county. In 2024, we ran 4 mobile markets and will increase to 8 markets this year to meet demand. Markets offer 25+ different seasonal produce varieties; each market is stocked based on accumulated weekly data on market preferences for each community.
 - a) Market produce is discounted to make produce affordable to all residents in the healthy food priority areas where we are located (in addition to the residents referred with vouchers), and all markets accept SNAP which is matched by MD Market Money to a limit.
 - b) Making local fresh produce more financially and geographically accessible, shoppers use a pre-loaded ‘MC Market card’ for shopping. The markets feel more like a dignified farmers market experience, rather than a long-lined food distribution.
 - c) Markets further offer residents opportunities to connect in person with our Community Engagement Coordinator and Nutrition Education Coordinator and receive information on nutrition education, recipes and other social services referrals.

The table below demonstrates how intertwined CFS is in supporting numerous County based partners. Including projected wholesale to small institutions, pre-packs produce bags and the markets, we estimate over \$800,000 (~325,000 pounds) reaching 1,200 households each week through almost 50 schools, clinics and other community based partners.

Method of produce procurement	2024 - Number of community partners	2025 - Number of community partners, <i>estimate</i>	Notes
Pre-packed Bags	21	12	Decrease demonstrates shift to free choice market preference
Bulk produce (wholesale)	6	12	Expected increase in wholesale bulk purchases to facilitate increased demand from small institutions
Free choice Markets (Vouchers)	7 (4 markets, plus additional CBO partners who referred clients to those markets)	30 (8 markets; additional school and clinic partners refer clients to markets)	Increase shift to free choice markets. Improve efficiency, scale, data collection. Extend market sales to SNAP customers