



MURIEL BOWSER
MAYOR

September 9, 2025

The Honorable Phil Mendelson
Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 504
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Chairman Mendelson:

I am pleased to submit to the Council of the District of Columbia the Food Access & Food Economy Report for Fiscal Year 2024, prepared by the Food Policy Council and Office of Planning pursuant to section 3(c) of the Food Policy Council and Director Establishment Act of 2014, effective March 10, 2015 (D.C. Law 20-191; D.C. Official Code § 48-312(c)). The report includes information on the state of the local food economy and food access across the District, as well as recommendations based on lessons learned from within the District and across the country.

If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact Caroline Howe, Food Policy Director, at 202-442-7604, or caroline.howe@dc.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Muriel Bowser", written over the printed name and title.

Muriel Bowser
Mayor



Food Access & Food Economy Report

Fiscal Year 2024



District of Columbia
Office of Planning



GOVERNMENT OF THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Food Security & Equitable Access	3
Food Economy	10
Key Recommendations	15
References	16

Students enjoy free summer meals at Kimball Elementary School which offers free meals to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision. Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture. Photo by Paul Sale



Executive Summary

The Food Policy Council and Director Establishment Act of 2014 directs the Food Policy Council and the Office of Planning to issue an annual report on the state of the local food economy and food access across the District. The law requires that the report assess District food access, identify barriers to the development of a local food economy, identify national best practices, and recommend revisions to regulations and policies. The full report describes the justification for the policy recommendations below.

In Fiscal Year 2024, the District invested over \$66 million in local food access and food economy initiatives, including over \$6 million in local nutrition programs, nearly \$40 million in temporary SNAP benefit increases, \$15 million in senior nutrition programs, and \$5 million in grants available for local food businesses. Since 2021, the District has also invested a total of \$24 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to increase equitable access to nutritious food and rebuild a resilient food economy. However, with the expiration of this federal funding, several key food programs are winding down, including the Food Access Fund. The District took steps to leverage new federal funding streams such as the Summer EBT program to address child food insecurity and several programs that support food businesses, such as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative and the Resilient Food System Infrastructure grants.

Key Takeaways

- **Food insecurity increased nationally,ⁱ regionally, and in the District.ⁱⁱ** Disparities across race and age have widened: residents of color were eight times more likely to be food insecure than white residents, and seniors experiencing food insecurity increased by 11% since 2023.ⁱⁱ
- **Increased costs of groceries, housing, and other necessities**, coinciding with an end to the pandemic-era federal benefits, have exacerbated food insecurity not just among low-income households but also the middle class.
- **Employment in the District food economy grew by 9.2% in 2023.** In total, food jobs now account for 8.2% of the total workforce.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Many local food businesses are facing financial hardship** due to increased costs of ingredients, rent, and labor as well as decreased customer traffic. Three out of four restaurants in the DC Metropolitan Area reported declining profitability in 2023 compared to before the pandemic.^{iv}

Key Recommendations

1. Increase the funding for locally-funded nutrition assistance programs, such as Produce Plus, and Home-Delivered Meals for seniors.
2. Create strategies to address food insecurity among residents with incomes too high to qualify for federal public benefits, but who struggle to afford food and other necessities.
3. Pilot cooperative purchasing and shared storage for meals served by District agencies as a path towards building central food processing facilities.
4. Clarify and promote pathways for small food business growth, including clarifying the licensing process and expanding access to affordable commercial kitchen space.
5. Support growth and retention of small grocery retailers by removing barriers to accessing District grants and tax incentives, piloting online delivery programs, and expanding SNAP match funds.
6. Create a legal definition for farmers markets, streamline the permit process, and create a funding stream for development, operation, and promotion of farmers markets.

