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FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS AND ENDING FOOD DESERTS STUDY COMMITTEE (2021 SENATE RESOLUTION 283)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Senator Harold Jones II, Chair
District 22

Senator Billy Hickman
District 4

Senator Freddie Powell Sims
District 12

Senator Russ Goodman
District 8

Senator Steve Gooch
District 51

*Prepared by the Senate Research Office
2021*

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STUDY COMMITTEE FOCUS, CREATION, AND DUTIES

The Senate Improving Access to Healthy Foods and Ending Food Deserts Study Committee (the “Study Committee”) was created by 2021 Senate Resolution 283 to: (A) determine how many Georgians live in food deserts and where food deserts are located; (B) examine local, state, and national policies which address food deserts; (C) examine the economic impact food deserts have on this state's economy; (D) examine any changes that should be made to this state's tax and economic policies to combat food deserts; and (E) examine how this state can assist local governments as they attempt to eradicate food deserts.¹

The Study Committee met for four substantive meetings to hear testimony in different locations. These meetings were held in Augusta, Georgia at Augusta State University; Valdosta, Georgia at Valdosta State University; and in Atlanta, Georgia at the State Capital.

Senator Harold Jones II of the 22nd served as Chair of the Study Committee. The other Study Committee members included Senator Billy Hickman of the 4th, Senator Russ Goodman of the 8th, Senator Freddie Powell Sims of the 12th, and Senator Steve Gooch of the 51st.

The following legislative staff members were assigned to the Study Committee: Andrew Allison of the Senate Press Office; Katherine Russell and Beth Vaughan of the Senate Research Office; Melody DeBussey of the Senate Budget and Evaluation Office; Holly Carter of the Office of Legislative Counsel; and Sabrina Wise, Legislative Assistant to Chairman Jones.

BACKGROUND

There are several methods to define a “food desert” or to measure a community’s ability to access fresh food. In the August 2012 Economic Research Service report entitled “Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts,” the term “food deserts” is defined to mean a census tract that meets both low-income and low-access criteria including: (1) poverty rate is greater than or equal to 20 percent or median family income does not exceed 80 percent statewide (rural/urban) or metro-area (urban) median family income; and (2) at least 500 people or 33 percent of the population located more than 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store.² For its Food Access Research Atlas (“FARA”), the USDA’s Economic Research Service currently utilizes concepts of low-income and low-access (“LILA”) census tracts. In 2015, 39.4 million people of the United States population lived in LILA census tracts, and 2,207,703 people in the State of Georgia lived in LILA census tracts.³

Food insecurity costs Georgia \$1.78 billion in additional health care costs per year and increases disease risk for a number of serious conditions, including: high blood pressure (25% more common); Type 2 diabetes (25% higher); kidney disease (50% higher); osteoporosis (400% higher); obesity (200% higher); and cancer.⁴

¹ GEORGIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 2021 Senate Resolution 283, <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/60583> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

² Paula Dutko, Michele Ver Ploeg, & Tracye Farrigan, *Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts*, U.S. DEPT OF AGRIC. ECON. RESEARCH SERV. (Aug. 2012), available at https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45014/30940_err140.pdf

³ U.S. DEPT OF AGRIC. ECON. RESEARCH SERV., State-Level Estimates of Low Income and Low Access Populations (last updated Sept. 30, 2019), available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/state-level-estimates-of-low-income-and-low-access-populations/>

⁴ Joy Goetz, MS, RDN, LD, CHES on behalf of the Georgia Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, presentation on October 5, 2021, available online at <https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/AtlantaCommunityFoodBankHungerandHealth.pdf>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Study Committee heard testimony from 65 speakers, and the following is a brief overview of the multifaceted issues that were presented to the Study Committee:

1. Education related to nutrition

The Study Committee heard from a number of speakers about the importance of education in addressing food insecurity and promoting access to healthy foods, including testimony about evidence-based solutions relating to shaping tastes and eating habits early through school health intervention programs and regarding nutrition and health education for adults.

2. Senior hunger

Another common thread from the testimony was concerns regarding senior citizens having adequate access to healthy foods. A number of barriers, including the inability to access available resources online due to a lack of internet access, were discussed. The Study Committee also heard testimony regarding ongoing efforts to address senior hunger, including the Georgia Department of Human Service's State Plan to Address Senior Hunger and Georgia's Annual Senior Hunger Summit.

3. Concerns regarding overregulation

Some speakers expressed frustration regarding overregulation in regards to regulations that the State adds on top of federal regulations for federally funded nutrition programs that are then managed by the State of Georgia. The Study Committee also heard recommendations that the State be more flexible and innovative with its hunger programs.

