



Dr. Melony Samuels

Public Hearing: Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside Continuing Inequalities on our Food Systems

To Senate Social Services Committee Chair Persaud and members of the Senate Committees on Agriculture, Labor, and Social Services: thank you for this opportunity to testify on the work of The Campaign Against Hunger (TCAH), the importance of diversity in Agriculture, and justice in our food systems. Forums like these are excellent opportunities to learn from one another and work together toward solutions for our city. We are grateful to have a voice at this virtual table.

My name is Dr. Melony Samuels, and I am the Executive Director and Founder of The Campaign Against Hunger (TCAH). We are a 22-year-old anti-hunger nonprofit headquartered in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and we are rapidly expanding our urban farming footprint across the city. Our mission is to empower vulnerable New Yorkers to live healthier, more productive, and self-sufficient lives by increasing their access to safe, nutritious food and related resources. We advance our mission by providing equitable access to food with dignity, social services, youth workforce programs, community nutrition education, and urban farming to stir community activism and engagement to alleviate poverty.

In 2009, TCAH became the first community-based organization in New York City to effectively create its own "farm to pantry" distribution loop with the opening of the Saratoga Urban Agro-Ecological Center. This model prioritizes fresh fruit and vegetable access in our SuperPantry and provides additional heart-healthy options for our clients. Having started with two backyard plots more than a decade ago, TCAH now operates a growing network of youth-led Urban Agro-Educational Centers in Central Brooklyn and the Rockaways, NY, complete with hoop houses, chicken coops, and an aquaponics system. Our success in the urban farming space has led to partnerships with groups like L+M Development Partners and the City of New York. With L+M, we have secured an additional two acres of urban farmland in Arverne, NY, a federally labeled food desert, which promises to infuse heart-healthy fruits and vegetables into nearby neighborhoods that need them most. With the city, TCAH is in the planning stages of the Marlboro Greenhouse Project in Coney Island, NY. This initiative will introduce a transformative public housing model to the city, one which includes a greenhouse with hydroponics and aquaponics systems; a multipurpose space for training, meetings, workshops, events, community programs, and a farmers' market; and a teaching kitchen with cooking classes and demos. Both of these partnerships represent sustainable investments in urban agriculture that address the high level of need for food and nutrition justice in our communities.



At TCAH, our urban farms are cultivated in large part by a team of young people, who we call Green Teens. These youth are predominantly from underserved communities of color, many of whom come to us without agricultural experience. Like anything in life, you can teach what people are willing and eager to learn. Every year, we train around 30 Green Teens in agricultural production, leadership, teamwork, and communication. We pay them at living wages to help us cultivate a yearly average of 20,000 pounds of 100 varieties of fresh produce for community distribution and welcome hundreds of students for live learning labs on an annual basis. Any unused or spoiled produce contributes to sustainable, soil-enriching compost.

The average person tends to have an image of an old white man as a farmer, but my urban farm manager is a young Black woman. When people think "New York City," farming probably isn't the first thing that comes to mind. Even so, urban farming is the backbone of the vision I have for advancing food justice for our neighbors. Introducing young people to opportunities in agriculture in their own neighborhoods connects them to the land and the nutrition it offers. Their perspective also informs the seeds we plant and the culturally appropriate produce we offer. The lessons they learn and the skills they develop in these environments serve not just on an individual level, but ripple effects spread throughout their communities. This truth is central to our work.

Youth empowerment is one of TCAH's pillars of service. We know that investing in young people, particularly young people of color, is essential to the vitality of a community. Within those communities, access to healthy food has a direct link to health outcomes. At present, youth unemployment is concerning, and the health of our neighbors is crumbling. At TCAH, we work to address both of these challenges through initiatives like youth-led urban farming, and we believe it is a replicable model for success.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to share the importance of diversity in agriculture and justice in our food system. When we prioritize these initiatives, better days follow. Together, we can inch ever closer to futures that serve all of us.

Sincerely,

Dr. Melony Samuels
Executive Director and Founder
The Campaign Against Hunger