

**Testimony of Caroline Howe, Food Policy Director
Before the
Committee on Health
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Christina Henderson, Chairperson**

**John A. Wilson Building
Room 412
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004**

**January 29, 2025
9:30 a.m.**

Good morning, Councilmember Henderson, members and staff of the Committee. My name is Caroline Howe, and I am pleased to testify today regarding the FY24 performance of the Food Policy Council.

I am proud of the work of both the Food Policy team at the Office of Planning (OP) and the Food Policy Council (FPC) do to support the vision of a sustainable, equitable, and just food system for all residents of the District of Columbia. We have built meaningful collaborations across agencies to ensure that our nutrition benefits are reaching those who need it most and that our food system is being managed holistically. We are focusing on balancing land and investment needs to integrate urban agriculture and affordable housing. At the same time, we are collaborating across agencies to integrate transit planning, land use planning, and food systems planning, ensuring that we are effectively getting people to food and food to people. We have worked to build strong relationships within the OP to integrate food system planning into both neighborhood-level and citywide planning initiatives, such as the Nannie Helen Burroughs Small Area Plan and the upcoming Comprehensive Plan. Additionally, we have built intersectional research projects to understand the scale of hunger on college campuses, particularly challenging for our BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students, and to examine food insecurity among recent migrants and amongst our LGBTQ+ community. This intersectional approach is serving us to best understand how to serve our most marginalized communities and build meaningful and sustainable interventions.

I am particularly proud of the work we did in Fiscal Year 2024 to support the District's Participation in Summer EBT, the first new Federal nutrition program in over 50 years. The SUN Bucks program brought over \$7 million Federal dollars to give \$120 each to 58,000 children in the District, in addition to a further \$1.5 million Federal dollars in administrative funds. This enabled families to purchase groceries while schools were out of session this summer and students could not receive the school meals that so many rely on. When paired with our robust ongoing Federally-funded Summer Meals program, this meant more kids got more meals to meet their nutritional needs for growing bodies and minds. Thanks to our partnerships, we were able to integrate promotion for both programs – one, long-standing and beloved, and one brand new.

We were able to bring together the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), Department of Human Services (DHS), DC Health, Child and Family Services Administration, and the Office of the City Administrator -- agencies each operating under separate District clusters to collaborate, share data, promote a program, process thousands of applications, and ensure that all participants were able to use their benefits and make the most of every dollar through additional produce matching programs. The Food Policy team worked with The Lab @ DC to create an online customer service system that responded to thousands of inquiries without needing live responses. We managed customer service during the first few key weeks of the program and updated the website's FAQs that minimized calls to the DHS service center. We supported six community grants for outreach, enabled dozens of parent influencers to share information through trusted parent social media networks, and trained dozens of community organizations to help families submit SUN Bucks applications. We are thrilled to have been able to be a part of supporting the District to launch this essential program and learn from those lessons to support the planning for future years to be run by the core service agencies for children and nutrition benefits — OSSE, DC Health, and DHS.

We are also proud to see the FPC's past recommendations bearing fruit in policy and programs: the Elderly Simplified Application Program is making it easier for Seniors and those with disabilities to apply for and renew their SNAP benefits. The implementation of

the Microenterprise Home Kitchen license is building on a legacy of lessons learned from cottage food businesses and the many sessions to listen to those cooks and food entrepreneurs seeking to serve food to their communities safely, affordably, and healthily. Prior recommendations on purchasing are seeing meaningful implementation, including with success on reducing carbon emissions in our food system and DCPS' Good Food Purchasing Program implementation. The final 1115 waiver submitted in 2024 does including expanding the District's Food is Medicine programs. The Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grants and the Urban Agriculture Tax Abatement both have more interest than funding allocated to support new and existing urban farms. We continue to be thrilled that the FPC's recommendation to create Nourish DC has exceeded initial expectations. Nourish DC has been able to leverage the investment of \$2 million from local funds to enable loans of more than \$10 million from local Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs) and receive Federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative funds. With connections made between District agencies and local philanthropic funders, Nourish DC has also been able to expand their grants to include the "Keeping It Cool" program, which supports cold storage for food businesses, which reduces food waste, makes businesses more able to meet food waste diversion legislation, and cuts costs for businesses during this challenging time.