4. Allocating State funds to nutrition incentive programs

The Study Committee heard testimony regarding SNAP nutrition incentive programs which match SNAP shoppers' purchases dollar-for-dollar on fresh, locally grown food. The Study Committee also heard testimony regarding how state funding can help secure matching federal funds for the expansion of nutrition incentive programs.

5. Access to transportation

Access to a vehicle is one of the various metrics used by the USDA's Economic Research Service in its Food Access Research Atlas to delineate low-income census tracts where a significant number of households are located far from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle. Numerous speakers described improving transportation options as a solution to increase access to healthy foods.

6. Potential concerns regarding the State WIC Program

The Study Committee heard an ongoing discussion between grocers and the State WIC program. The State WIC program has some flexibility in its administration but must still abide by federal laws and regulations. The Study Committee heard testimony about previous fraud in the State WIC program and the remedial steps taken by the State WIC program to address those issues. However, the Study Committee also heard testimony from grocers who have concerns regarding barriers to obtaining a State WIC license and the costs that a grocer can bear by participating as a WIC vendor.

7. Dollar stores and food access issues

The Study Committee heard testimony regarding concerns that dollar stores could be impacting the ability of traditional grocery stores to operate in low access areas, including testimony regarding DeKalb County's moratorium on small box discount stores. The Study Committee also heard testimony on behalf of Dollar General and the efforts that it is making as a discount retail store to provide healthy options and invest in partnerships to improve access to healthy foods.

STUDY COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND TESTIMONY

A. Meeting 1 – August 25, 2021

The first meeting of the Study Committee was held on August 25, 2021 at Augusta University. Senator Harold Jones (Chair), Senator Russ Goodman, and Senator Billy Hickman were present for the meeting.⁵

The following individuals provided testimony:

- Department of Public Health: Sean Mack, State WIC Director; Todd Stormant, WIC Nutrition Operations/Education Manager; and Yvonne Rodgers, WIC Deputy Director of Vendor Management;
- Kathy Kuzava, President of Georgia Food Industry Association;
- Sue Parr, President of Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce;
- Hawthorne Welcher, Director of Augusta Housing and Development Department;
- Timothy McFalls, Sr., Manager of Commercial and Retail Development for the Augusta Economic Development Authority;
- CSRA Regional Commission: Regina Pyles, Director of Planning; and Betsy Teasley, CSRA Area Agency on Aging;
- Amy Breitmann, Executive Director of Golden Harvest Food Bank;
- Kellie Cardona, Executive Director of Augusta Dream Center;
- Karen Gordon, Co-Founder of Growing Augusta: Arts, Agriculture, and Agency;
- Rebecca Van Loenen, Executive Director of Augusta Locally Grown;
- Menia Chester, MS, CFCS, CNWE; and
- Keith Walton, Campus Pastor of Journey Sherwood Community Church.

1. Department of Public Health – WIC (Women, Infants, and Children)

State WIC Director Mack provided an overview of the WIC program as it operates in Georgia, as well as the history and background on the program itself. Mr. Stormant noted that WIC is a key partner in the process of providing access to healthy food and education. He described the federally required referrals for Medicaid, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). He explained that, in a broader context, Georgia’s WIC program also provides referrals for Children First, immunization, Head Start, and other programs. He provided a map of Georgia and the health districts. There are 202 WIC clinics throughout the state, serving about 185,000 participants monthly.

Ms. Rodgers stated that there are over 1,300 WIC vendor locations statewide, in grocery stores, pharmacies, and commissaries. Authorized WIC grocers stock and maintain a minimum inventory of WIC-approved foods, and they agree to remain competitively priced. Ms. Rodgers also described the farmers’ market nutrition program, which is seasonal and includes the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (“FMNP”) and the Seniors Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (“Senior FMNP”). The FMNP serves traditional WIC constituents and runs from June 1 to September 30. Ms. Rodgers stated the FMNP was established by Congress in July 1992 and is funded by the USDA. The State WIC Program administrates the program in partnership with the 18 health districts, and Ms. Rodgers noted that 16 of the 18 health districts are currently active in the FMNP.⁶ The Senior FMNP is

⁵ All presentations and materials provided to the Study Committee by speakers at the Study Committee meetings are accessible online at: <https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/en-US/2021StudyCommittees.aspx>

⁶ According to a handout provided to the Study Committee by the State WIC program, WIC farmers markets are held each year, beginning June 1 and ending September 30, at participating health departments across the state. WIC participants can use their checks at any Georgia WIC FMNP approved farmers market site displaying a Georgia WIC Farmers Market sign. Recipients receive one set of FMNP checks per season. The brochure provided to the Study Committee is available online at: <https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/WICGAFarmersMarketNutritionProgramChildren.pdf>

operated in partnership with the Division of Aging, and Ms. Rodgers stated that the Senior FMNP was established in 2001 as a USDA pilot program, that the program was financed through the 2002 Farm Bill, and that the funding continues to this day through the USDA.⁷