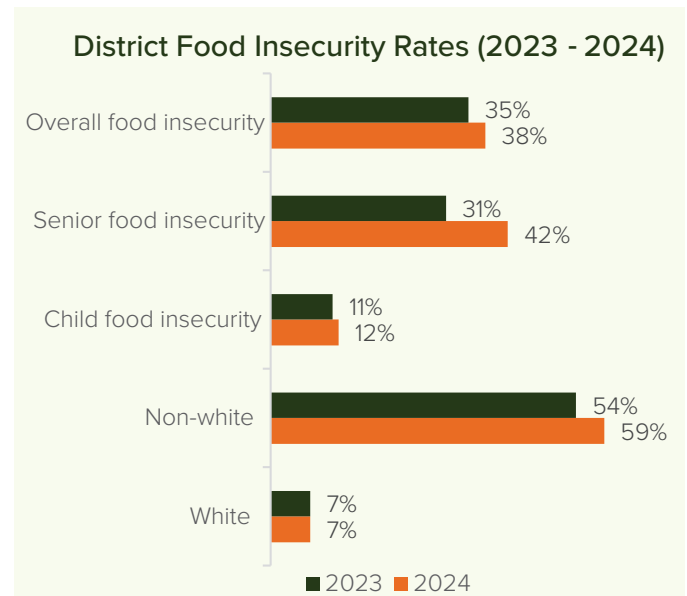
Food Security & Equitable Access

Rising Food Insecurity

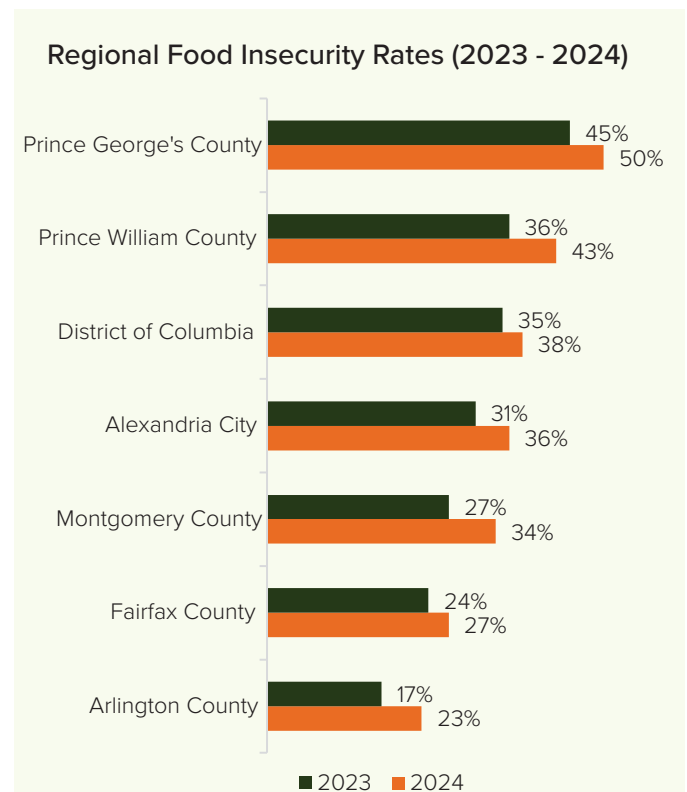
Despite some signs of economic recovery, food insecurity is on the rise nationally. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the national food insecurity rate increased from 12.8% in 2022 to 13.5% in 2023. USDA estimates that the 2021-2023 three-year average food insecurity rate for the District was 8.8%.ⁱ

At the same time, the Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB)'s **2024 Hunger Report** estimated that the food insecurity rate for the District in 2024 was 38%, an increase from 35% in 2023. This study showed that the food insecurity rate increased similarly in all seven counties in the DC region, and the District's rate was the third highest. Furthermore, the report highlighted that the District residents of color were eight times more likely to be food insecure than white residents. The District's food insecurity rate among seniors was the highest in the region, and has increased by 11% since 2023.ⁱⁱ The CAFB analysis is based on the general population survey conducted with the University of Chicago, which measured food insecurity of the households in the DC region between May 2023 and May 2024, using the USDA's definition and screener questions.

The wide range between these estimates may be due to several reasons.* Most significantly, the USDA data does not account for the high cost of living in the metropolitan areas because USDA excludes many households above 185% of the Federal Poverty Level from its full food insecurity survey. Thus, many District residents above this threshold and experiencing food insecurity may not have been captured by the USDA data. United Way estimated that the minimum cost to live in the District in 2022 was roughly 350 to 400% of the Federal Poverty Level and that 36% of the District households earned less than the minimum cost to live.^v More discussions on the impacts of high cost of living on food security can be found on page five of this report.



Source: Capital Area Food Bank Survey with USDA eighteen-item screener for food insecurity conducted May-28-July 31, 2024 and May 1-15, 2023.



Source: Capital Area Food Bank Survey with USDA eighteen-item screener for food insecurity conducted May-28-July 31, 2024 and May 1-15, 2023.

* Key factors include 1) CAFB's survey asked all respondents, regardless of income, the full 18 questions used by USDA; 2) USDA uses a three-year average due to small sample sizes while CAFB uses a 12-month period; and 3) although both use phone interviews, CAFB also uses online interviews while USDA's data also uses in-person interviews.

Key Drivers of Food Insecurity: High Food Costs and the End of Federal Pandemic-Era Benefits

Major drivers of rising food insecurity include high prices of groceries and an end to both federal and local increases in the pandemic-era benefit programs.

The annual average Consumer Price Index (CPI) for food at home in the DC Metropolitan Area has risen substantially. **The CPI for food at home in January 2024 was 19.2% higher compared to January 2020, a greater increase than the overall CPI for all items, which rose by 16.2% during the same period.**^{vi}

Moreover, the food price increase outpaced the average wage growth, which was 15% during the same period in the region.^{vii} The CPI for food at home rose more slowly in 2023, a 2.5% increase compared to 9.4% in 2022.^{vi} These price increases are forcing families to stretch their dollars and benefits further each year.

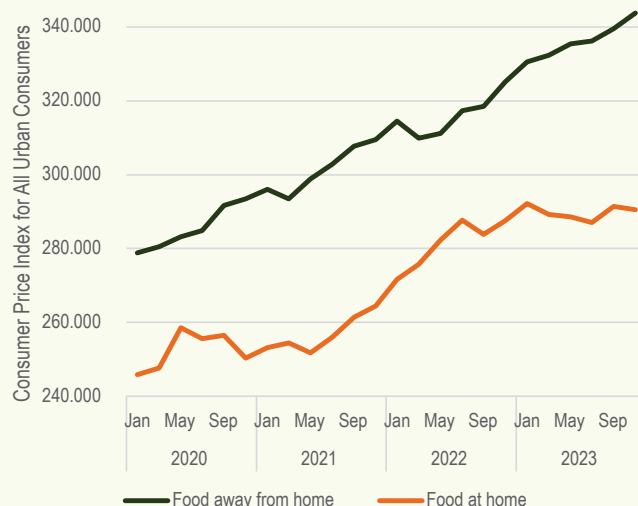
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) continues to be a vital support for food security for one in five District residents.^{viii} However, **the federal temporary SNAP benefit boost known as the Emergency Allotment, which supported over 90,000 District households since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, was terminated** after the February 2023 benefit issuance as a result of Congress passing the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023. Consequently, average monthly benefits for District residents decreased by 34%.^{ix}

The District is working to process SNAP applications more quickly and increase enrollment among eligible residents including simplifying applications for seniors and residents with disabilities.

