



**Congressional
Hunger Center**

SUPPORTING CHICAGO'S BIPOC AND LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES: A WEBSITE FOR URBAN FARMERS TO SECURE LAND

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About Chicago Food Policy Action Council

The Chicago Food Policy Action Council (CFPAC) is a non-profit organization which co-facilitates, advocates, and implements policies that advance food justice & sovereignty in Chicago and across the region. CFPAC works to ensure that all Chicagoans, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have the right to produce and access culturally appropriate, nutritious, sustainable, and fair food.



Introduction

FOOD INSECURITY AND DISINVESTMENT IN CHICAGO'S BIPOC COMMUNITIES

What is Food Insecurity?

Food insecurity is a public health concern as experiencing it has been shown to be associated with higher probability of cardiovascular disease, hypertension and diabetes, among other chronic diseases.¹ Food insecurity can be defined as “a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life.”² In addition, food insecurity disproportionately impacts low-income and BIPOC communities, highlighting the health disparities gap that is in need of closure.³

Food Insecurity in the City of Chicago

Currently, in the City of Chicago, over 16% of households and 22% of households with children experience food insecurity.⁴ It is well known that the burden of food insecurity varies based on racial/ethnic background. In Chicago, 32% of Black households and 28% of Latino households with children experience food insecurity compared to 16% of White households with children.⁴ Given that low-income and BIPOC communities are more likely to be impacted by food insecurity, it is important that efforts to address hunger prioritize finding long term solutions for those most vulnerable.

“ In Chicago, 16% of all households and 22% of households with children are food insecure. [4] ”

A History and Continuation of Disinvestment

Much like the rest of the U.S. in the early 20th century, Chicago engaged in racist policies that dictated where Black Chicagoans could live, which led to disinvestment and degradation of these communities. The Chicago Real Estate Board campaigned on racially restrictive deeds and covenants for homes in the city, preventing designated areas from being sold to Black residents, a notion that supporters believed would prevent both violent racial clashes and threaten property values.⁵ In addition, the United States Federal Housing Administration refused insuring mortgages for homes in or near Black communities, a practice known as redlining.⁶ These discriminatory practices forced Black residents into neighborhoods with overcrowding and substandard housing.⁵

Introduction

FOOD INSECURITY AND DISINVESTMENT IN CHICAGO'S BIPOC COMMUNITIES

These racist urban planning and mortgage lending practices has led to a shortage of goods and services in low-income and BIPOC communities, including fresh and affordable foods via supermarket retailers.⁷ The loss of supermarkets in these communities contributes to their continuous decline by the loss of job opportunities and reduced access to fresh fruits and vegetables and subsequent poor health, distress, and hopelessness.⁷ These closures also perpetuate the perception that a neighborhood is a poor investment.⁷ In Chicago, the creation of community gardens in the South and West sides of the city of were a “neighborhood resilience strategy” to address the lack of fresh food in the community as well as an effort for community building and agency.⁸

In the present day, BIPOC in Chicago have repeatedly seen the impact first-hand after the loss of large grocers in their communities where fresh, healthy and affordable foods are already scarce. In November 2022, the Whole Foods market in Englewood closed its doors, unexpectedly to many, after just 6 years in the neighborhood, leaving the community as it was prior to their opening - with limited options for fresh and healthy foods.⁹ Unfortunately, similar scenarios have taken place in other BIPOC communities across Chicago including the closure of Food 4 Less in Back of the Yards in October 2022, and the abrupt closure of an Aldi's in Auburn Gresham in June 2022.⁹ In the Auburn Gresham neighborhood, the local community has proposed solutions and lobbied the city for support in identifying a community owned grocery store to take the place of Aldi, with no response from the city.

One example of community food mobilization efforts can be found in Englewood. As a response to the 2022 closure of Whole Foods, a local resident of the community, Kenneth Griffin worked with a local teen to develop a community garden for residents in a vacant lot in the neighborhood and looks to scale up this project to promote the youth and the community to grow their own food.⁹ Kenneth Griffin is among the growing movement of many Chicago-based individuals and organizations cultivating urban agriculture spaces in the Chicagoland region.

