



**Testimony Submitted by  
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Before The New York State Senate's Joint Public Hearing:  
Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside  
Continuing Inequalities on our Food Systems  
Tuesday, April 13, 2021

Thank you for holding today's hearing. My name is Onika Abraham, and I am a wife, a mother, a life-long New York City resident, and most pertinent to this hearing, a granddaughter of three farmers and a teacher, champion, midwife to hundreds more farmers as the Executive Director of Farm School NYC.

Farm School NYC offers urban agriculture training to adults through certificate programs as well as 20 individual courses -- over 430 hours of classes annually -- that are tailored to the growing season, offering hands-on skill building, professional development and timely work at flourishing urban agriculture sites all over New York City.

Our core constituency are Black and brown beginning farmers and food justice advocates. Our students learn that we are facing are not food deserts, but food apartheid -- a term that doesn't treat our marginalization as a naturally occurring ecosystem like a desert, grassland or forest, but like the structured, racialized, political, economic and social system that it is -- a system that we can work to interrogate and dismantle.

The work of dismantling racism in the food system is generational work, and it is work that no one farmer or organization can do in isolation.

That is why Farm School NYC is a founding member of Black Farmers United NYS, and we are humbled to serve as the fiscal sponsor of the coalition. Black Farmers United NYS is a collective of Black farmers, educators, and food justice advocates from across this state who developed [9 Solutions for Racial Inequity in New York Agriculture](#).

These solutions underscore how essential education, training, technical assistance and support are to supporting existing Black farmers and the scores of young and beginning Black farmers who are called to the profession.

After training over 400 Black and brown beginning farmers, Farm School NYC has seen how critical it is Black and brown beginning farmers learn with mentors and teachers who reflect their cultural heritage and who teach regenerative agriculture's origins in and relationship to the Black and indigenous agrarian experience.

We urge the legislators to invest in these BIPOC-led and -centered agricultural training programs, and resource organizations and Black farmers to teach the next generation. We urge you not to fall into the trap of only financing white-led organizations to “serve” farmers of color, which only perpetuates the power imbalances that come with relegating Black people as passive consumers being served, rather than power-building producers that create, grow and own the means of education and production.

Nevertheless, even as we urge legislators to invest directly in Black-led farmer education initiatives, we recognize that our land-grant and other public institutions do have a role to play. Black Farmers United NYS outlines two solutions that can help:

- #4 - Create a certificate program at Cornell with experienced black farmers teaching new black farmers on their farms with salaries and scholarships provided by the University.
- #7 - Provide full scholarships to all black students pursuing SUNY agricultural degrees.

At Farm School NYC, our students learn that accessing fresh, affordable food is a human right, but access is just the beginning -- true justice is Black and brown communities owning the means of production.

And owning the means of production is where Black and indigenous farmers of color are falling short.

You have heard the statistics. They are dire. New York’s agricultural landscape is deeply redlined.

- Only 0.24% of farmers are black, 139 black farmers out of 57,000.
- White farmers have more than 500 times the land of black farmers.
- Black farms receive 60% fewer government subsidies and support.
- Black farmers make \$1 for every \$5 a white farmer makes.
- Black farmers make less than any other group, netting -\$903 annually while the average farmer’s net income is \$42,875.
- Perhaps that starkest illustration of New York State’s agriculture apartheid is the fact that in the state’s \$42 billion farming and agriculture industry, Black farmers’ share equals 0.01%.<sup>1</sup>

New York State has the 2nd largest Black population of any state in the nation, yet we are woefully represented in farming. Moreover, urban farmers are hardly factored into these statistics at all. A small fraction of the 57,000 farmers who completed the Census of Agriculture are from urban congressional districts, yet the majority of Black and brown people growing food for their

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AqCensus/2017/Online\\_Resources/Race,\\_Ethnicity\\_and\\_Gender\\_Profiles/New\\_York/cpd36000.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AqCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Race,_Ethnicity_and_Gender_Profiles/New_York/cpd36000.pdf)

communities do so in cities. In fact, 93% of African Americans in NYS live in New York City and its surrounding counties. In the rest of the state, the majority of African Americans live in urban areas such as Buffalo, Syracuse, and Rochester. Cities are where Black people farm. Undercounting and under-investing in urban agriculture in our state is a racial justice issue.

