

KEY FINDINGS: Focus Groups with Farmers

August – September 2025

“Farmers are hard-working people who want to make a reasonable living and care about food and community.” – Farmer in Focus Group

Submitted to:

Howard County Food Council
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1. Executive Summary

The Howard County Health Department and the University of Maryland Extension – Howard County have partnered to establish the Howard County Food Council (HCFC). They held two focus groups with farmers to learn about their perceptions, beliefs and opinions of their role in the local food system and their experiences growing, raising, and distributing food locally. Their experiences and ideas will help to shape the activities of the new HCFC including programs and policies that support farmers and strengthen local food systems.

Farmers understand that they are fortunate to serve in Howard County where they receive a lot of support. The challenges they face include community members' lack of awareness on the benefits of locally grown food, lack of knowledge about how to choose and prepare fresh food, and competition with grocery stores and processed convenience food. They deal with high land and labor costs. Some farmers feel marginalized by the current system since they deal with high regulation and low-profit margins.

Here are the major themes with ideas from farmers on how to create solutions that support the local food system:

THEMES	SOLUTIONS
Education <i>"Kids are learning how to do coding but not how to cook."</i> The loss of Home Economics and limited agricultural programs in schools mean students lack basic food/food-system knowledge.	Include representatives from the Department of Education on the council to help integrate local food system knowledge into K-12 education.
Public Awareness <i>"Pay money now for food or later for the doctor."</i> Many consumers don't know what to look for, how to cook meat or vegetables, how to plan meals or even how food should taste.	Raise consumer awareness with a "Buy Local" campaign on the value of food since "good food isn't cheap" but tastes better and is more nutritious.
Labor <i>"[It is] hard to get people to work for \$16/hour minimum wage. Teenagers want to work for \$30/hour but put in \$5/hour effort"</i> Labor is expensive and vegetables are the hardest because of the labor intensity.	Create structured internship program that introduces people to farming skills and places interns on a network of farms.

THEMES	SOLUTIONS
Regulations <i>“Why are we regulating local food but not foreign foods?”</i> Farmers recognize the need for regulations to level the playing field, but they desire fewer, more common-sense regulations and lower permit fees.	Advocate for “common sense” regulation and provide resources such as fact sheets or checklists to help navigate regulations.
Marketing <i>“Risk when social media managers lack on-farm context like posting non-local items like bananas.”</i> Farmers noted how important marketing is for sales, but it is a pain point since they already wear many hats and “everything breaks down” on a farm.	Collaborate with schools to provide marketing support and training on branding and increasing market share.
Land, Equipment and Supply Costs <i>“Low margins and pressure of what people will pay.”</i> There is the cost to rent, buy and pay taxes on land. Plus, the cost of equipment, supplies and seeds, “which goes up every year.”	Small grants that can be used for labor, equipment and recurring costs that farms face. A tool and equipment library that small farms can use to try to expand their production.
Local Food Distribution & Processing <i>“[There are] 6 [facilities] that process meats for 90% for the country.”</i> Distribution and processing challenges apply to fruits, vegetables, herbs and meats.	Work with the Health Department to facilitate addressing the needs of small farms and enable on-farm commercial kitchens and streamlined permits.

The Howard County Food Council can collaborate with existing organizations and local government to support farmers and local food security through **capacity building** (e.g., internship programs) and **education** that raises consumer awareness, educates youth, advocates for small farmers, and provides resources to navigate regulations.

2. Background

The Howard County Health Department and the University of Maryland Extension – Howard County have partnered to create the Howard County Food Council. A Food Council is a group made up of community members—like farmers, food producers, educators, health professionals, and local government—who come together to improve how food is produced, distributed, and accessed in the community. The Council looks at the whole

food system—from farm to plate—and works to make it more sustainable, equitable, and resilient.

The Howard County Food Council will support a healthier, more connected local food system that helps local farms thrive, increases access to healthy food for all community members, and ensures that food-related decisions reflect the needs and ideas of people who live and work in Howard County. Results from the focus groups will inform the development of key activities for the Howard County Food Council.

The focus group objectives were to:

- Explore how farmers define and experience food security.
- Identify challenges and opportunities for local food production and distribution.
- Examine how policy, community support, and infrastructure can better support farmers in their role.

3. Methodology

The Howard County Health Department (HCHD) and the University of Maryland Extension-Howard County (UME-HC) held two focus groups on September 10, 2025, at 11 AM and 6 PM at the Howard County Fairgrounds. The groups were facilitated by Christine Barbour, an independent consultant with Swangnomy, LLC. The farmers were recruited by the UME-HC.