Recommendation

Expand existing locally-funded nutrition programs, such as Produce Plus and Home-Delivered Meals for seniors, to allow more eligible residents to participate.

Food Consumer Price Index in the DC Metro (2020 - 2023)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Food Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers, Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, not seasonally adjusted.

Food Insecurity: a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, as defined by USDA.

Food Insecurity Rising in the Middle Class Families

Food costs are not the only expenses increasing: higher prices for housing and childcare are exacerbating food insecurity not just among low-income households but also the middle class. CAFB found that **28% of households in the middle-income group (annual income of \$100,000 to \$150,000) in the DC region were food insecure in 2024**. Moreover, food insecurity among the middle-income groups had the greatest rates of increase in food insecurity across income groups – an 11% increase on average from 2023 to 2024.ⁱⁱ However, these households do not have access to many public benefits including SNAP, Medicaid, and free school meals, because their incomes exceed the eligibility thresholds ranging between 130% and 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. In fact, CAFB’s study found that only 50% of food insecure District residents were enrolled in SNAP, 23% were enrolled in Medicaid, and 14% were enrolled in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).^x

United Way of the National Capital Area and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments have drawn special attention to **Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed (ALICE) households**, which earn more than the Federal Poverty Level but not enough to afford necessities such as food, housing, and health care. United Way estimated a District household of four with an infant and a preschooler needed a minimum of \$109,824 per year to survive in 2022, nearly four times the Federal Poverty Level of \$27,750. The study found 24% of District households qualify as ALICE and highlighted significant racial disparities. 55% of District Black households were below the ALICE threshold while 18% of the District White households were below the ALICE threshold.^v

District food programs without income requirements provide much-needed help to fill this gap, such as **Joyful Food Markets**, **DC Youth Meals Program**, and **Senior Dining Programs**. However, additional support and policy interventions to address the economic instability and food insecurity within ALICE households are urgently needed. While any child attending a school participating in the federal Community Eligibility Provision can receive free school lunch, implementing a **District-wide Universal Free School Meals program** would support all ALICE families with children, free from any stigma around receiving free meals. Additionally, many community-based food access programs without income requirements such as pantries require in-person attendance during work hours, which is a key barrier for ALICE households, whose breadwinners often work long hours or multiple jobs.

Recommendation

Create strategies to address economic stability and food insecurity among residents whose incomes are too high to qualify for federal public benefits, but struggle to afford food and other necessities.



Learning from Peer Jurisdictions

Montgomery County, Maryland

The county invested \$1.8 million in a new online grocery benefit program for households below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level and not eligible for SNAP. **The MC Groceries Program**, launched in August 2024 through a partnership with Instacart, provides \$100 per month per child, up to \$400 per household, to buy fresh and shelf-stable food items for deliveries and pickups from 80 grocery stores. 600 households are enrolled with a plan to expand to 2,000 households in the future.^{xi}

Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed (ALICE):

households that earn more than the Federal Poverty Level but less than the basic cost of living, thus can’t afford the essentials.^v

Community Eligibility Provision: a federal funding option that allows schools with high percentages of families who qualify for free or reduced-price meals to provide free meals to all students.

Rethinking District Procurement for Food Access Programs

The District provides a total of approximately 45 million meals annually to students, seniors, shelter residents, and incarcerated people through various agencies implementing federal and District-funded programs. Over the last few years, the District looked more closely at how to increase the positive social, environmental, and health impacts of purchasing these meals.

The [Green Food Purchasing Amendment Act of 2021](#) requires the Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) to evaluate the sustainability impacts of those meals. In 2023, DOEE conducted its initial assessment of food-related emissions in the District required by the Act. The [FY 2023 Green Food Report](#) indicated beef and lamb make up 36% of the District's emissions related to food while they make up only 2% of total purchases by weight. As anticipated, DOEE identifies the major points of intervention as reducing red meat consumption and encouraging plant-based options.^{xii}

DC Public Schools adopted the [Good Food Purchasing Program](#) in 2018, committing to purchase more foods that support local economies, health, environment, workforce, and animal welfare. To support other agencies and institutions in making similar improvements, the Sustainable Supply Chain Working Group of the Food Policy Council released the [Values-Based Food Sourcing Guide](#).



Learning from Peer Jurisdictions

Austin, Texas

The Austin Independent School District, with 12 schools and approximately 74,000 students, hired a full-time staff person focused on implementing the Good Food Purchasing Program. They also shifted to bulk organic milk distribution in all renovated schools, with funding from the [Chef Ann Foundation](#). Bulk milk distribution reduces cost, wasted milk, and packaging waste while meeting federal dairy guidelines.

Recommendation

Pilot cooperative purchasing and shared storage for meals served by District agencies as a path towards building central food processing facilities and identify larger spaces for one or more facilities.