These programs, along with our community engagement with food businesses over the years since COVID allowed us to make decisions this year to best structure the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Grant, now implemented by the Deputy Mayor of Planning and Economic Development (DMPED), and the Regional Food Business Center funding, implemented by the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture. I am committed to continuing to leverage all possible Federal dollars to support the District's food system.

I am also proud of the work we do to build community. We have brought our meetings back to in person and hybrid after years of virtual meetings. While our breakout rooms were great chances to connect, the space before and after our in-person meetings and in our office hours have enabled essential connections in the public and private sector. Our

roundtables, with college students, migrant communities, residents in food apartheid communities, and LGBTQ+ service providers have offered us insight but have also enabled connection and community-made solutions to emerge. We have collaborated with colleagues in many Mayor's Offices of Community Affairs, as well as the Interagency Council on Homelessness, to ensure that the food policy solutions we propose are addressing diverse cultural needs and the needs of our most marginalized residents. I remain committed to make sure any time we bring people together we are offering resources at the same time we are gathering input, and I see the space we hold as being increasingly valuable in the years to come.

My goal for the coming year is to remain proactively focused on the District's core needs, especially to develop the policies and programs and partnerships to bring food to people and people to food in Wards 7 and 8. We are working with DDOT and WMATA to look at how transit planning can best serve those getting too and from grocery stores; working with DMPED and the OP Development Review Team to see how to improve incentives and partnerships for more full-service and medium format grocers; and learning from our peer cities in exploring the right role for municipal governments in supporting grocery businesses. As we enter the new Comprehensive Plan process, I know there are ways for us to think about land use and zoning that enables growth both of needed housing and of food access, without pricing out existing residents. We are working with researchers at The George Washington University to see how to meaningfully respond to the challenges of crime in grocery environments in ways that are dignified for shoppers and maintain a high-quality shopping experience. We are working with our partners in DC Health and in the private sector to enable and improve online delivery for SNAP recipients, while also supporting existing and expanded SNAP matches in our healthy corner stores. DC Health and DC Central Kitchen have done amazing work with the Healthy Corner Store program, bringing produce to smaller stores, and we can learn from peer cities like Indianapolis, on how to invest in more of the technical assistance we need to get more diverse healthy, minimally-processed foods to transition corner stores to small grocers. Strategically leveraging Federal, philanthropic, and local funds to support grocers in target areas will help us reach our food access goals.

I also look forward to leading the Food Policy Council and the Food Policy team at OP to drive innovative responses to a warming world while mitigating our carbon emissions. We are looking closely at how heat is impacting our food workers in kitchens and in outdoor food service, and at how our procurement choices and reductions in food waste can reduce the District's carbon emissions. The District government has made great progress in recognizing the food-climate nexus, and we will continue to work to ensure residents throughout the District will be able to thrive in the warmer, wetter, wilder weather of years to come.

This will continue to be a challenging time in the District food system. Inflation has driven up all costs of living, especially food costs, outpacing wage growth in the region. While we know that current Federal SNAP benefit levels are not enough to support families in the District, we remain committed to making sure we are taking advantage of all Federal funding for food assistance by dismantling stigma and supporting more eligible residents to receive the SNAP assistance and additional programs like SUN Bucks they deserve. ESAP and other processes that make applications easier will help. I'm committed to supporting interagency collaboration that can enable the District to leverage Medicaid data to enroll students in free and reduced-price school meals as well as SUN Bucks. The more students enrolled in these Free and Reduced Price meals, the more affordable the District's investment in Universal School Meals will become. What we started with SUN Bucks collaboration with the 211 Warm Line can expand to move the District towards a No Wrong Door approach to benefits, where clients who approach any agency for assistance can be directed to **all** the benefits they deserve, from housing assistance to food access. Whether our liaisons serving our neighbors experiencing homelessness during these cold months or staff in community-based organizations, everyone should know about both Federal and local programs to increase nutrition assistance.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.