Director Mack noted that the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act required all WIC agencies to issue food benefits by Electronic Benefit Transfer (“EBT”) by October 2020. Georgia WIC will fully implement EBT by October 31, 2022. State WIC Director Mack described COVID-19 accommodations for WIC, including the American Rescue Plan Act and the increase to the access to fruits and vegetable vouchers. He described how WIC also allowed substitution for out of stock WIC-approved foods (for example, allowing the purchase of 2% milk if lower fat milks are out of stock). He also discussed the WIC Approved Foods List, which is a list of foods that are available to a WIC customer, and only these food items may be purchased using the WIC program.⁸

2. Kathy Kuzava, President of Georgia Food Industry Association

Kathy Kuzava, President of the Georgia Food Industry Association (“GFIA”) spoke to the Study Committee and provided perspectives from grocers. GFIA is a state association that consists of food retailers, wholesalers, and suppliers. She stated that ten years ago, the Food Trust led a group and formed the Georgia Supermarket Access Taskforce. She described working with nonprofits, grocery leaders, and the Blank Foundation, among other organizations, to prepare a presentation with recommendations (see below).

She described how competitive the retail industry is and noted that grocery stores operate on an average one percent profit margin (pre-pandemic). She noted the challenges that are presented in entering into this competitive industry and how stores can begin to lose money, for various reasons. She stated that there are also increased costs due to the pandemic and that sales increased during the pandemic but so did costs. She described the struggle with inventory during the COVID-19 pandemic and shortages on a variety of WIC items, like bread and milk. She described going to restaurant suppliers to get items like milk, the prices being higher due to having to purchase the milk from a different supplier, and the WIC voucher being rejected (like a bad check) for being over the amount. She stated that e-WIC would make it easier to adjust the prices faster, based on what has been seen in other states.

She discussed the changes in the supermarket industry over the last ten years, including e-commerce. She described how dollar stores can come into an area and take a portion of sales in the community, by selling various items like paper products and dish detergent that cut into what the supermarket would sell. She provided examples of stories from retailers, including one who has concerns over premise liability and the increase in tort liability coverage.

Ms. Kuzava described a new retailer purchasing a grocery store who has never owned a grocery store. She described helping the new retailer get a SNAP license so she could open with a SNAP license, but the new retailer will not be able to open with WIC because the new retailer cannot get a WIC license until she has had a SNAP license for one year. Ms. Kuzava noted that there had been fraud in the State WIC program many years ago which has been fixed, but the State WIC program is now very stringent with the new rules.

⁷ More information regarding Georgia’s Senior FMNP is available online at: <https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/WICGAFarmersMarketNutritionProgramSeniors.pdf>

⁸ The representatives from the WIC program provided the Study Committee members with a handout regarding the WIC Approved Foods List, which is accessible online at: <https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/WICApprovedFoodsList.pdf>

Ms. Kuzava discussed the recommendations that were made by the Georgia Supermarket Access Task Force made in 2012 and noted which of those recommendations could still be made today.⁹ She made the following recommendations to the Study Committee: (1) the State of Georgia should modify the Georgia WIC requirements to reduce the barriers to healthy food vendor participation in underserved communities; (2) the State should partner with local government and grocery retailers to prioritize increasing the rates of SNAP and WIC enrollment for eligible individuals; (3) state and local governments should implement a fast-tracked permit process and provide assistance with land assembly for supermarkets and other healthy food retail projects that want to locate in underserved communities; (4) state and local governments along with other workforce training groups should partner with supermarket and other healthy food retail operators to support workforce development programs that ensure local residents are trained and qualified to work in the grocery industry; (5) state and local governments should partner with grocers, developers, commercial and retail security, law enforcement and community groups to create a safe and secure environment for customers and store personnel; and (6) state and local governments should partner with local community groups to provide nutrition education for residents in underserved communities where fresh food financing projects exist.

3. Sue Parr, President of the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce

Ms. Parr described three issues relating to access to healthy food, including: (1) internet connectivity, (2) 2021 Senate Bill 49 and expediting the permitting process and regulatory process that large commercial retail development or mixed use facilities go through; and (3) transportation.¹⁰ She described how Senate Bill 49 brings conformity to expedited permitting. She discussed the challenges associated with urban development and noted the importance of commercial developers having a tool in the toolbox to help them fast track the permitting and regulatory process. She discussed public transportation and noted that her region has passed TSPLIT (Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) for the second time. She described public transportation as an important tool for people to be able to access healthy food and reduce food insecurity.

