

January 27, 2026 Public Hearing

Lisa Büttner

WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT of Special Appropriation to the FY26 Operating Budget, Montgomery County Government, Office of Food Systems Resilience, Resident and Community Gardening Grant Program (\$100,000)

TO: Council President Fani-González, Vice President Balcombe and Members of the County Council
FROM: Lisa Büttner

My name is Lisa Büttner. I am a resident of Takoma Park, MD, in Montgomery County's District 4. I am submitting this testimony in support of a Special Appropriation of \$100,000 to the FY26 Operating Budget of Montgomery County Office of Food Systems Resilience for its Resident and Community Gardening Grant Program

Dear Council President Fani-González and Members of the County Council,
Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of this Special Appropriation for community gardening grants. I am writing to **urge you to approve the proposed \$100,000 special appropriation for the Office of Food Systems Resilience Resident and Community Gardening Grant Program.** Since 2023, this grant program has invested in strengthening the resilience of our county's local food systems, supporting innovative, equity-focused models for stimulating local food production for and by people experiencing food insecurity.

I work with CHEER (Community Health and Empowerment through Education and Research), a hyper-local nonprofit in Long Branch, Silver Spring, where 40% of the neighborhood is foreign born. CHEER's mission is to convene, connect and collaborate with neighbors and partners to uplift strengths and cultivate agency for healthier, safer and thriving Long Branch and Takoma Park communities. As CHEER's Neighborhood Gardening Program Director, I have had the privilege of leading a program that builds bridges between homeowners with land and renters who lack spaces of their own to grow food. Since 2021, this program has fostered relationships across cultural and socioeconomic divides, has provided fresh and culturally-valued produce to dozens of families, and has supported the local food economy. This program supports immigrants who are in need right now.

CHEER is grateful to OFSR for critical grant funding for this program since 2023, and more broadly for recognizing the value of this and similar community-based gardening programs that increase the equity and resilience of our county's local food systems. Montgomery County is blessed with a vast

Agricultural Reserve, but only a tiny fraction is dedicated to table crops, and access to that fresh produce is extremely limited for our low-income neighbors in Long Branch. Our program empowers neighbors to choose what to plant, and to work collaboratively to maintain, harvest and cook seasonal meals together over the year. Every year, while CHEER's program has attracted new gardeners, many core participants have been coming weekly for months, including some for 4 or 5 years. This consistency and retention reflects the deep value that gardeners are finding in belonging to a joyful and rewarding endeavor in a welcoming space. Many gardeners have shared, time and again, that being in the gardens enables them to leave behind their worries for a spell, which we know is critical to their mental health and our resilience as a community.

Grant funds from the OFSR have been critical to making CHEER's program possible. Gardening grants are often limited to start-up infrastructure costs, such as fencing, tools and raised bed materials. The OFSR grant funding has been uniquely helpful in its support of operations expenses to enable this public service to continue. In addition, we have used OFSR grant funds to purchase tokens from Crossroads Farmers Market which we use as incentives for anyone who participates at least once during any given week. Gardening participants then spend these tokens at the Crossroads market, benefitting their families with additional fresh produce and also benefitting the local farmers, many of whom grow culturally-valued produce, herbs and plants specifically for this community. These Long Branch Gardeners host a table once a month at Crossroads, where they share plants they have potted and exchange knowledge and ideas about the use of different vegetables and herbs.

Program participants also benefit from other partnerships nurtured by CHEER, including through workshops, work days, food festivals and other events at Koiner Farm and the food forest at Montgomery College established by the Community Food Forest Collective; through field trips to local farms; and through workshops hosted by CHEER with OFSR funding.

The \$100,000 special appropriation request represents less than 1% of OFSR's FY26 budget, and less than half of the FY24 budget for the Residential and Community Gardening Grants program. **I urge the Council to approve the \$100,000 special appropriation for the OFSR's Residential and Community Gardening Grants Program to enable programs like CHEER's to grow more food and healthy communities in Montgomery County.**

Sincerely,

Lisa Büttner
Neighborhood Gardening Program Director
Community Health and Empowerment through Education and Research (CHEER)