The 11 AM focus group had 9 farmers and the 6 PM focus group had 8 farmers whose farms are in Howard County or serve the county. Participants introduced themselves and their farms. Some are non-profit, but most have the goal of making a profit. They produce a wide range of products including vegetables, fruits, mushrooms, flowers, sheep, grass-fed beef, pork, lamb and wine. Many have been farming for decades, with some farms in their family for over 200 years. They connect with the community through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farm stands, local farmers' markets and the Roving Radish.

4. Discussion Themes and Findings

Understanding Local Food Security

“Food security means having plenty of food that is nutritious, culturally representative, and desired—not just calories.”

Farmers defined food security as having plenty of nutritious food available, accessible and affordable. Accessibility is the biggest factor in food security. Barriers include limited market hours (e.g., Ellicott City market midweek), family schedules (e.g., “Johnny had soccer”), lack of nearby grocery stores, and transportation barriers. A participant also noted the need for culturally representative food.

Farmers remarked that food security includes affordability. Farmers need to keep prices low enough to stay competitive, but the current system with regulations and a lack of processing facilities in the county contributes to low-profit margins.

As farmers, their primary function is to produce food. Some also act as aggregators, helping smaller-scale growers bring their products to market. Farmers contribute to food security by selling products at farmers markets, operating CSAs and farm stands and participating in Roving Radish. They consider themselves educators which they deem essential since many people don't know how food grows (e.g., broccoli plant), how to cook it, or what fresh food should taste like. And they want to inspire younger people to enter the farming profession, ensuring the future of local agriculture and demonstrating that farming can be a viable and fulfilling lifestyle (even if parents discourage it as a profession).

A farmer gave an example of how her farm supports food security with a Food as Medicine program with the support of a non-profit grant. Many farmers agreed that you need to support children and schools.

Current Support

Farmers in Howard County recognize that they receive a lot of support. Support comes from county/state/federal sources: Department of Agriculture, individual legislators, Farm Bureau, Live Green, Howard County Economic Development, University of Maryland Extension (they have very good workshops), Howard County Soil Conservation District, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Maryland Climate Corps (interns), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) past grants, Roving Radish, Future Harvest and church support. There are grants available, but the demand outweighs the availability of funds and there is a lot of competition. They appreciate that the Agricultural Preservation Program is a national model enabling land ownership.

Education

There is a public education gap. Many consumers don't know what to look for, how to cook meat or vegetables, how to plan meals or even how food should taste. The loss of Home Economics and limited agricultural programs in schools mean students lack basic food/food-system knowledge. The year-round global supply of processed foods reduces seasonal awareness important to farms.

“Kids are learning how to do coding but not how to cook.”

Farmers believe youth need to learn about nutrition and cooking at school since they're not learning these skills at home. They noted that children are learning how to code and not how to cook. Farmers believe that trades and agriculture are gaining respect after a long push toward 4-year colleges. They noted an interest in agricultural programs is rising, but family expectations and long, low-paid hours are deterrents. Parents don't want their children to become farmers, but artificial intelligence (AI) is taking over coding jobs and farmers believe that there is value in learning skills that people used to learn in Home Economics and agricultural programs. “There used to be kindergarten through Grade 5 education at the Fairgrounds, but this has been curtailed,” limiting exposure on how food is produced.



SOLUTIONS: Farmers suggested that HCFC and other organizations target middle and high school students, whose opinions are more adaptable and can influence the future.

- Start with 6th and 7th Graders who will take the skills with them to college.
- Utilize Service-Learning Hours to engage high schoolers.
- Incorporate in-school programs, such as installing hydroponic systems in high schools to give students hands-on experience with food production and combat the idea that food just comes from a store.
- Bring the Department of Education 'to the table' by having a representative be a part of the council to improve collaboration.

Public Awareness

“People don’t know what good food tastes like from the farm since the grocery store has food that is already a week old.”

Many people don’t know how food grows (e.g., broccoli is a plant), how to cook it, or what fresh food should taste like. They only know how a tomato tastes when it was harvested 10 days ago, ripened off the vine, and transported across country. Taste and freshness matter for acceptance. For example, “red delicious” apples at school can taste like cardboard but “Sun gold CSA tomatoes can change perceptions.” Habits for convenience (e.g., microwavable bags) impede adoption of fresh alternatives. But taste education for truly fresh items can support farmers. Consumer enthusiasm happens when quality is evident.