Urban Agriculture

POLICIES AND INITIATIVES IN CHICAGO

Urban agriculture refers to any agricultural practices that are conducted in city-settings, including community gardens and urban farms. In Chicago and the greater Cook County area, these spaces are typically operated by non-profit organizations, community groups, and individuals. They provide a range of community benefits such as affordable fresh fruits and vegetables, job training and development, spaces for residents to connect with nature, build relationships with neighbors, and educational activities. Supporting urban agricultural spaces can therefore support the overall development and prosperity of communities and is especially promising in communities that have faced historic disinvestment.

According to the City of Chicago Zoning Ordinance, a community garden is typically owned or managed by public entities, civic organizations or community-based organizations, and maintained by volunteers in contrast to an urban farm which are said to “grow food that is intended to be sold, either on a nonprofit or for-profit basis.”¹⁰

In recognition of the prevalence of food insecurity pre- and post-pandemic in Chicago, Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s administration established the Chicago Food Equity Council that aims to “transform the food system by removing barriers to urban farming, supporting BIPOC food entrepreneurs, and better connecting residents with nutrition programs and healthy, affordable food.”¹¹ Influence from the Urban Agriculture Working Group within this Council has led to the introduction of the Urban Agriculture Business License Enhancement Ordinance by Mayor Lightfoot and the Chicago Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection. Currently, there is no license that addresses the needs of urban growers, causing licensing issues that prevent growers’ participation in business opportunities such as farmer’s markets, limiting their ability to participate in the local economy.¹² The ordinance will provide urban growers a clear pathway to conduct their business to sell what they grow while also improving food access in their communities.¹²

Urban Agriculture

POLICIES AND INITIATIVES IN CHICAGO

The City of Chicago owns nearly 10,000 vacant lots, a majority of which are located on the South and West side of the city. To make use of these vacant lots, the city has created the Community Growers Program, a pilot program that will provide 10 new urban agriculture sites using city-owned vacant land and support the implementation of 15-20 existing sites. In addition, through the Department of Planning and Development, nearly 2,000 city-owned vacant lots have been made available for urban farmers to purchase.¹³

It is encouraging to see that the city government is working to address the needs of urban farmers to make it easier for them to conduct business and support the growth and local economy of their communities. However, not all institutions have clear pathways to land acquisition therefore, the Productive Landscapes project at the Chicago Food Policy Action Council (CFPAC) aims to address this issue and ensure urban agriculture spaces are recognized, supported, and cultivated to improve the lives of Chicagoans.



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The Productive Landscapes Project

The Productive Landscapes project, created by CFPAC in collaboration with Neighborspace, an urban land trust non-profit organization, aims to cultivate and improve urban agriculture in the greater Chicago area. One of the most significant barriers growers and farmers face is access to stable and long term land access. The goals of this project are to:

- Provide transparency on land use and acquisition for Chicagoans through land-owning institutions for urban agricultural uses including urban farms and community gardens
- Encourage land-owning institutions to amend their land policies to make urban agriculture projects more feasible
- Map vacant land within Cook County to know where land is available, institutions that own it, and suitability for urban agriculture
- Create a comprehensive website that guides urban farmers to land-owning institutions' processes for securing stable and long-term land based on farmers' agricultural needs

This report details the creation of the Chicago Land Access Pathways (CLAP) website for urban farmers, including insights from interviews conducted with farmers and with land-owning Institutions in the Chicagoland area and more information on the website's purpose and use.



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Institution Interviews

The Productive Landscapes team conducted initial research to learn about the processes for acquiring land through a number of institutions with land in Chicago and Cook County. This initial research demonstrated that there was limited information on institutional priorities for land use, allowable activities on their property and the process for land ownership or rental publicly available through their respective online platforms. To this end, from September 2022 to January 2023, the Productive Landscapes team conducted interviews with institutional representatives to gain clarity on pathways to land acquisition for Chicago urban farmers.

