



**Testimony Submitted by
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Before The New York State Senate's Joint Public Hearing:
Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside
Continuing Inequalities on our Food Systems
Tuesday, April 13, 2021

Thank you for holding today's hearing. My name is Onika Abraham, and I am a wife, a mother, a life-long New York City resident, and most pertinent to this hearing, a member of BFU-NYS, a board member of Black Farmer Fund, a granddaughter of three farmers and a teacher, champion, midwife to hundreds more farmers as the Executive Director of Farm School NYC. Through my oral testimony, I will lift up how essential urban farming and farm training is to diversifying our nation's whitest profession - farming.

Farm School NYC offers urban agriculture training to adults through certificate programs as well as 20 individual courses -- over 430 hours of classes annually -- that are tailored to the growing season, offering hands-on skill building, professional development and timely work at flourishing urban agriculture sites all over New York City.

Our core constituency are Black and brown beginning farmers and food justice advocates. Our students learn that the issues we are facing are not food deserts, but food apartheid -- a term that doesn't treat our marginalization as a naturally occurring ecosystem like a desert, grassland or forest, but like the structured, racialized, political, economic and social system that it is -- a system that we can work to interrogate and dismantle.

The work of dismantling racism in the food system is generational work, and it is work that no one farmer or organization can do in isolation.

That is why Farm School NYC is a founding member of Black Farmers United NYS, and we are humbled to serve as the fiscal sponsor of the coalition. Black Farmers United NYS is a collective of Black farmers, educators, and food justice advocates from across this state who developed [9 Solutions for Racial Inequity in New York Agriculture](#).

These solutions underscore how essential education, training, technical assistance and support are to supporting existing Black farmers and the scores of young and beginning Black farmers who are called to the profession.

I was one of those young aspiring farmers. Inspired by my grandmother, who grew everything her children ate on less than an acre in Alabama, I went to a renowned agricultural training program in California in 2011 that trained sustainable farmers for 50 years. I can't recall not one Black or brown faculty member, not one mentor of color, not one person who reflected my experience. It was demoralizing to only see Black and brown folks in the field, but not in the classroom, lifted up as the experts they are. That's why I was drawn to Farm School NYC.

After training over 400 Black and brown beginning farmers, Farm School NYC has seen how critical it is Black and brown beginning farmers learn with mentors and teachers who reflect their cultural heritage and who teach regenerative agriculture's origins in and relationship to the Black and indigenous agrarian experience.

We urge the legislators to invest in these BIPOC-led and -centered agricultural training programs, and resource organizations and Black farmers to teach the next generation. We urge you not to fall into the trap of only financing white-led organizations to "serve" farmers of color, which only perpetuates the power imbalances that come with relegating Black people as passive consumers being served, rather than power-building producers that create, grow and own the means of education and production.

Nevertheless, even as we urge legislators to invest directly in Black-led farmer education initiatives, we recognize that our land-grant and other public institutions do have a role to play. 1/3 of the testifiers at the hearing are from Cornell, a clear indication of the power and platform our land-grant is given. Black Farmers United NYS outlines two solutions that can help: providing full scholarships to all black students pursuing agricultural degrees, and creating programs at these institutions with experienced black farmers teaching new black farmers on their farms with salaries and scholarships provided by the University.

At Farm School NYC, our students learn that accessing fresh, affordable food is a human right, but access is just the beginning -- true justice is Black and brown communities owning the means of production.

And owning the means of production is where Black and indigenous farmers of color are falling short.

You have heard the statistics. They are dire. New York's agricultural landscape is deeply redlined. New York State has the 2nd largest Black population of any state in the nation, yet we are woefully represented in farming.

- Only 0.24% of farmers are black, 139 black farmers out of 57,000.
- Black farmers make \$1 for every \$5 a white farmer makes.
- White farmers have more than 500 times the land of black farmers.
- Black farms receive 60% fewer government subsidies and support.
- Black farmers make \$1 for every \$5 a white farmer makes.
- Black farmers make less than any other group, netting -\$903 annually while the average farmer's net income is \$42,875.

Moreover, urban farmers are hardly factored into these statistics at all. A small fraction of the 57,000 farmers who completed the Census of Agriculture are from urban congressional districts, yet the majority of Black and brown people growing food for their communities do so in cities. In fact, 93% of African Americans in NYS live in New York City and its surrounding counties. In the rest of the state, the majority of African Americans live in urban areas such as Buffalo, Syracuse, and Rochester. Cities are where Black people farm. Undercounting and under-investing in urban agriculture in our state is a racial justice issue.

We urge our legislators to increase funding to urban agriculture, especially for farms led by Black, brown and indigenous people of color. Urban farms are where we grow food for our communities, and where we can learn and practice skills that are transferable to larger scale farming, a trajectory that many Farm School NYC students have made. With support, Black-led urban farming initiatives can help so many more. Help us ensure that Black farmers aren't marginalized out of existence with policies that support BIPOC-led training and investment in urban farms.