Building on the [2021 study](#) led by OP that identified many potential benefits of building centralized food processing infrastructure, OP convened agencies procuring food and worked with HR&A Advisors to analyze sitting and capacity needs. The [2023 study](#) identified core needs shared across the agencies that could be addressed by such centralized infrastructure:

- Decreasing costs by achieving economies of scale
- Accelerating production, distribution, and consumption of high-quality food
- Building emergency preparedness
- Advancing the District's social equity goals

For a single facility to produce the 45 million meals served by District agencies each year, it would need about 180,000 square feet total, which would be a challenge. Therefore, **the study recommends a distributed model with several smaller facilities, each providing distinct processing functions.**

This would allow smaller sites closer to end users and distribute economic and social benefits across neighborhoods.^{xiii} It would also offer flexibility to test and learn while prioritizing food elements with the highest impacts on District health and climate goals.

OP plans to collaborate with agencies to explore opportunities for cooperative purchasing and identify spaces for short-term storage, as well as continuing work to plan towards longer-term storage and processing facilities.

Farm to Early Childcare and Education (ECE) Roadmap Released



Children receive cooking lesson at their child care center.
Source: FRESHFARM

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) released a roadmap for advancing equitable access to [Farm to Early Childcare and Education \(ECE\)](#), in partnership with FRESHFARM and ECE stakeholders. Farm to ECE connects young children and their families to local food and hands-on food education at childcare facilities, which leads to healthy habits such as increased fruit and vegetable intake.^{xiv} The roadmap identifies strategies to increase ECE facility participation, including facilitating connections between ECE providers and local farmers.

In FY 2024, OSSE's Healthy Tots Act team successfully included Farm to ECE in the District's FY 2025-27 Child Care Development Fund, the federal program that provides funding for child care. Additionally, OSSE plans to pilot a grant to provide additional financial incentives to ECE providers serving local food.

New Federal Child Nutrition Benefits During Summer Launched

For the first time in almost 50 years, a new permanent federal food assistance program launched in 2024. [SUN Bucks](#), or the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (SEBT), provides a one-time payment of \$120 in grocery benefits to income-eligible families with students during the summer. These benefits work with other nutrition assistance programs, such as DC Youth Meals, SNAP, and Farmers Market Nutrition Benefits to support students with consistent access to nutritious meals when school is out. While the federal funding covers the full cost of benefits, [50% of the administrative cost](#) must come from local funds. [USDA](#) requires states to submit their annual implementation plan and budget by the previous August in order to draw federal administrative funds for the following program year. [New Mexico](#) and [Colorado](#) have appropriated recurring or multi-year funds, which has allowed agencies to hire staff, implement essential data and technological systems, and deliver benefits on time.



Seniors Identified Barriers & Strategies to Improve Their Food Security



Seniors receive meals at Congress Heights Senior Wellness Center. Source: Department of Aging and Community Living

The Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL) and The Lab @ DC conducted [a resident-centered design project](#). Based on input collected from over 50 seniors, program administrators, and government officials and through site visits, they identified various barriers seniors face in purchasing, transporting, and preparing meals. Their report concluded that existing food programs could be improved to better meet seniors' needs: **recommendations include expanding home delivery services, adding spots in programs with waitlists, increasing the amount of food or funds program participants receive, or adjusting eligibility criteria.** Additionally, the report recommends promoting underused nutrition programs. The Lab plans to test an outreach strategy in 2025 to increase enrollment in SNAP, in which only half of eligible District seniors currently participate.

Fruit and Vegetable Production on Public Properties Expanded

The Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) has expanded the production of vegetables at its **Communal Farms**. Across the three locations, DPR gave away 13,000 lbs. of produce to residents at no cost in 2023. More produce grown on the Communal Farms could be distributed by building cold storage or central food processing facilities.

DPR has also expanded its **Partner Urban Farms**, totaling seven farms operated by nonprofits on DPR property in Wards 1, 7, and 8. In 2024, City Blossoms and Dreaming Out Loud opened the Farm at Fort Stanton on DPR-owned land in Fort Stanton Park, which consists of a production farm and a youth garden. Produce grown on the farm is distributed to children at a Joyful Food Market and sold at a new farmers market onsite.



DPR's Lederer Gardens. Source: Office of Planning

Expanding Food Is Medicine Could Reduce Food Insecurity and Improve Health Outcomes

The Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF) took a significant step towards leveraging federal funding to expand Food Is Medicine programs such as vouchers for fresh produce prescribed to address diet-related illnesses. Food is Medicine programs are recognized as an effective and low-cost strategy to reduce food insecurity and improve health outcomes while decreasing health care cost.^{xv} Nearly half of the food insecure residents in the DC region suffer from diet-related illness, and they are more than twice as likely to have a chronic health condition compared to food secure residents.ⁱⁱ

In early 2024, DHCF proposed to expand Medicaid coverage for nutrition services to children and those with certain health conditions as a part of the federal **1115 Demonstration Project**. This proposal was informed by stakeholder inputs collected through DHCF's public hearings and community conversations led by DC Greens and the DC Food Policy Council Health and Nutrition Working Group. It also builds on the successes of locally funded Food is Medicine programs: Produce Rx and the Medically Tailored Home Delivered Meals program. If approved by the federal Medicaid agency, the new coverage is expected to start in 2026.



District-funded, medically-tailored meals delivered to residents with serious illnesses. Source: Medically Tailored Home Delivered Meals Program at Food & Friends

Related Legislation

No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2022 (enacted in January 2023)

This law takes a holistic approach to addressing senior hunger, including an interagency task force to create a District-wide response plan and the creation of a communications plan to increase outreach.