The following institutions completed interviews:

- Chicago Park District
- The Conservation Fund
- Cook County Land Bank
- City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development
- Neighborspace
- Chicago Botanic Garden
- Housing Authority of Cook County
- Southland Development Authority
- Illinois Department of Transportation
- ComEd

Institutional interviews informed the creation of the CLAP website for farmers of all experience levels to be a resource to them when planning their next steps in land ownership for their urban agriculture endeavors.

Among those interviewed, there was a wide range in the standard processes each takes for purchasing or using their land for urban agriculture activities, from formal processes, such as applications and work plans, to less formal, such as starting conversations with institutional leaders on interest of their land.

Land Priorities

Seven of the institutions interviewed work with individuals, nonprofits, and for-profits for land sales and rentals. Priorities for land use across institutions included housing/home-ownership, economic development, community improvement and urban agriculture & workforce training.

Institution Interviews

Stance on Urban Agriculture

Four institutions had no formal definition of urban agriculture while three others had less formal definitions such as through an organizational values statement, and one with a formal definition. Examples of urban agricultural projects happening across institutions' land include urban farms, community gardens, and raised garden beds.

Restricted and Allowable Activities

Often, representatives noted that there were no limitations to land use other than local zoning laws. Limitations that were mentioned include no cannabis production, no industrial use, no chemical use on crops, no large-scale solar use, as well as limitations that are considered on a case-by-case basis. Aside from these restrictions, institutions allow for functions of urban agriculture such as infrastructure builds (water, solar, power, greenhouses), refrigeration, composting, beehives, and livestock, again within local zoning laws.

Process for Land Acquisition and/or Rental

As aforementioned, the process for accessing land varies across institutions. This includes a formal application submission, submission of a work plan proposal, conversations with their point of contact about interest in a particular land parcel. These processes vary in duration from application submission to working on the land, from as short as around 2 weeks to 2+ years. Situations that can impact the duration of this process include financial issues, competition from other buyers, lack of aldermanic support, lack of community buy-in, environmental concerns, and policy and law concerns or changes. For some institutions, support in waiving or discounting fees and rental payments and grants are possible, however, for most, funding support would be needed from external sources.

Of the representatives interviewed, three have demonstrated interest in wanting to support the development of urban agricultural projects on their land. As such CFPAC and the Productive Landscapes team anticipates continuing conversations with interested institutions to brainstorm and ultimately help develop policies and/or programs dedicated to both improving land access for urban farmers and improving the lives of communities through increased access to healthy and affordable fresh foods.

Farmer Experience Interviews



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In addition to institutional interviews, five farmers in the Chicago and Cook County area were interviewed to learn about their perspectives on land ownership versus rental, their experiences in attempting to own land including challenges and successes, and fielding feedback on the Productive Landscapes map created by the Productive Landscapes team in collaboration with the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association (SSMMA) in 2020. Feedback received will be used in the near future for anticipated updates to improve functionality.

We spoke with a range of urban farmers in Chicago from different experience levels and backgrounds. These interviews provided important insights into the perspectives of farmers which have helped in how we frame the website for farmers to use. For example, we learned that business opportunities came up as an important factor in farming for one of the farmers we interviewed. From this understanding, we included the ability to make sales on the property as a factor that a farmer can filter results for only institutions that would allow business transactions.

Farmer Experience Interviews

Perspectives on Renting, Owning and Land use Agreements

Four of the five farmers interviewed preferred owning as opposed to renting. Reasons for ownership preference included long term benefits in ownership, more control over what you do with the land, pushes you to want to be successful to want to be successful in production, ability to rent to others.

“I think I would rather own the land myself...that just **gives you more control** for one thing but it also gives you, I think more satisfaction [...] I think you would put more into what would be required to **successfully grow and have good production...**”
Urban Farmer

One farmer did mention preferring to rent because it alleviates some stressors for that that come with owning. It is important to mention that this farmer is currently renting via a land-use agreement with a land-owning institution.