We urge our legislators to increase funding to urban agriculture, especially for farms led by Black, brown and indigenous people of color. Urban farms are where we grow food for our communities, and where we can learn and practice skills that are transferable to larger scale farming, a trajectory that many Farm School NYC students have made. With support, Black-led urban farming initiatives can help so many more. Help us ensure that Black farmers aren't marginalized out of existence with policies that support BIPOC-led training and investment in urban farms.

African American concentrations can also be found in smaller cities and towns in or near the Hudson Valley between New York City and Albany such as Poughkeepsie, Newburgh, and Monticello.<sup>2</sup>

3,824,642, 93% of African Americans in the state live in New York City and its surrounding counties. In the rest of the state commonly referred to as Upstate New York, African Americans live almost entirely in urban areas and mostly within city limits.

Growing up on the lower east side, I was surrounded and inspired by those community gardens – vacant lots reclaimed as places for growing food, flowers, connection, power. I remember those epic battles over land, battles that resulted in those lovely pocket gardens throughout my old neighborhood, battles that continue today.

But urban agriculture is older than those gardens, it's older than this city.

Urban agriculture is as old as the concept of city itself. And since the first plot was dug in the first city, urban agriculture has been innovated and dominated primarily by those who needed that food for survival – the money-poor, the marginalized, the immigrants, the black and brown people of color. And it still is. Even if Modern Farmer isn't profiling them, even if The Times doesn't feature them in the Style section.

Urban agriculture may be hip, but it's not new. In this city of migrants and immigrants, each new wave brought practices to this patch of land – from Italian immigrants festooning fig trees in backyard gardens to my own black and brown ancestors bringing collards and callaloo to church yards.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://blackdemographics.com/states/new-york-state/>

My ancestors had generations of experience farming marginal land – the only land they could access in the South due to government policies and racism – and they brought those practices to the city, where the land they could farm was just as marginal, and worse – polluted.

But they believed that the soil could provide, and with hard work digging, hoeing, testing, amending, stewarding for the soils of this city – it did. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of food are grown in NYC farms and gardens each year – most of it on land that our residents worked hard to reclaim over generations. In restoring the city’s soil, urban farmers are restorers of our communities, our families, our local economies, our bodies.

Urban agriculture has been the bedrock of food sovereignty for generations of urban poor because WE can do it – with a few seeds, the sun, the rain and the soil. We can have control of what we eat by what we grow -- we have the means of production and distribution.

Urban farms and gardens are essential. With community-based projects, the people don’t have to hope that corporate social responsibility will kick in overstock produce to a local food pantry. Community-based urban agricultural projects are where the people feed themselves.

We need a multitude of solutions to create a just and resilient food system, and the land and the people will always be the heart of it.

This is something that the founders of Farm School NYC understood deeply.

Farm School NYC’s origin story provides a perfect example of the importance of building community voice into the proposed urban agriculture plan.

For more than a decade, Farm School NYC has provided farmers, gardeners, and aspiring food growers--primarily Black and Latinx people from socially disadvantaged communities in NYC--the opportunity to learn to grow food, justice and community in a structured and supportive environment that better prepares them for work in urban farming. Each year, a growing segment of our graduates apply their urban farming training to a larger scale by launching or working with suburban, exurban and rural farms. Past students have launched [Rocky Acre Community Farm](#), [Rock Steady Farm and Flowers](#), [Rise and Root Farm](#), [Fringe Farm](#) among others, and have secured jobs at farms including [Stone Barns Center](#), [The Farm School](#), [Sisters Hill Farm](#), [Valentines Farm](#), [Glynwood](#) and [Lowland Farm](#).

Our students recognize the urban - rural continuum that is a vital part of our New York State food system and are helping forge deeper connections throughout our foodshed, which includes central New York, the Capital Region, the Mohawk Valley, the Hudson Valley, Long Island and New York City. Seeing the possibilities their predecessors have achieved, new students have increasingly expressed interest in not only urban, but suburban, peri-urban and rural farming.

These three partners are clearly rooted in New York City. Yet, this Project extends their reach beyond the city at a time when studies show a relevant trend. It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between rural and urban areas, a transition blurring into a more gradual continuum.<sup>3</sup> There is agriculture and open space in many cities; industry and manufacturing in many rural regions.

