



**Testimony Submitted by
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Before The New York State Senate's Joint Public Hearing:
SFY 2021-2022 State Budget as it relates to assisting small- and medium-sized farms and related
small businesses to compete in the state, national and international marketplace
Tuesday, November 16, 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, I am a board member of Black Farmer Fund, a granddaughter of three farmers, and a champion and midwife to hundreds more farmers as the Executive Director of Farm School NYC. I am also a member of Black Farmers United-NYS and a supporter of our [9 Solutions for Racial Inequity in New York Agriculture](#), which our Steering Committee member Pamela Reese Smith will speak to shortly.

Through my oral testimony, I will highlight how important it is that the Department of Agriculture and Markets invest more in New York State's community-based urban farms. I thank Senator Amanda Septimo from the Bronx for raising this issue earlier. Investing in community-based urban agriculture is not merely an economic development issue, but a vital social justice issue. The Department of Agriculture and Markets' continued disinvestment only exacerbates farming as New York State's whitest profession.

This sobering fact has likely been well documented already today: According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers and producers make up just 1.3% of producers in New York State. The problem is not lack of interest. Applications to Farm School NYC's agriculture training certificate program have almost tripled in the last three years, and increased 95% since the pandemic. We have to turn away 5 applicants for every available spot in our program. There are only 139 Black farmers in New York State according to the census, yet we turned away over 200 aspiring Black and brown farmers this year because we lacked the staffing and administrative capacity to train them.

Farm School NYC is not alone in this. Black-led training programs such as Farm School NYC, Soul Fire Institute in Petersburg, NY, Urban Fruits and Veggies in Buffalo New York, and Our Core in Newburgh, New York are flooded with Black and brown beginning farmers who want

to be trained and mentored by Black farmers in safe spaces that are grounded in Black agrarianism and build our collective wealth and community.

The problem with the dwindling number of Black and brown farmers has never been the number of interested aspiring farmers. The problem is lack of investment in training, access to land, networking support, and capital investment for aspiring and beginning BIPOC farms.

And that investment needs to meet beginning Black farmers where they are. And in New York State, that is in cities. At 3.8 million, 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, African Americans live almost entirely in urban areas such as Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, Poughkeepsie, and Newburgh.¹ Cities are where Black people farm. Undercounting and under-investing in urban agriculture in our state is a racial justice issue.

The Department of Agriculture and Markets must invest in community-based urban agriculture training and business development if it hopes to bring equity and diversity to New York State's agricultural sector, as it has stated. Small farms in our cities grow nutritious fresh foods for families, communities, and emergency food sites. They are centers of learning and recreation that deliver environmental benefits such as reduced city heat, decreased storm water run-off, safer soil, and natural habitat for pollinators. And they are economic engines, with small farms aggregating produce, creating dynamite value-added products, and buying from upstate producers to supplement their produce for their bustling markets.

Yet, to my knowledge, the Department of Agriculture and Markets has not had a dedicated grant opportunity for community-based urban farms since the one-time Community Growers Grant Program in 2018. Other state initiatives such as Vital Brooklyn and SNAP education grants have been available, but the fact the the Department of Agriculture and Markets does not have a dedicated, fully funded, year-to-year grant program for community-based urban agriculture belies the importance of urban agriculture to our state and our BIPOC communities. Having direct support in the Department of Ag's budget sends a strong signal that community-based urban agriculture is a vital part of growing an equitable and viable agricultural sector.

Moreover, each year, a growing segment of Farm School NYC graduates apply their urban farming training to a larger scale by launching or working with suburban, exurban and rural farms. 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

¹ <https://blackdemographics.com/states/new-york-state/>

Island and New York City. 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](#). Training in the cities where they currently live and work allows beginning farmers the opportunity to continue supporting themselves as they learn, and our programs help them forge connections with BIPOC rural farmers who help them follow a similar path to a rural scale. Thus, community-based urban agriculture is essential for the sake of our cities, but it also is a critical pathway for BIPOC beginning farmers to become rural farmers as well.

We urge the legislators to make deeper investments in urban agriculture, with dedicated grant funding, and a more robust budget for the New York City office, which oversees a variety of statewide and local programs to support urban agriculture which are woefully underfunded. We urge you to collaborate with other agencies, such as USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, which launched an Urban Agriculture Subcommittee in New York State. The Department of Agriculture and Markets could help subsidize stipends for the community-based urban farmers serving on the committee and coordinate to share learnings from that group to inform department initiatives, which would lessen the time commitment needed from already time-strapped urban farmers. We urge you to invest in BIPOC-led and -centered agricultural training programs, and to 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.

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.