Status

The District has begun implementing parts of this law through federal waivers and the research conducted by The Lab @ DC. If available, additional funding could support the creation and implementation of a comprehensive strategy mandated by this law that addresses transportation barriers, nutritional quality, and outreach.

Secure DC Omnibus Amendment Act of 2024 (enacted in March 2024)

This law includes three elements from the FRESH STARTS Act: 1) update the meal standards for Department of Corrections (DOC) facilities to two servings of green vegetables, two servings of raw fruit, an additional three servings of vegetables, five ounces of protein-rich foods, and options of plant-based, kosher, halal, or medically necessary meals upon request; 2) produce public reports on food inspection results and environmental safety and sanitation; and 3) establish a hospitality and culinary arts training program for DOC residents.

Status

While meal requirements were unfunded in FY 2025, funding for construction of a kitchen in the new DOC facility was included. A working group of returning citizens and food advocates has been working with DOC to consider opportunities for improving food procurement.



DC Central Kitchen Staff prepares lunch at Kimball Elementary School.
Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture. Photo by Paul Sale

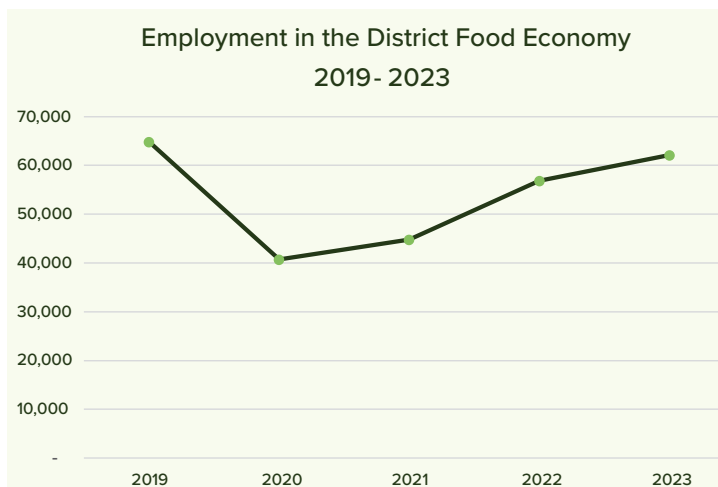
Learning from Peer Jurisdictions

Baltimore, Maryland

The city invested \$3.6 million in the American Rescue Plan Act funding to provide SNAP participants with an additional \$30 per month to buy fruits and vegetables from participating online grocery retailers. **B'more Fresh**, launched in 2023, aims to increase Online SNAP participation while increasing fruit and vegetable purchases. 3,200 SNAP customers used B'more Fresh benefits at Amazon, Giant, and Safeway between March and December 2023. Outreach and in-person support have been critical to increasing awareness and use of the new program. Additionally, the city aims to establish a mechanism to subsidize delivery fees for B'more Fresh customers to remove financial barriers to shopping online with SNAP.^{xvii}

Food Economy

Food Sector Jobs Increased While Small Businesses Continuing to Face Barriers



Source: US Bureau of Labor and Statistics: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages Data Tables

Employment in the District food system continued to increase in 2023, a 9.2% increase from 2022, with 62,069 individuals now employed in this sector. This is still a 4.2% decrease from 2019, while the total number of food businesses in the District increased by 7% compared to the pre-pandemic level.ⁱⁱⁱ

While average wages in the food system have increased substantially since 2019, they have not been equally distributed across food sectors. Food manufacturing workers saw their average wages decrease between 2022 and 2023. Food service workers' average wages increased by 4.7% during the same period (NAICS code 722).ⁱⁱⁱ We anticipate changes in 2024 as Initiative 82 gradually increases the tipped minimum wage to eventually phase it out completely in 2025. The minimum wage for tipped food service workers is \$10 per hour before tips as of July 1, 2024.

Restaurants are seeing decreases in sales due to diners eating out less often. In the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington's 2023 annual survey, 81% of restaurants reported paying more for ingredients than in 2019 – on average, 23% higher. Three out of four restaurants reported being less profitable in 2023 than before the pandemic. In a notoriously low-margin industry,

Cottage Food Business: a business in which food products prepared in the residential home kitchen of the owner's primary residence.

Recommendation

Clarify and promote pathways for food business growth, including clarifying the licensing process and expanding access to commercial

In the food business surveys conducted by the Office of Planning (OP) in 2023, many restaurant owners and managers reported challenges of funding increased labor costs and finding reliable, consistent, and long-term staff. The surveys identified not only additional need for food safety training but also trainings on the soft and professional skills necessary to thrive in food service. The costs of labor are only one part of the increasing costs of running a business: costs of food and rent are also rising.

The OP's survey also identified accessing affordable commercial kitchen space as a major barrier for smaller businesses. Other jurisdictions have adjusted zoning, provided grants, expanded access to school kitchens after hours, removed barriers for businesses to share kitchens with others, created a database of shared kitchens, and expanded cottage food licenses to include a wider range of products that can be cooked in home kitchens.

Cottage food businesses licensed in the District decreased from 33 in 2022 to 31 in 2023.^{xvii} Possible factors include the lengthy approval process, the challenges of obtaining a Certificate of Occupancy, and a lack of awareness about the need to renew a cottage food license. The new license for mobile food vending businesses is pending review. Vendors have expressed a need for coordination between DLCP and the Department of Health (DC Health) on the Microenterprise Home Kitchen permit and clarity on how to operate while the process is being finalized.

