

Agriculture Committee Member Day Hearing – December 6, 2023

Testimony: Rep. Dwight Evans (PA-03)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, for giving members of Congress the opportunity to speak today about the agricultural priorities and challenges facing their constituents.

I come here today, as the Representative of Pennsylvania's 3rd Congressional District, located in Philadelphia. It is one of the most urban and densely populated districts in the entire United States, which may cause some to wonder why I believe agriculture policy is so important to the people in my district.

Well, as we all know, there is another side to agriculture that comes after the very important job of growing and producing the food. And that is ensuring that the food we produce gets into the homes and stomachs of every American. And that is what I would like to speak about today.

As a member of the Pennsylvania State House, I led the creation of the Fresh Food Financing Initiative in my state. This program allows businesses to expand healthy grocery options in communities through a mix of public and private funding, attracting food retailers to invest in underserved areas and renovate existing stores to improve healthy food selections.

This state initiative created thousands of jobs across the Commonwealth and funded nearly 100 new healthy food options for disadvantaged families throughout Pennsylvania.

Eventually, this idea for financing healthy food was taken up at the national level by the Obama Administration through the creation of the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, or HFFI.

The HFFI, through a partnership between USDA, the Treasury Department, and the Health and Human Services Department, similarly provides loans, grants, and technical assistance to improve access to affordable and healthy foods in underserved communities.

Community development corporations and community development financial institutions have especially been instrumental in supporting this program through providing loans to local projects most in need. By steering funds through community groups, we are ensuring that funds are distributed to the most worthwhile causes, to organizations that have community buy-in, and which are

the most trusted in neighborhoods affected by a lack of access and a lack of institutional support.

The USDA's Food Access Research Atlas, which collects data on food access in census tracts across America, shows that as much as 6% of the U.S. population lives in areas of low-income and low-access to grocery stores. That is nearly 20 million people.

These Americans typically live in low-income urban areas, where a lack of reliable public transit, low wages, and a lack of investment in their neighborhoods makes it more difficult to buy fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy, and cooking ingredients. Or they live in rural areas where the closest supermarket may be well over an hour away by car. Not to mention that in many of these cases, there's no guarantee the food available is either healthy or affordable.

That is why continued support for the HFFI is so necessary. According to a report by The Food Trust, since first being established at the Federal level in 2010, the HFFI has been essential to over 900 healthy food projects being financed across the nation, bringing fresh food to millions of families.

As the U.S. faces inflationary costs that burden low-income families the most, we must ensure that the HFFI continues to be supported by the members here today.

Earlier this year, 55 members of Congress, including myself, sent a letter to the Appropriations Committee in support of funding for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, citing the program's impacts on job creation, market opportunities for American farmers, investments in the food supply chain distribution economy, ability to decrease obesity rates in America, and the increased need to improve access to healthy food in rural and urban communities.

I ask that this Committee keep in mind those same points, understanding that this program has the potential to improve America's physical, nutritional, agricultural, and economic health simultaneously.

As the Agriculture Committee moves forward with work on the Farm Bill, it must ensure that it continues to support the HFFI throughout the process. Ensuring reauthorization and continued engagement with statewide initiatives is a necessary step in helping to end the hunger crisis in the United States.

I appreciate your time and look forward to working with any members who want to help support this vital program and permanently end hunger in America. Thank you.