The following pros and cons noted from interviewees:

Renting

- Pros: Low upfront costs, non-permanent, Don't have to pay fees such as taxes and water
- Cons: Limited freedom in what you do on the land, can cost more long-term

Owning

- Pros: Taxes, total responsibility in event of damages
- Cons: Requires capital upfront

Characteristics of the Land

Farmers were asked what characteristics of farmable land they would consider farming on which they noted environmental factors such as sunlight, flatness, tree distribution, size of the land, soil content, pollutants (traffic, nearby industry), previous farming on the land, history or risk of flooding, electricity and water access, and general interest in the community in which the land is located.



Photo Credits: Alexy Irving

Farmer Experience Interviews

Relevant Information About Land-owning Institution

Farmers were asked to share information they would want to know from land-owning institutions that would help them in making a decision to purchase or rent land from them. Financial costs associated were emphasized among all five farmers. Other points mentioned include:

- What metrics, if any, does the farm need to track and report to the institution?
- What commitments to urban agriculture, if any, does the institution have?
- Is there someone who can walk them through the process, overview their financial ability and receive feedback on what is possible?

Challenges and Successes

There were major themes that were present among farmers when they shared their experiences renting or attempting to own land for urban agriculture. One farmer attempted to own land through a land-owning institution but found issues with finding a contractor to get the land up to par and in the land remediation process. Another farmer shared in their previous renting experience to which they found difficulty in figuring out where to start in registering their business and getting insurance. Another challenge mentioned included struggles to find volunteers for their community garden and in sourcing water. Successes shared by farmers included an easy process through an apprenticeship program that supported them through the process of renting and starting their farming experience maintaining a few garden beds at their local community garden.

Other comments

At the end of the interviews, farmers were asked if there was anything else that they wanted to share. One farmer highlighted the business aspect of farming. To this end, they shared that they want to farm as a part of their business plan and expressed that competition with supermarkets is a challenge for farmers to do and that this discourages many from farming. In addition, another farmer shared that it is important for farmers to have conversations related to land accessibility to share their experiences and concerns and loop them into initiatives and projects that are working to address these issues.

Farmer Experience Interviews

“The business of it - I'm worried about it because [at farmers markets] its typically people who want to buy locally, who want to have that relationship with the farmer. Unfortunately its a huge gap with customers who don't care about that and want the cheaper option that's in more abundance at the supermarket [...] How much room is that market and is there anyway to make it more accessible?”

Urban Farmer

Feedback on Productive Landscapes Map

In general, farmers found that the map could be a useful tool in determining where they would be most interested in acquiring or renting land. One farmer noted that they would use the tool infrequently but that it would be valuable for new farmers looking for land. Map layers that were noted as most helpful among farmers included:

- Proximity to farmer's markets to know the closest location they can sell their produce
- Flood zones to know which locations may have issues with flooding
- Railroad lines to know about proximity to pollution from fumes
- SNAP retailer locations, schools, and other community centers to know what groups and resources are nearby and opportunities for collaboration

Comments on improvements for the map included, noting how many offers have been made on the property, how frequent the map is updated and improving the useability and visualization of the map as one farmer noted the many layers of the map may be overwhelming for some to view.

Perspectives from these interviews provided important insights that the Productive Landscapes team ensured to address through institutional interviews and in creating the CLAP website to best address the needs and concerns voiced.

Chicago Land Access Pathways Website for Farmers

The website for farmers, named Chicago Land Access Pathways (CLAP) can be found [here](#). This website is intended for farmers who are interested in either purchasing or leasing land or interested in land-use agreements with a land-owning institution.

Creation

The CLAP website was created with the support of Ken Pan, a graduate student at the Illinois Institute of Technology contracted by CFPAC to create the website platform. Institutional interview notes were compiled and formatted such that the website has a filter feature for where land is predominantly located, method of acquisition, who the institutions tend to work with, and the duration of the process from start until a farmer would have access to the land. It also includes informational pages for each institution interviewed and provides land information, stance on urban agriculture, requirements, acquisition procedures, and contact information. Lastly, the website also hosts a Resources tab for more information on funding opportunities to acquire land for farmers.