In regards to internet access, Ms. Parr noted that the Augusta Metro Chamber partnered with the county board of education four years ago to study and understand the lack of home internet access for students in Augusta-Richmond County. The issue is the affordability and the price of the subscription for internet access. Ms. Parr described the role that employers could have in promoting healthy lifestyles for their employees, such as employers providing incentives to employees like gym memberships and opportunities to access healthier foods, which could in turn lower the costs of the employers' health plan. She also noted that public transportation must continue to be a high priority because employers have employees who need to continue to be able to get to work.

4. Hawthorne Welcher, Director of Augusta Housing and Development Department

Director Welcher provided an overview of the mission of the Augusta Housing and Community Development Department ("HCD"), which is to create positive change by promoting self-sufficiency through partnership in (1) economic development; (2) quality housing; and (3) neighborhood reinvestment. He discussed food desert eradication methods, like increasing disposable income in the

⁹ For further detail, the report of the Georgia Supermarket Access Task Force can be found online at: http://policylinkcontent.s3.amazonaws.com/GA_recommFINAL_web.pdf

¹⁰ 2021 Senate Bill 49, sponsored by Senator Clint Dixon of the 45th and Representative Josh Bonner of the 72nd, passed in the Senate by a vote of 39-13 and the House by 148-15. The bill was signed by Governor Kemp on May 4, 2021 and became effective law on that date. Additional information regarding Senate Bill 49 and its complete text are available online at: <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/59083>

area, repopulating the area and increasing average household income in the area. He also discussed the Laney Walker Farmers Market and partnerships with the American Heart Association and with Augusta Locally Grown. He noted that the Laney Walker Farmers Market accepts and doubles SNAP benefits used there. He also discussed the mini-concept of Good Food Markets, an urban grocer. Director Welcher presented a slide that reflects the needs of various grocery store chains in the area.

5. Timothy McFalls, Sr., Manager of Commercial and Retail Development for Augusta Economic Development Authority

Mr. McFalls gave a brief overview of the Augusta Economic Development Authority, and he provided an overview of the staff and board members. He noted that two major grocers are interested in Augusta today but that it would be 12 months before they could put a shovel in the ground. He said the slow moving process can be frustrating. He described working with Augusta Transit and trying to create routes that would address issues with workers getting to their employers' locations, including for those that are opening second and third shifts. He also noted that better transportation solutions are needed to get people to grocery stores.

He played a video for the Study Committee regarding Good Food Markets, which is designed to be in communities that are traditionally underserved. Mr. McFalls recommended (1) thinking of access to food as more of a right than a privilege and (2) funding public transit authorities so they can provide a public service that benefits the citizenry and not making a transit authority run as if it is a for-profit business.

6. Central Savannah River Area (CSRA) Regional Commission

Regina Pyles, CSRA Regional Commission's Director of Planning, stated that CSRA includes over 50 local governments with over 488,000 residents. She described local issues and barriers, including: (1) government and service providers (including, for example, locating older adults who are not currently being served under a federally or locally funded meal program and unclear or non-existent codes and ordinances (i.e., zoning and land use, which can be used to build a better quality of life to protect residents and build communities), etc.); (2) business (aging farmers and incentives for future farmers); and (3) residents (more grandparents are raising grandchildren, lack of knowledge around available services, existing ordinances and ways to access healthy foods, etc.). Ms. Pyles described examples of local and regional government projects, including removing fees for farmers, making more straightforward applications, using land at schools to grow food and the students can watch the food being grown and learn about the industry and the local food system. She also discussed encouraging local policy review (i.e., reviewing codes, whether the changing of a zoning application or changing density would allow for a better quality of life).

Ms. Pyles described the CSRA Regional Plan 2040 to increase access to healthy, affordable food by (1) educating the public and local government officials on what is currently available and addressing what is missing in the regional food system; and (2) examining and updating local land use policies as they relate to community food systems. She also described creating a regional map of farmer's markets, community gardens, school gardens, and other resources, through the CSRA Food Mapping Project.

Betsy Teasley from the CSRA Area Agency on Aging ("AAA") discussed the Senior Hunger Coalition and the Georgia State Plan to Address Senior Hunger (December 2017). Examples of recommendations from the State Plan include: the creation of regional hunger coalitions; providing education and training; and providing entrepreneurial grants.

CSRA Regional Commission made the following recommendations:

General: (1) Fund programs that incentivize or require collaborative partnerships; (2) review other states' policies and initiatives that have a low rate of food insecurity; (3) provide long-term staff, technology, training and support for individuals to assist them with applying for food benefits electronically; and (3) advocate for a streamlined application process for food benefits.

Schools: (1) Support and maintain farm-to-school programming; (2) incentivize farmer participation in rural markets; (3) enable and support school gardens that have excess produce to sell it; (4) review and update regulations for utilizing local food producers in schools if needed; and (5) work with schools and other institutions to allow markets on their grounds.

