

# CHICAGO FOOD EQUITY AGENDA



## BUILDING A MORE EQUITABLE FOOD SYSTEM, TOGETHER

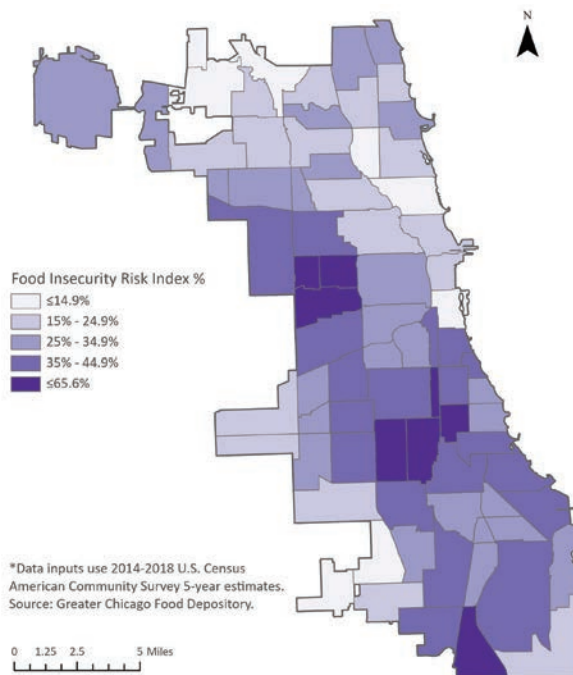
During the on-going pandemic and resulting economic downturn, City and Community food system experts worked to address economic hardship and poverty, including the rising rates of food insecurity in our city. As food and nutrition insecurity was a problem even before the pandemic, it is critical that Chicago make the structural changes needed so that every Chicagoan has access to healthy and affordable food and that food becomes an engine for community wealth building. In the wake of the pandemic, Chicago has an opportunity to become an equitable food city – one that leverages vacant land for urban farming and that catalyzes wealth building through support for food businesses.

**Food insecurity remains significantly above pre-pandemic levels in the Chicago metro region at 19% overall with rates amongst Latinx communities at 29% and Black communities at 37%.<sup>1</sup>**

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community members, and particularly neighborhoods on the South and West Sides, do not have sufficient access to healthy food, and experience disproportionately worse health outcomes, including life expectancy, compared to

white Chicagoans. In the midst of these challenges, BIPOC communities across Chicago have led the way with innovative food access initiatives throughout the pandemic.

### Food Insecurity Index by Chicago Community Areas



Over the winter of 2020, the Mayor’s Office, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, and the Departments of Public Health (CDPH) and Family and Support Services (DFSS) convened a cross-sector working group of City and community food system experts to review past food plans and discuss emerging opportunities. Through a series of five workshops, the working group collectively identified five high-impact priorities to advance beginning in 2021:

1. **Eliminate barriers to food pantry expansion**
2. **Market and maximize nutrition programs and benefits**
3. **Leverage City and institutional procurement to support local BIPOC growers, producers, and food businesses**
4. **Eliminate barriers to urban farming**
5. **Support BIPOC food businesses and entrepreneurs, especially with access to capital**

Together, these priorities now form a Food Equity Agenda, and this working group is being formalized as the Chicago Food Equity Council. Formalizing the Council was identified by the working group as an important step to bring greater transparency, accountability, and collaboration between departments and community groups to the City’s food systems work.

The Food Equity Agenda is a multi-year effort, crafted in partnership with a cross-section of community and City representatives, to transform the food system by removing barriers to urban farming, supporting BIPOC food entrepreneurs, and better connecting residents with nutrition programs and healthy, affordable food. The Council wants to deepen the City’s partnership with BIPOC communities and leaders in addressing racial and social inequities in food insecurity and access to healthy and affordable food.

The Chicago Food Equity Council will advance the five short-term priorities to address immediate need as well as root causes of food and nutrition insecurity.

# CHICAGO FOOD EQUITY AGENDA

## 1. Formally establish a Food Equity Council, as an evolution of the ad hoc working group convened in 2020, to bring transparency, accountability, and cross-sector collaboration to create an equitable local food system.

The Food Equity Council will utilize data to identify communities disproportionately impacted by food and nutrition insecurity, set shared goals, and track the progress of outcomes from these initiatives. It will advance the five high-impact priorities mentioned above and shape future programmatic and policy priorities.

The City and its departments' food efforts have historically had a decentralized approach to food system management, resulting in stalled implementation of related plans and a lack of transparency in decision-making. The creation of a Food Equity Council will establish a centralized governing body that convenes City Departments, Sister Agencies, City Council members, and community partners around a shared goal of building an equitable and just food system in Chicago. Community partners will be central to this effort, bringing a unique neighborhood level perspective, lessons from the COVID-19 response, and a depth of food system expertise to shape the best solutions. This body will also increase transparency in decision-making and set the policy and program agenda. With the support of our partners, and funding by the Greater Chicago Food Depository, the City will hire a Food Equity Policy Lead to sit in the Mayor's Office to staff this Council.