Purpose

The CLAP website aims to address the challenge of not knowing where to look and who to contact by compiling relevant information into one central location to alleviate farmers from being overwhelmed by the task of researching on their own. It also addresses funding concerns through providing information of pathways to financial support for farmers.

Distribution

At this time, the website is only available online. The Productive Landscapes team recognizes that this is a barrier for those without internet access or with limited technology experience. This concern was also voiced by some farmer interviewees, though each farmer did not identify the online website as a barrier for themselves. Conversely, almost all American millennials say they use the internet and as a wave of younger farmers are getting settled into the profession, access to this website could provide them an entry point into learning and understanding pathways to land access as younger age groups tend to be more tech-savvy and regular internet users.¹⁴ The CLAP website could also help other young people who otherwise may not have considered farming feel empowered and capable of doing so. It is important to note however that disparities in internet usage across race/ethnicity among American millennials are not yet clear but overall usage among this younger generation are promising for adequate access to using the CLAP website.

How to Use

Use the filters on the left side of the web page to navigate through several City of Chicago, Cook County agencies and institutions that may be most relevant for your needs. Click on an institution or agency to learn more about allowable and restricted activities on the land, requirements for and process to purchase, lease or complete a land-use agreement and additional information

Recommendations & Next Steps

As the Productive Landscapes project continues to work towards supporting Chicago's urban agriculture scene, interviews with institutions will be ongoing to ensure that the Productive Landscapes team is aware of all land-owning institutions and their policies and therefore continue to update the CLAP website for farmers to use as their first step in acquiring stable and long-term land.



Interview City of Chicago aldermen on their stance on urban agriculture projects

This project highlighted the critical role that aldermen have in approving urban agriculture projects across Chicago. As such, the Productive Landscapes team has considered the next steps for this project to include interviews with aldermen about their stance on urban agriculture. It would be best to connect with politicians who have a history of hesitancy in urban agriculture in the city to understand what factors they consider when they decide not to approve such activities and what factors would make them more inclined to approve them. This is work that can be continued by CFPAC staff and incoming interns and/or fellows who will support the productive landscapes project.



Create educational opportunities for residents to learn about urban agriculture and encourage their aldermen to support urban agriculture in their communities

To this end, the future of the Productive Landscapes project will likely move to more mobilization of Chicagoans to engage them in the website to inform them of the several options available for more stable and long-term land accessibility and to encourage them to start conversations with their political representatives on the importance of urban agriculture for their communities and improving food accessibility.



Follow up with institutions interested in supporting urban farmers

There were several institutional representatives who voiced their interest in creating or updating their policies and programs to establish a pathway at their institution for urban farmers to use and/or purchase land from them. CFPAC should ensure that these conversations can continue by scheduling follow up meetings with these representatives to brainstorm ideas on what's possible.



Address farmers' feedback on the Productive Landscapes map to improve useability

With the feedback from farmers, the Productive Landscapes team should prioritize updates to the map and include it as an additional useful resource for the CLAP website. The map can help farmers to skim through locations where they are interested in buying or leasing land for urban agriculture projects to allow them to start to narrow down where and with which institution they can collaborate with, followed by reviewing the CLAP website to learn how to start the land acquisition process.



Continue to advocate for institutional support for local urban growers

As some farmers mentioned in interviews, there is a need to include farmers in conversations related to food access and to ensure that farmers are capable of competing with large supermarket retailers without compromising their profits.

Conclusion

CFPAC is excited to present the CLAP website for urban farmers who want to take ownership in the land that they grow on and is hopeful that the website will serve as a central, easy-to-navigate location for farmers to start their land acquisition process. As we look towards the near future of the urban agriculture landscape in Chicago, our goal is to see BIPOC growers owning land in their communities and providing not just food but economic growth, community cohesion, and food sovereignty in the neighborhoods of Chicago that need it the most.



Learn More

[Chicago Food Policy Action Council](#)

[Neighborspace](#)

[Productive Landscapes Project](#)

[Chicago Land Access Pathways \(CLAP\) Website](#)

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