Transportation: (1) Expand home-delivered meal programs; (2) create delivery options for healthy food to older adults; and (3) provide transit vouchers for individuals' quality of life trips.

Retail and Industry: (1) Work with small, local retailers to add or increase affordable, healthier options; (2) address the creation and utilization of food waste at all levels; and (3) standardize a process for retailer food donation, including differentiation of food types and associated regulation (and expanding the ability of retailers to donate food, etc. providing more options to donate items like fresh meat, etc.).

Planning and Land Use: (1) Encourage the use of food access policies and activities in comprehensive plans and other plans; (2) create, strengthen, and support urban agriculture and related policies (such as food forests); (3) introducing healthy, medicinal food to residents without residents having to pay for it – i.e., having the food forest in a park where the residents can access it without cost); (4) assist with creating local food forests at community locations like parks; (5) incentivize or require dedicated space in new housing developments (single and multifamily) and housing authority complexes for community gardens and mobile markets; (6) develop food systems' model ordinances through the Department of Community Affairs, local/regional governments and other agencies; (7) expedite the permitting process for grocery development in priority areas; and (8) provide resident guides that simplify local ordinances and provide clear directions.

7. Amy Breitmann, Executive Director of Golden Harvest Food Bank

Ms. Breitmann provided a brief overview of the history of Golden Harvest Food Bank and the growth of its scope and mission. She described the challenges sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in people who had not previously experienced food insecurity and how Golden Harvest Food Bank worked on addressing the rising need for food assistance. She described the Bold Goal, designed to address the meal gap of 8.8 million meals by the year 2030.

She described the strategies that Golden Harvest Food Bank utilized to meet the growing need for food, including increasing its capacity, staff and volunteer force; investing in community partners; strengthening programs for children, seniors, and rural communities; building individual and community health through better nutrition and fresh produce; partnering with healthcare providers to increase access to healthy food and nutrition education; and connecting the community with more volunteer opportunities to be a part of solving hunger. She described working with local governments and trying to use American Rescue Plan Act funds to build satellite locations, expand pantries, and build greater access.

8. Kellie Cardona, Executive Director of Augusta Dream Center

Ms. Cardona described how she began the initiative as the Augusta Dream Center (“ADC”) in 2016 but prior to that in 2012, ran it as My Neighbor Ministry. ADC is a partnering agency with Golden Harvest Food Bank. Some of ADC's programs provide health care and mental health resources, clothing, and adequate bedding for families in need who have children. She also described ADC's adopt

a block program, which has the mission to not leave that block and to return to provide resources at regular times, including mobile food distribution. ADC's food pantry is open twice a week, and they also serve hot meals on Sundays. Ms. Cardona stated that an average of 15,000 pounds of food is distributed a month. She expressed concerns about the patrons' transportation, the impractical location of certain current bus stops or lack of bus stops in certain areas, and the need for sidewalks.

9. Karen Gordon, Co-Founder of Growing Augusta: Arts, Agriculture, and Agency

Karen Gordon is the co-founder of Growing Augusta, which brings together farmers, artists, and builders of community, with the mission of creating a food oasis in South Richmond County. She described how Growing Augusta began with the Soul + Soil Initiative, which was started with a \$3,000 mini-grant from the Georgia Organics pitch competition. Soul + Soil was imagined as a live-work-play resources in South Augusta, with its residents at the helm, to identify and build food assets (like farmers markets, community gardens, and urban farms) in the neighborhoods. Ms. Gordon described how Growing Augusta had to make a hard pivot with COVID-19 pandemic. She discussed the Saturday Market at the River, which provides live music and arts performances and cooking demonstrations. She noted that the Jamestown Market has been paused due the Delta variant of COVID-19. Growing Augusta is a certified Georgia Grown company and obtained a cottage food license to be able to sell value-added products in persona and online.

Growing Augusta made the following recommendations: (1) providing financial incentives for developers to build fruit and nut trees and edible landscaping into building communities; (2) incentivize dollar stores to partner with farmers to bring fresh produce into the communities; and (3) loosen restrictions on urban agriculture to allow for small livestock as long as nuisance is mitigated.