The food sector accounted for 8.2% of the total workforce compared to 7.6% in 2022.ⁱⁱⁱ

Median annual wage for food service workers was \$37,800, less than 45% of the overall median annual wage (\$84,450).^{xviii}

Small Grocers Step Up to Fill Gaps in Grocery Access Needs

Small-format grocery stores remain an important part of the solution to fill food access gaps for many residents, especially as many offer culturally-relevant foods. Small-format grocers have a footprint of under 6,000 square feet or provide some but not all of the required food products for the full-service grocery license.

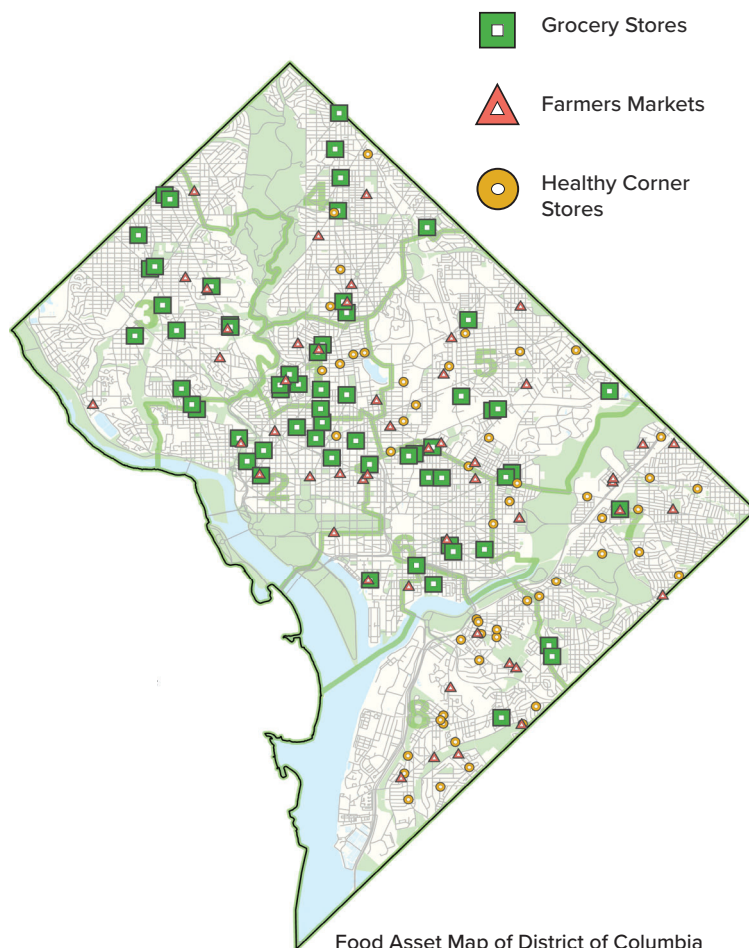
The District has invested in increasing produce access at corner stores through the [Healthy Corner Stores Program](#), funded by DC Health and implemented by DC Central Kitchen. In FY 2023, healthy food sales at participating stores increased by 11.6%. The 33 stores offering matching funds for SNAP purchases served over 15,000 customers at a 92.5% redemption rate. This program supports not only small businesses, but also local growers in the region, with approximately 11% of products sourced locally.^{xvii}



Healthy Corner at the Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy
Source: Washington Nationals Philanthropies

Recommendation

Support growth and retention of small-format grocery retailers by removing barriers to accessing District grants and tax incentives, piloting online delivery programs, and expanding SNAP match funds.



Food Asset Map of District of Columbia
Source: Office of Planning analysis of data from DC Central Kitchen, DC Health, and Washington DC Economic Partnership



Learning from Peer Jurisdictions

Indianapolis, Indiana

The Indy Local Grocers Coalition managed by the city provides technical assistance to small grocers. The city also facilitates collective purchasing of fresh fruits and healthier alternatives for shelf-stable goods, which helps decrease the cost to the participating retailers.

State of Illinois

In 2023, Illinois launched the [Illinois Grocery Initiative](#) to fund energy-efficient upgrades in small grocery stores. Grantees must be a small grocer that accepts both SNAP and WIC benefits and offers a diverse selection of fresh foods.

64 Full-service Grocery Stores;
yet only **4** for the 158,000
residents living east of the
Anacostia River^{xix}

57 Healthy Corner Stores^{xx}

53 Farmers Markets^{xxi}

134 School Gardens^{xxii}

Additional Investments in Farmers Markets and Farm Infrastructure Can Support Local Producers

The District has over 50 independently operated farmers markets across all eight wards. They serve as the primary direct producer-to-consumer channel for locally grown or locally produced foods, making them an important asset for the region's small- and mid-sized farms and food businesses. Almost all markets host shoppers that use federal or local food assistance programs. Farmers markets also provide essential services outside of food access, such as increasing economic activity in commercial corridors, improving public safety, building community, and driving foot traffic.

However, to date, the District has not passed any specific legislation to support farmers markets nor provided any funding specifically for market development, operation, or promotion. While programs like **Produce Plus** create a powerful revenue stream for farmers market vendors in addition to increasing fresh produce access, it does not cover any operating costs. Without a definition in legislation, farmers markets remain ineligible for many of the District's existing business support grants. Through a series of conversations with market operators, interested market vendors, and Ward 7 and 8 residents, the Food Policy Council gathered input to produce the [following recommendations](#) to support farmers markets:

- Create a legal definition of a farmers market, inclusive of a special permit and streamlined process for establishing, renewing, and vending at a market.
- Provide direct financial support to farmers market operators.
- Support placemaking, visibility, and awareness.
- Increase funding and extend the season for Produce Plus.