## 2. Advance a 2021 Policy and Programmatic Agenda

### Eliminate Barriers to Food Pantry Expansion

Recognizing the importance of addressing hunger and urgency of opening new food pantries, the City will prioritize streamlining food pantry expansions in the near term – such as through clarifying related zoning, permitting, and licensing processes.

Food and nutrition insecurity is an ongoing problem that continues to impact many Chicagoans. Due to the pandemic and unrest in summer 2020, over thirty grocery stores were temporarily closed. The City is grateful to neighborhood food pantry and mutual aid leaders, volunteers, and neighbors across communities who stepped up to support food distribution during the pandemic. The City also recognizes the opportunity to invest in strengthening the emergency food network for the longer term.

### **Market and Maximize Nutrition Programs and Benefits**

Federal nutrition programs, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and meal programs serving children and seniors serve as a critical tool to reduce food-related hardships. In Chicago, barriers to enrollment in these programs lead to underutilization among eligible households most likely living on the city's South, West, or Far North sides as well as a significant amount of funding left on the table for Chicago residents and communities. The City estimates around \$60.5 million annual dollars may have been left unused in the WIC program in 2019. Similarly, an estimated monthly average of \$29.5 million dollars in SNAP were left unused between July 2019 and June 2020.<sup>2</sup>

The City will dedicate efforts to fully leverage federal funding and maximize nutrition programs and benefits for Chicago residents. These efforts include coordinating marketing of nutrition programs, simplifying WIC enrollment, and expanding SNAP programs for healthy and local food access including online grocery orders, prepared foods, local retailers, and farmers markets.

Furthermore, the City must find ways to reduce access and process barriers to improve access to food and nutrition for people with disabilities. Limited seating and no elevators or ramps at provider locations are examples of access barriers, while lack of coordination between disabilities service providers and food programs are examples of process barriers.

### **Leverage City and institutional procurement to support local BIPOC growers, producers, and food businesses**

Small, local producers face challenges to sustain cash flow and scale due to a lack of connection with large-scale purchasers. Previous institutional procurement efforts focusing on supporting local producers were siloed and limited to direct partners. Current City and institutional procurement standards have yet to explicitly prioritize BIPOC vendors. The City will centralize coordination of citywide food procurement efforts by leveraging Chicago's Good Food Purchasing Policy and encouraging large non-City institutions (such as health care systems or higher education) to increase purchasing from and support for local BIPOC producers and businesses. City departments and sister agencies spend an estimated \$300 million annually on purchasing food.<sup>3</sup>

### **Eliminate barriers to urban farming**

Investing in urban farms and community gardens helps promote positive social, economic, and health impacts. However, the City has too many barriers in place that prevent BIPOC growers and producers from accessing critical resources for scaling urban agriculture efforts, such as water, land, and training. In collaboration with food system partners, the City is committed to





# THE CITY ESTIMATES AROUND \$90 MILLION MAY HAVE BEEN LEFT UNUSED IN THE SNAP AND WIC PROGRAMS IN 2019.

Photo: Urban Growers Collective

implementing programs to minimize barriers and improve urban agriculture. These initiatives include equitable water access, farming education and employment programs, and economic empowerment of community gardens. The City will also launch pilot programs to streamline processes as well as provide assistance from application through planting.

### **Support BIPOC food businesses and entrepreneurs, especially with access to capital**

Food is also a way to build wealth and drive inclusive economic growth, especially in Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other communities of color. Stronger BIPOC-owned and led food businesses are an important strategy to reduce poverty and build social and economic wealth.



Photo: Urban Growers Collective





One significant barrier to overcome is to address disparities in access to capital, as BIPOC businesses are less likely to secure funding through a bank and rank lower than average in utilization of the SBA 7(a) program. The City and partners will address this barrier by exploring the creation of a public-private “Chicago Food Fund” to target investments to BIPOC entrepreneurs, including urban farmers.

### **3. Expand Chicago’s Food System Coalition**

There is a unique opportunity to leverage the power of public and private support to reduce food insecurity as well as the economic inequities that have burdened BIPOC communities for decades. The Food Equity Council, by design, will engage government, non-profit, business, and philanthropic partners to build a coalition committed to a stronger, more just and resilient food system.

# INAUGURAL CHICAGO FOOD EQUITY COUNCIL MEMBERS

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**Jaye Stapleton**

*Mayor's Office*

**Leon Walker**

*DL3*

*\*Four co-chairs of the inaugural food policy working group*

## Endnotes

1 Food Insecurity Information Pooled for Sept 2, 2020 - Dec 21, 2020, Chicago Metro Region

2 Greater Chicago Food Depository calculation estimates based on 2015-2019 U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-year estimates and Illinois Department of Human Services administrative data on SNAP participation acquired through FOIA requests.

3 Low and Vogel, USDA-Economic Research Service, 2011; City of Chicago