10. Rebecca Van Loenen, Executive Director of Augusta Locally Grown

Ms. Van Loenen highlighted Augusta Locally Grown's pre-pandemic programs, COVID-19 programs, and what the plans are going forward. Augusta Locally Grown has a network of 60 plus sustainable farmers and producers covering 100 miles within the Central Savannah River Area, with four locations for pickup and delivery. Augusta Locally Grown connects the farmer to the community through a variety of ways, including farmers markets. They also had one of the nation's first online farmers markets, which began with a group of female farmers who got together and used the Locally Grown platform (hence the name "Augusta Locally Grown"). Augusta Locally Grown also offers traditional farmers markets. She described the Georgia Food for Health Program, also known as "Veggie Rx," which was the State's first vegetable prescription program. Georgia Food for Health provides an actual prescription for fruits and vegetables. Participants and their families can redeem vegetable prescriptions at the local farmer's market, and they also have access to cooking classes, wellness classes, and clinic visits. She also discussed the HUB for Community Innovation project. In terms of ideas for improvement, Augusta Locally Grown made the following recommendations: (1) infuse funds and development into small neighborhood grocers with incentives to purchase from local growers; (2) provide small business grants for farmers who sell in food desert areas; and (3) create incentive programs for selling in food desert areas much like incentives and tax breaks in opportunity zones.

11. Menia Chester, MS, CFCS, CNWE

Ms. Chester was the Director of the Fulton County Cooperative Extension and created a program that gave away vegetables. She also created recipes that would accompany the fresh foods that were being given away. She described the Fulton Fresh Mobile Farmers Market program, which was created in part from funds from Arthur Blank Foundation and the Atlanta Falcons Foundation. She noted that

the program has since been duplicated in other counties and in other states. She also showed the Study Committee a video from a CNN news report regarding the Fulton Fresh program.¹¹

12. Keith Walton, Campus Pastor of Journey Sherwood Community Church

Pastor Walton described working in the community with students from a Title I school (a federal education program that supports low income students). He started a food pantry but noticed that the foods that were being given out were high in sodium and low in nutritional value. He worked to build 21 raised beds and encouraged the kids to come to the backyard (all while engaging them in STEM educational activities). He said that, at harvest time, they open the gates and lets the community take what they need from the garden. The Green Thumbs group within the church helps people learn about the fresh foods. He described bringing local farmers in to sell directly to the community and noted that they had great foot traffic at those events. He discussed attacking socioeconomic diseases within the community. He is about to introduce kale to the community and will provide educational workshops with chefs to help teach the community what to do with the vegetables that they are given.

B. Meeting 2 – September 15, 2021

The second meeting of the Study Committee was held at Valdosta State University on September 15, 2021. Senator Harold Jones (Chair), Senator Russ Goodman, and Senator Freddie Powell Sims were present in-person for the meeting, and Senator Billy Hickman participated in the meeting over Zoom.

The following individuals provided testimony:

- Dr. Vincent Miller, Vice President of Student Affairs, Valdosta State University;
- Jalen Smith, President, Student Government Association, Valdosta State University;
- Tom Coogle, President of Reynolds Foodliner Inc. (d/b/a Piggly Wiggly);
- Dr. Anne Price, Associate Professor of Sociology, Valdosta State University;
- Dr. Michael Webster, Professor of Exercise Physiology, Valdosta State University School of Health and Sciences;
- Steve Brophy, Vice President of Government Relations, Dollar General Corporation;
- Frank Richards, Chief Executive Officer of Second Harvest of South Georgia, Inc.;
- Dr. Allisen Penn, Associate Dean for Extension and Outreach, University of Georgia, College of Family and Consumer Sciences;
- Susan Culpepper, County Extension Coordinator for the University of Georgia, Cooperative Extension for Douglas County;
- Vanessa Hayes, Chief Nutrition Officer, Tift County Schools;
- Paige Dukes, County Manger, Lowndes County;
- Christie Moore, President, Valdosta-Lowndes Chamber of Commerce;
- Dr. Kimberly Carr, Community Resource Specialist for the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center; and
- Davis Perkins, Rural Health Representative for the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center.

The Study Committee also heard public comment from Michael Smith, Executive Director of the Greater Valdosta United Way and from the Reverend Fer-Rell Malone Sr., CEO of Fresh Communities.

¹¹ The video that Ms. Chester showed the Study Committee is available online at: https://youtu.be/smp0_vlN-Is

1. Valdosta State University Administration and Student Government Association

Dr. Vincent Miller, VP of Student Affairs, and Jalen Smith, President of the Student Government Association, provided a presentation regarding combatting food insecurity at Valdosta State University. Mr. Smith discussed the Blazer food pantry and closet which is open and accessible to students and the Swipe It Forward Campaign and the SGA's partnership with Dining Services to allow students to donate unused guest meal swipes. Dr. Miller noted that there is a growing trend of more college campuses recognizing food insecurity on campus and implementing programs to address those issues.

2. Tom Coogle, President of Reynolds Foodliner Inc. (d/b/a Piggly Wiggly)

Mr. Coogle is an independent grocer, and he noted that there are fewer independent grocers in the industry now. He described what grocers do when trying to decide whether to go to a location. He stated that a grocer will come into a market and do a headcount. He said that his focus has been more in rural areas, and he noted that the grocery stores in a rural area are trying to bring in more people from a larger footprint. He described the challenges of trying to operate a store in Roberta, Georgia and having to close the store at the end of the lease because the store was not sustainable due to insufficient business. He described the capital requirements to open a new location. Even if the store is profitable, the margin would be about 1.75% of the total receipts. He described the management program that his company offers to help people start-up grocery stores.