“COVID was the greatest thing that happened.”

The COVID-19 pandemic briefly improved engagement with local producers, but customers reverted to old habits and “forgot” local sources. The convenience and lower apparent cost of processed foods drive choices, especially for low-income households. Fast, simple home-cooking is possible (e.g., sausage with potatoes and onions in 15 minutes), but many lack skills or confidence, reinforcing reliance on convenience foods and drive-thru windows. There are also generational and cultural shifts with fewer people freezing, canning or keeping stocked freezers. Consumers don’t trust local meat vendors who struggle to compete with big brands (e.g., Tyson) so the farmers introduce them to their products with items like “ground beef” as an entry point to other sales.

“Pay money now for [quality] food or later for the doctor or pharmacist.”



SOLUTION: The HCFC and other organizations could raise consumer awareness with a “Buy Local” campaign on the value of food since “good food isn’t cheap” but tastes better and is more nutritious. The campaign could balance community values around food vs time and convenience.

Labor

“[It is] hard to get people to work for \$16/hour minimum wage. Teenagers want to work for \$30/hour but put in \$5/hour effort”

Farmers juggle many roles (grower, marketer, educator, lobbyist, plumber, electrician) making time and labor a persistent challenge. It's difficult to find workers, and the \$16 minimum wage is tough. Vegetables are the hardest because of the labor intensity. H2A workers are expensive, costing around \$18.62 per hour plus housing. Farmers cannot afford to offer benefits like health insurance. H2A workers also require housing that is inspected which adds to the cost.



SOLUTIONS: To address labor shortages, farmers suggested the HCFC and other organizations:

- Create a pipeline by offering an internship program for high school students who need volunteer hours, or farm labor apprenticeships akin to the building trades. A structured certification program could ensure that volunteers understand what they need to do on a farm, so farmers don't have to “babysit.” Farmers discussed existing internship programs and suggested the need for county-facilitated training and connections to transition interns into paid roles across a pool of farms.
- Make small grants available to cover labor since it is not an eligible cost for those that are currently available.

Regulations

“Why are we regulating local food but not foreign foods?”

Farmers recognize the need for regulations to level the playing field, but they desire fewer, more common-sense regulations and lower permit fees. Farmers described frustrating and illogical rules, such as being told pasteurized cheese production is prohibited in a home while unpasteurized is allowed. As licensed farmers at farmer's markets, a farmer stated that they “lose money (\$1,000-\$1,500 annually) competing with unlicensed sellers.”

Farmers expressed frustration with Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification, which is expensive and involves excessive paperwork. Farmers questioned why they face such strict regulations when produce imported from other countries are not held to the same standard, despite potentially being grown with chemicals outlawed in the US.



SOLUTIONS: Farmers face significant hurdles with complex regulations and licensing. They identified:

- The need for a liaison between farmers and agencies like the Health Department.
- Clear guidelines for operations “like selling eggs or cheese.”
- Fact sheets on regulations.

- Checklists for vendors (e.g., for meats, baked goods, etc.) to simplify compliance at farmers markets.

Marketing

“[There is a] risk when social media managers lack on-farm context like posting non-local items like bananas.”

Farmers noted how important marketing is for sales, but it is a pain point since they already wear many hats and “everything breaks down” on a farm. Maintaining websites and social media is time-consuming and they would prefer to be doing work on the farm.



SOLUTIONS: Farmers proposed that the HCFC and other organizations provide marketing support and training. This includes:

- Marketing interns from local schools.
- Training on marketing and branding (logo creation, consistent use, labeling/packaging for products), signage, website setup (e.g., Wix).
- Coordinated marketing and outreach to target customers.

Land, Equipment and Supply Costs

“Low margins and the pressure of what people will pay.”

A major barrier to local food security is the prohibitive price of land in Howard County. Farmers stated that it's financially impossible to make enough money from farming to purchase land in the county. There is the cost to rent, buy and pay taxes on land. Plus, the cost of equipment, supplies and seeds, “which goes up every year.” One farmer added that “organic fungicide is \$426 per gallon.” Farmers noted that there are a lot of vegetables and meats grown in the county but no grains, rice or beans. A farmer would like to grow grains but can’t afford the equipment (e.g., Japanese combine). Small farms can’t justify the expense of small-scale harvesting, drying, and processing equipment to experiment with growing grains.