In addition to ensuring robust market opportunities, the District's **Urban Agriculture Infrastructure and Operations Grant** supported infrastructural investment and operational costs for small farmers. The program received requests for more than double the available funds both in FY 2023 and FY 2024, with only a third of applicants receiving funds. Given high demand for the program, the District could consider offering the program again in the future.

Recommendation

Create a legal definition for farmers markets, streamline the permit process, and create a funding stream for development, operation, and promotion of farmers markets.



Ward 8 Farmers Market. Photo by Elvert Barnes Photography

Learning from Peer Jurisdictions

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources awarded over \$200,000 to 23 organizations in their **2024 Farmers Market Sustainability Grant Program** to support marketing, consumer education, planning, and infrastructure efforts. The state also provides interested residents a [robust set of tools to start a market](#), including an affordable and specific farmers market license.

State Funding for Farmers Markets

According to the [National Council of State Legislatures](#), between 2022 and 2024, more than 15 states funded the development, renovation, or promotion of farmers markets. In 2024, California voters passed **Proposition 4**, approving \$20 million to develop year-round farmers market infrastructure and \$20 million for mobile farmers markets infrastructure such as refrigeration.

The District Leveraged Millions of Federal & Philanthropic Dollars Alongside Local Funds for Food Businesses

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) has invested over \$4.5 million in the [Nourish DC Collaborative](#) (Nourish DC). Managed by Capital Impact Partners, the goal of Nourish DC is to foster an inclusive food system that provides economic opportunities and access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food, with a focus on locally-owned businesses in Wards 5, 7, and 8. Nourish DC was created in 2021 based on resident feedback to provide more fresh food, high-quality jobs, and wealth-building and ownership opportunities among entrepreneurs of color. This public-private partnership approach to equitable food access has proven to be successful, attracting more than \$2 million in private funding. Over the past three years, more than \$17 million in low-interest loans, grants, and technical assistance has been deployed to local District food businesses in Wards 5, 7 and 8.^{xxiii}

This is in addition to the more than \$23 million distributed through the Food Access Fund, which was funded by American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. The Food Access Funds helped food businesses expand in low-food access areas, particularly in Wards 5, 7 and 8. With ARPA funds expiring at the end of 2024, however, the future of the Food Access Fund is uncertain.

In 2024, the Nourish DC Collaborative was awarded \$3 million from the USDA's [Healthy Food Financing Initiative](#) to continue the network and support to technical assistance providers, a strong example of a District-funded pilot continuing with Federal dollars. Additionally, USDA has invested in supporting District food businesses through the [Regional Food Business Centers](#) and the [Resilient Food System Infrastructure Grants](#) that will be distributed in 2025 and 2026.

Nourish DC Impact (2021-2023)^{xxiii}



16.2 million
in low interest loans

\$945,000
in grants



600 District food
businesses received
technical assistance

88%
BIPOC-owned



400 jobs
created or retained

64%
women-owned

“Nourish DC is saving small businesses hit hard by the perfect storm of COVID, the labor and supply shortage, and inflation — businesses that otherwise might have ended up closing in the circumstances.”

— Tesform Bockrezion, owner of Circle 7 Food and Grocery Market (Ward 5), a Nourish DC grantee



Stephanie Williams, owner of Oh-Mazing and Nourish DC grantee, makes granola. Photo by Glen Gordon Jr.

Related Legislation

Zero Waste Omnibus Act 2020

(Enacted in December 2020)

This law requires businesses to separate organics, donate excess edible food, and separately process back-of-house food scraps from the rest of waste.

Status

In 2023, Department of Public Works (DPW) published a [Commercial Food Waste Diversion Guide](#) to help commercial entries understand the legislative requirements, recognize the importance and commercial benefit food waste diversion, and start implementing food waste reduction and diversion strategies in back-of-house activity. As of January 1, 2024, this now covers more food waste generators, including colleges and universities with 500 or more residential students, stadiums with capacity for more than 15,000 people, retail food stores 10,000 square feet and larger, and retail food store chains or three or more stores that collectively have at least 10,000 square feet. The legislation also allows the Mayor to apply waste diversion requirements to other types of businesses in future years. DPW also released the [Zero Waste Plan](#) in 2024, which includes actions around food donation, food waste reduction trainings, source separation, and food waste diversion from commercial, governmental, and residential properties.

Restaurant Revitalization and Dram Shop

Clarification Amendment Act of 2023

(Enacted in May 2024)

This law addressed several top restaurant concerns, including limiting liability for restaurants in a way that could reduce costs for businesses while also providing clearer direction to restaurants and bars to prevent serving alcohol to obviously intoxicated individuals and underage youth. More than half of restaurant and bar operators surveyed indicated that the cost of liquor liability insurance was a significant barrier to growing their business. Liquor liability insurance in the District can be 10 to 100 times higher than in Maryland and Virginia due to unlimited cap on damages that restaurants could be liable for regarding alcohol consumption.^{iv} The law also requires the Mayor to study the conditions of food delivery workers.

Status

The law was enacted in May 2024 but funding for the study on food delivery workers has not yet been allocated. The remainder of the law is now in effect.