He outlined the challenges for rural grocers. He noted that rural areas are losing population and that the stores in rural areas would be below the average top line volume. He noted that the costs of the power bill is a significant issue and that some independent grocers cannot make the investment in more energy efficient equipment. He described how, in the independent grocer world, they buy stock in a co-op or collaborate to have stronger buying power. He discussed the need for efficient management practices, for example, determining when to staff and addressing theft.

He discussed struggles with the WIC program and aspects of the program that can be burdensome for the vendors in rural areas. He noted that it costs him 2.75% to sell WIC products. He believes that WIC is overregulated. He noted that WIC at one point was concerned with products in the stores being out of date, which is an issue in any store. He said that an independent grocery store in a small town where business is slow may have more dating issues. He described the issues with "sell by" dates as opposed to the date at which the food product is spoiled. He said that the WIC program was doing date checks and issuing warnings for out of date items, then returning shortly thereafter and doing another date check. The grocer spends extra labor going through the store to pull out of date items, but it is difficult to get all of those items checked and pulled. The WIC program could, after so many violations, pull the state-issued WIC license. He described issues with how WIC pays the grocers in the program for the products that are sold through the WIC program. He opined that there are grocery stores that will not come to Georgia because of the WIC program. He noted the need for a dialogue between the grocers and the WIC program to address these issues.

Mr. Coogle stated that he is a fan of jobs tax credits and that those tax credits have been helpful. He suggested looking at rural areas differently and noted that adding a location in some circumstances could put another grocer out of business. He suggested programs to help grocers who need new refrigeration. In response to a question regarding dollar stores and whether they impact his business, Mr. Coogle said that he has seen a huge number of dollar stores opening up. The rural independent grocers are trying to draw from a larger footprint and that customers would not travel as far to, for

example, pick-up a gallon of milk. He discussed the value of promoting growth of locally owned businesses.

3. Dr. Anne Price, Associate Professor of Sociology, Valdosta State University

Dr. Price described her research in looking at community indicators, socioeconomic indicators, and neighborhood design. She described the USDA Food Access Atlas and the USDA Food and Environment Atlas and provided data regarding key food access and health indicators for Lowndes County as compared to the Georgia averages. She described the metrics for low income and low access in the USDA Food Access Atlas. She noted limitations regarding how data is collected for identifying food deserts in the USDA Food Access Atlas (which is focused on data collected by census tract) as compared to health indicators like obesity rates (which are collected at the county level) and certain limitations with the USDA Food Access Atlas in not capturing nuances (for example, people shopping for food outside of their census tract and other issues). She noted that researchers have not reached a consensus on whether food deserts are primarily correlated with poor health outcomes or if the food desert actually causes poor health outcomes. She stated that food insecurity is clearly linked to poor health but noted that how much of the impact that food deserts have on food insecurity is less clear. She discussed the problem of “food swamps,” where there is a high density of fast food restaurants as opposed to healthier options, and she noted research which found that living in a “food swamp” is a stronger predictor of obesity rates than living in a “food desert.”

She provided the following evidence-based solutions relating to community-based and educational changes: (1) community-based, bottom-up initiatives and empowering the community (i.e., campaigns for residents to submit ideas to make the community healthier) instead of further shaming and stigmatizing obesity; (2) shaping tastes and eating habits early (for example, through school health intervention programs); (3) nutrition and health education; and (4) the latent effects of spatial solutions to food deserts, such as farmers markets and community gardens. She also described evidence-based solutions in terms of spatial change to combat food deserts, such as (1) incentivizing grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods, (2) improving transportation options, and (3) restricting dollar stores. She described Valdosta On-Demand, a micro transportation program which recently opened and the need for further study on whether the implementation of this program impacts where people shop for food and their health.¹²

Dr. Price discussed evidence-based solutions through reducing poverty. She noted that there is some evidence that the affordability of healthy foods has more of an impact on food patterns than the distance to the nearest store. Healthier diets costs more, especially if time or cooking facilities are limited, and introducing a supermarket into a neighborhood does little good if the residents do not have the money to use it. She noted that reducing poverty allows for future-oriented health decisions.

4. Dr. Michael Webster, Professor of Exercise Physiology, Valdosta State University School of Health and Sciences

Dr. Michael Webster discussed quality food availability and noted that those who do not live in a food desert have adequate food available but people in these areas are still dying of chronic diseases. Getting the food into food deserts may solve one issue related to access to food but would not address the chronic diseases like heart disease. The underlying problems of chronic diseases exist in the poor communities as well.

