



BARTRAM'S GARDEN

**Testimony to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee
Re: Urban Agriculture Grant Program**
Submitted by Maitreyi Roy, Executive Director, Bartram's Garden
July 12, 2023

Dear Chairman Pashinski, Minority Chairman Moul, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf Bartram's Garden, a home for horticulture and the oldest surviving botanic garden in North America. I humbly submit testimony on behalf of our community and colleagues, who serve our mission to create equitable relationships among people and nature, including expanding access to fresh foods and resources.

Located just a few blocks from the gleaming campuses of University City, the neighborhood of Southwest Philadelphia is one of the poorest, most industrialized, and most structurally violent areas in America's poorest big city.¹ This neighborhood is predominately Black or African-American (80.3%), with roughly 65,000 residents. Southwest Philadelphia has long been one of the most under-resourced parts of Philadelphia, with higher than the city's average rates of poverty, trauma, chronic illness, and environmental degradation, even before the devastation wrought by the COVID19 pandemic. In 2019, the New Markets Tax Credit rated the area as in "severe distress"; it has also been identified as a Qualified Opportunity Zone. Per the 2021 American Community Survey, the area is even poorer than the city average, with 29.9% of residents living below the poverty line, including 41% of children. Only 25.4% of residents have a bachelor's degree, and the median annual household income is just \$34,579. In Bartram Village, one of the city's largest public housing complexes, the median annual household income is less than \$10,000. Census data reveals that 32.2% of residents receive public food or income assistance, including 65.6% of families with children; in addition, the neighborhood reflects what Detroit educator Malik Yakini describes as "food apartheid," where "public policy and economic practices have created [this area with] low access to foods."²

But this area also has an unparalleled legacy of agriculture and connection to the land: Bartram's Garden, America's oldest surviving botanical garden, was founded here in 1728 by John Bartram, an acclaimed early botanist. During Bartram's time and until the industrial era, West and Southwest Philadelphia represented the city's farmland. Today, Bartram's Garden is a 50-acre riverfront public park and National Historic Landmark welcoming more than 100,000 visitors annually through the

¹ Per Bandy X. Lee's *Violence: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences, and Cures*, "Structural violence refers to a form of violence wherein social structures or social institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Although less visible, it is by far the most lethal form of violence, through causing excess deaths—deaths that would not occur in more equal societies." The term was coined by sociologist Johan Galtung in "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research."

² Yakini, Malik. "Food Desert: A Problematic Term." T. Colin Campbell Center for Nutrition Studies (December 2020).

A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK HOUSE & GARDEN

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stewardship of the non-profit John Bartram Association (JBA), which has maintained the site in partnership with the City of Philadelphia since 1893. Our mission is to create equitable relationships among people and nature through immersive, community-driven experiences that activate the Bartram legacy, Garden, and House, on land and on the Schuylkill River, in Southwest Philadelphia.

The Garden's southern border is anchored by the four-acre Sankofa Community Farm at Bartram's Garden. With an intentional focus on the African Diaspora foodways that are most relevant to our immediate neighborhood, the award-winning Sankofa Community Farm increases access to locally grown, chemical-free food for Southwest Philadelphia residents, promoting self-reliance and a deeper relationship with the land and the sustenance it can provide. Using natural agriculture techniques like no-till, cover crops, pollinator habitat, and more, the Farm produces and distributes roughly 15,000 pounds of produce each year, with more than 95% of the harvest distributed in West or Southwest Philadelphia and more than 30% of farmstand transactions conducted with SNAP or WIC vouchers.

The Farm focuses on intergenerational programming, with an intensive paid youth workforce development program for 25 local high school students as part of the Garden's larger focus on paid youth leadership programs. In 2021, Bartram's Garden was accredited by the Philadelphia Youth Network as an approved TANF youth workforce development provider; since the program's founding in 2012, youth participants have maintained a 95% 4-year graduation rate, in contrast to the 58.99% rate at the local school.

With a focus on building the neighborhood's capacity to grow and prepare culturally relevant, nourishing fresh food, the Farm also hosts a thriving community garden program serving more than 60 families, an acclaimed youth-led home gardening program providing more than 200 low-cost home garden beds to local neighbors since 2019, an active greenhouse producing more than 60,000 seedlings annually for community gardens throughout the city through the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's City Harvest Program, and a year-round, culturally relevant series of free cooking and gardening workshops presented with a range of local partners, including the Philadelphia Orchard Project, Urban Tree Connection, the Garden at CHOP Karabots, and the City of Philadelphia Department of Parks & Recreation.

Bartram's Garden also works closely with local residents to determine priorities, set goals, and share resources and decision-making. In 2018, with support from the William Penn Foundation, Bartram's Garden convened the Southwest Philadelphia Community Leadership Team (SWLT), a stipended group of local leaders including local small business owners, neighborhood leadership like block captains and ward members, parents and teachers, clergy and non-profit executives, and more. In 2018 and 2019, the SWLT led a community visioning effort to guide the Garden's campus planning and site investments, gathering input from more than 300 local residents through public meetings, mobile-friendly surveys, and door-to-door canvassing. The COVID-19 pandemic proved no interruption to the SWLT's ongoing work, and they have continued to meet monthly to advise the Garden and, increasingly, other local institutions on key neighborhood priorities. The Farm's focus on community engagement in safe local green spaces, health and wellness, and youth workforce development reflects top priorities identified in the SWLT's continued neighborhood outreach.

We are grateful to have received two consecutive Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grants from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in 2019 and 2021. Together, these grants provided crucial support to update our harvest processing infrastructure as well as to strengthen site-wide efforts for

sustaining traditional agricultural practices, greening our wider neighborhood, and supporting neighbors and visitors to connect with their foodways and with nature.

We look forward to the increased funding opportunities made possible via 2023–2024 PA Farm Bill and new commitments from the GIANT Company. We urge the Committee to continue strengthening the state’s capacity to support urban farmers like those at the Sankofa Community Farm at Bartram’s Garden.

Thank you for your consideration and your ongoing support of our Southwest Philadelphia community.