Key Recommendations

1. Increase the funding for locally-funded nutrition assistance programs, such as Produce Plus, and Home-Delivered Meals for seniors.
2. Create strategies to address food insecurity among residents whose income are too high to qualify for federal public benefits, but who struggle to afford food and other necessities.
3. Pilot cooperative purchasing and shared storage for meals served by District agencies as a path towards building central food processing facilities.
4. Clarify and promote pathways for small food business growth, including clarifying the licensing process and expanding access to affordable commercial kitchen space.
5. Support growth and retention of small grocery retailers by removing barriers to accessing District grants and tax incentives, piloting online delivery programs, and expanding SNAP match funds.
6. Create a legal definition for farmers markets, streamline the permit process, and create a funding stream for development, operation, and promotion of farmers markets.



Jarabe Gourmet Pops receives an award for the DC Packaged Food Cohort's Pitch Showcase & Marketplace Competition hosted by Curate Courses, Nourish DC, and DMPED. Source: Office of Planning

References

- ⁱ U.S. Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Service. "Household Food Security in the United States in 2023." September 2024. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=109895>
- ⁱⁱ Capital Area Food Bank. "Hunger Report 2024." September 2024. <https://www.capitalareafoodbank.org/report-2024/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics. "Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages Data Tables." Accessed July 2024. NAICS codes used to calculate the private sector employment in the District food economy include: 311, 3121, 4244, 4245, 4248, 445, and 722.
- ^{iv} Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington. "2023 Member Survey Findings" November 2023. <https://ramw.org/blog/2023-member-survey-findings>
- ^v United for Alice. "ALICE In the District of Columbia. ALICE UPDATE, 2024." Accessed July 2024. https://unitedwaynca.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024_ALICE_Report_Update_DC-2.pdf
- ^{vi} U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Food Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers, Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, not seasonally adjusted." Accessed July 2024.
- ^{vii} U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. "Average Hourly Earnings of All Employees: Total Private in Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV (MSA)." Accessed September 2024. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SMU114790005000000003>
- ^{viii} U.S. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Services. "SNAP Data Tables. State Level Participation and Benefits." Accessed September 2024.
- ^{ix} Hall L. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "End of SNAP's Temporary Emergency Allotments Resulted in Substantial Benefit Cut." September 2023. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/end-of-snaps-temporary-emergency-allotments-resulted-in-substantial-benefit-cut>
- ^x Capital Area Food Bank general population survey conducted May 28 - July 31, 2024 <https://www.capitalareafoodbank.org/report-2024/>
- ^{xi} Montgomery County Government. "Montgomery County Launches Groundbreaking 'MC Groceries' Program in Partnership with Instacart to Fight Childhood Hunger" https://www2.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcgportalapps/Press_Detail.aspx?item_ID=45751
- ^{xii} District of Columbia Department of Energy and Environment, Office of Contracting and Procurement. "Green Food Report FY 2023." Accessed September 2024. https://doee.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doee/service_content/attachments/FY_2023%20Green%20Food%20Report.pdf
- ^{xiii} HR&A Advisors, KK&P, Epstein. "Approaches to a Centralized Food Processing Facility in the District." November 2023. <https://dcfoodpolicy.org/reports/centralized-kitchen-study/>
- ^{xiv} Taniguchi T, Haslam A, Sun W, Sisk M, Hayman J, Jernigan VBB. "Impact of a Farm-to-School Nutrition and Gardening Intervention for Native American Families from the FRESH Study: A Randomized Wait-List Controlled Trial. Nutrients. 2022; 14(13):2601." <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14132601>
- ^{xv} Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation, Harvard Law School. "Food is Medicine: Peer-Reviewed Research in the U.S. Medically Tailored Meals, Medically Tailored Food Packages, and Nutritious Food Referrals." December 2020. https://chlpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Food-is-Medicine_Peer-Reviewed-Research-in-the-U.S.1.pdf
- ^{xvi} Baltimore City Department of Planning Food Policy and Planning Division. "2023 B'more Fresh Reach and Impact" Accessed September 2024. <https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/baltimore-food-policy-initiative>
- ^{xvii} District of Columbia Department of Health. "FY23 Performance Oversight Response to the Council of the District of Columbia." January 2024. <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/233>
- ^{xviii} U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics. "Occupational Employment and Wages Statistics Survey." Accessed July 2024.
- ^{xix} Grocery store data as of April 2024 provided by Washington DC Economic Partnership. Independent analysis provided by OP using the Alcoholic Beverage and Cannabis Administration's definition of a full-service grocery store.
- ^{xx} DC Central Kitchen. "Healthy Corners Store Map." Accessed December 2024. <https://dccentralkitchen.org/healthy-corners/>
- ^{xxi} District of Columbia Office of Planning and District of Columbia Department of Health Analysis of Farmers Markets in the District of Columbia accepting nutrition benefits in 2024. <https://dcfoodpolicy.org/farmers-markets/>
- ^{xxii} District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education. "Healthy Schools Act School Health Profiles, SY23-24." Spring 2024.
- ^{xxiii} Carr E. Capital Impact Partners. "Testimony to Committee on Business and Economic Development." April 2024.



This report was authored by the Food Policy Team at the Office of Planning.

www.dcfoodpolicy.org

Phone: (202) 442-7600

Email: dcfoodpolicy@dc.gov

899 North Capitol Street NE, Suite 7100

Washington, DC 20002