According to the Census Bureau, the difference is density. To qualify as an urban area, a territory must encompass at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters such as prisons. “Rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) framework created by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and maintained by the Census Bureau defines urban areas by geographic population clusters with close economic ties throughout the region.<sup>5</sup>

At 3,824,642, New York State has the 2nd largest Black population of any state in the nation. 93% of African Americans in the state live in New York City and its surrounding counties. In the rest of the state commonly referred to as Upstate New York, African Americans live almost entirely in urban areas and mostly within city limits. These areas are mid-sized mostly manufacturing based cities such as Buffalo, Syracuse, and Rochester. African American concentrations can also be found in smaller cities and towns in or near the Hudson Valley between New York City and Albany such as Poughkeepsie, Newburgh, and Monticello.<sup>6</sup>

Even in the state’s smaller cities, many Black residents have surprisingly little exposure and interaction with the peri-urban and rural areas that surround them. When Black Yard Farm Collective Livestock Farmer Arian Rivera moved to Orange County to work at LowLand Farm, he lived and worked part-time in Newburgh, a city of 28,000 which is 24.5% Black. The LocalHarvest National Directory lists 29 farms near Newburgh, yet most of the Black residents Rivera encountered did not know or interact with any farms in the area and the fact that he himself farmed within 20 miles of their city was met with some disbelief.

### **Agricultural Apartheid - Racial Inequities in New York State Agriculture**

The attitudes Newburgh’s Black residents expressed regarding local farming reflects the deep redlining of New York’s agricultural landscape. Due to systemic barriers limiting access to land, capital, mentors and support systems, Black citizens of cities surrounded by farmland rarely pursue non-urban farming, and the demographics and political climate in less populated regions often don’t engender feelings of welcome or safety.

This redlining is evidenced in the most recent 2017 Census of Agriculture.<sup>7</sup> In New York State:

- Only 0.24% of farmers are black, 139 black farmers out of 57,000.
- White farmers have more than 500 times the land of black farmers.
- Black farms receive 60% fewer government subsidies and support.

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<sup>3</sup> Irwin, Elena. [The Urban-Suburban-Exurban-Rural Continuum: Definitions, Trends and Interdependences](#). OSU National Urban Extension Leaders Conference, Ohio State University, Columbus OH May 24, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>. 12/7/20

<sup>5</sup> Schultz, Laura. [Introducing New York’s Rural Economies](#). Rockefeller Institute of Government. 10/11/19.

<sup>6</sup> <https://blackdemographics.com/states/new-york-state/>

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AqCensus/2017/Online\\_Resources/Race,\\_Ethnicity\\_and\\_Gender\\_Profiles/New\\_York/cpd36000.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AqCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Race,_Ethnicity_and_Gender_Profiles/New_York/cpd36000.pdf)

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### **Target Audience**

The target audience for this project is Black beginning farmers, farm managers, and other aspiring agricultural professionals who may not have the financial resources or flexibility to leave the New York City area to pursue professional agricultural training. Farm School NYC centers and celebrates the Black experience in its curricula and culture, drawing an applicant pool of students and faculty as diverse as our city. Our current student body is 79% people of color, including 23% latinx, 24% black, and 13% Asian, 75% women, and 15% non-binary or gender non-conforming. In addition, a large portion of our community of students, faculty and alumni identify as queer. Our students range from 20 – 60 years old, and 64% are low income.

100% of the project budget will be allocated to serving limited resource and socially disadvantaged beginning farmers or ranchers. Through the *Continuum of Care and Cultivation Project*, Farm School NYC will continue to welcome students reflecting the full demographic diversity of our city, inviting them to immerse themselves in a Black-centered learning environment. This is in direct opposition to most regenerative farming educational spaces in this country, where the white experience is the default. We will not subsidize students who do not meet the criteria of limited resource or socially disadvantaged with project funds. Black beginning farmers will be heavily recruited for Black Yard Farm Collective programming at Corbin Hill Farm LLC through Farm School NYC's deep network of partners, students and alumni as well as those of Corbin Hill Food Project.

Sincerely,



Onika Abraham  
Executive Director

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<sup>8</sup>[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AqCensus/2017/Online\\_Resources/Race, Ethnicity and Gender Profiles/New York/cpd36000.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AqCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Race,_Ethnicity_and_Gender_Profiles/New_York/cpd36000.pdf)