SOLUTIONS: Farmers suggested that:

- Small grants (\$10k-\$50k) could be used for equipment, maintenance, or recurring costs (e.g., utilities) to help farmers sustain their infrastructure.
- Use grant funds to purchase farmers' products to introduce them into new markets, like school systems. This could create sustainable demand after an initial introduction, benefiting farmers in the long run.
- A solution could be a county-facilitated shared equipment program (including small combines and walk-behind units) to enable small farms to try grains without prohibitive costs.

Local Food Distribution and Processing

“[There are] 6 [facilities] that process meats for 90% for the country.”

Distribution and processing challenges apply to fruits, vegetables, herbs and meats. Distribution challenges include “moving product,” keeping a good supply, and fast turnaround from harvest to customer to maintain freshness. Vegetable perishability and seasonality do not coincide with institutional demand (e.g., schools requesting tomatoes in January). Health Department rules limit on-farm processing (e.g., kitchen use, cutting fruit, dried herbs). If farmers had processing capacity to can foods, they could bridge seasons, but there are a lot of barriers for vegetable processing including regulations that require a commercial kitchen to process anything that is going to be for sale – even “cutting watermelon” or other vegetables that would sell better if they were cut.

Farmers face consumer misconceptions about frozen meat, thawing times, microwave use, and imperfect produce. Perishability and cosmetic flaws make distribution difficult and force price cuts.

A primary challenge for meat producers is the lack of accessible meat processors. This leads to scheduling delays and long-distance travel. When they are forced to use multiple butchers there are product inconsistencies, and multiple labels since labels are tied to a single processor.



SOLUTION: Farmers would like to see the HCFC and other organizations work with the Health Department to address the needs of small farms and enable on-farm commercial kitchens and streamlined permits.

Challenges

When asked about their greatest challenges, farmers prioritized:

- Impacts of weather (e.g., droughts and consumer behavior)
- Public education
- Lack of local food processing opportunities from butchers to canning.
- Costs (land, taxes, seeds, equipment) which contribute to low profit margins.
- Labor
- Regulations
- Marketing

Farmers also mentioned processed sugars and fast food, too many farmer’s markets, new pests and safety.

Wishes: If I Had a Magic Wand

When asked what they would wish for if they had a magic wand, farmers prioritized:

- Dedicated **marketing support** and an **educated consumer** base that starts in school and understands the importance of buying local and valuing food for long-term health.
- Less **regulation** (more common sense), lower permit fees and lower agricultural taxes.
- **Processing facility** and a closer butcher.
- More collaboration between farms (e.g., co-ops) and support systems (e.g., county level food systems like a corps program) with **internships** and **labor** training.
- Access to annual **grants** for equipment and labor.

They would also like more time, labor and the ability to get things done; to get into grocery stores and have an expanded online purchasing presence; lower property taxes; guaranteed base salaries for farm owners and operators; affordable organic chemicals; more help with soil conservation; and daily pickup from Roving Radish.

5. Summary & Recommendations

Farmers understand that they are fortunate to serve in Howard County where they receive a lot of support. They noted that participating in the focus groups gave them a sense of shared passion and purpose. They face the same challenges across diverse farm types, and they share optimism about opportunities for improvement.

Farmers face challenges including a lack of awareness on the benefits of locally grown food and competition with grocery stores and processed convenience food. They deal with high land and labor costs. Some farmers feel marginalized by the current system since they deal with high regulation and low-profit margins and would like to see a system that promotes local production, distribution and sales so they can profit from their hard work.

The HCFC, existing organizations, and local government can work together to increase local food security through connection, education and capacity building. Specific actions:

- Provide Department of Education representatives with a seat on the HCFC to support education on the local food system and integrate fresh food into schools.
- Work with the Health Department to advocate for "common sense" regulations that don't penalize locally grown food and make it easier for small farmers to process food to increase sales and profits.
- Create resources such as fact sheets or checklists to help navigate regulations.
- Collaborate with high schools and community colleges to provide marketing support and training on marketing and branding and increasing market share.
- Provide a structured internship program that introduces people to farming skills and places interns on a network of farms.

- Provide small grants that can be used for labor, equipment and recurring costs.
- Create a tool and equipment library that small farms can use test and expand their production.

The Howard County Food Council will disseminate the Farmers Focus Group findings widely and discuss activities to incorporate in the Action Plan.

6. Acknowledgements

The Howard County Food Council expresses appreciation to the farmers for joining the focus groups and sharing their candid feedback to help improve food security in Howard County.

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