¹² More information on Valdosta On-Demand is available at <https://www.valdostacity.com/public-works/valdosta-demand>

5. Steve Brophy, Vice President of Government Relations for Dollar General Corporation

Steve Brophy spoke about food insecurity and the role that Dollar General is playing in expanding access to healthy foods and fresh foods in areas with limited access.¹³ He provided an overview of Dollar General's history as a company and its role as one of the first dollar stores. He stated that Dollar General operates 992 stores in Georgia. He noted that Dollar General's stores are often located in communities that other retailers have chosen not to serve.

Regarding the question of food assortment, Mr. Brophy stated that there are four elements that differentiate Dollar General from others in the discount retail sector. First, he stated that the components of a healthy diet are offered at every Dollar General store, and he noted that Dollar General works with several nutritionists and dieticians (from the Centers for Disease Control, to metro health departments, to advocacy groups and independent professionals) who affirmed that customers can source healthy meals at a Dollar General. Second, he stated that Dollar General works with nutritionists to help families build on that healthy assortment, and he described the work of Mary Alice Cain, who while working on her master's in nutrition at Georgia State University, challenged the stereotypes about Dollar General and created a book of 30 recipes that are healthy and affordable. As an adviser, she builds recipes and counsels Dollar General's buyers on its healthier "Better for You" assortment. Third, Mr. Brophy described the DG Fresh Initiative, which is a strategic effort to self-distribute Dollar General's frozen and refrigerated products and to allow Dollar General greater latitude regarding the items it carries. Fourth, he discussed the progress that Dollar General has made in bringing fresh produce into communities and noted that, by the end of this fiscal year, Dollar General will have added fresh produce to an additional 1,000 stores, totaling 2,300 stores across the chain that carry produce. He noted that Dollar General recently stated its expectation that it will expand its offering of fresh produce to over 10,000 stores over the next 10 years, with a meaningful number of those stores in food deserts.

Mr. Brophy stated that Dollar General is partnering with Feeding America to help feed those in need and that, in addition to its \$1,000,000 donation, the partnership will double the number of retail outlets to which Feeding America partners have access. Mr. Brophy opined that blaming the discount retail segment (and Dollar General in particular) for the existence of food deserts is irresponsible, and he stated that there is no credible evidence that Dollar General is limiting traditional grocery stores. He noted that Dollar General complements the local grocery to provide customers with an affordable merchandise option in addition to the traditional grocery. He described the different formats and floor plans of Dollar General's stores and the communities that they serve.

He stated that, in 2019, Baton Rouge Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome contacted Dollar General to build a public-private relationship to benefit Baton Rouge residents. He noted that the collaboration between Dollar General and the Mayor's Healthy City Initiative helped find a solution to address food insecurity challenges and to create programming and resources to help residents of Baton Rouge's food desert communities make affordable, heart-healthy meals with food available at Dollar General. He described how Dollar General collaborated with the American Heart Association and local hospitals to provide healthy cooking classes and bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to two Baton Rouge Dollar General stores serving communities with low access to fresh produce. He also stated that Dollar General hired its first Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Albert Wu, to help customers live healthier lives.

¹³ Mr. Brophy's written statement to the Study Committee is available online at <https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/DollarGeneralCorporationSteveBrophyTestimony.pdf>

6. Frank Richards, CEO of Second Harvest of South Georgia, Inc.

Frank Richards described Second Harvest of South Georgia as Georgia’s largest rural food bank, providing over 23 million meals to families in South Georgia. Second Harvest of South Georgia is an affiliate of Feeding America and federal and state agencies. Mr. Richards described the challenges for food banks and the shift in the operational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted the ongoing issues that are facing food banks nationwide, such as fewer volunteers returning to the food pantries and programs closing down due to lack of funding.

Mr. Richards recommended that the Study Committee review all federally funded nutrition programs that Georgia runs and take a look at the rules and regulations, how they operate, and if they make sense in regard to how the local programs across the State operate. He asked for help in rolling back regulations that the State adds on top of the federal regulations. He provided an example of a state department also requiring prior written approval and how that requirement would delay the purchase of an oven that is needed to feed more children.

He recommended that the State be more flexible and more innovative in its hunger programs, including the CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program), SFSP (Summer Food Service Program), and CSFP (Commodity Supplemental Food Program). These programs are federal pass through grants that are utilized in programs by food banks like Second Harvest of South Georgia. He also encouraged a review of these programs and how they impact the entire State, giving it the same kind of look that education, transportation, and economic development are given. He also encouraged creating parity between government programs and private programs that the food banks work with. He stated that the school systems and local, private charitable organizations use funding from the same federal sources but have to operate under different sets of rules. He provided an example of a child who gets breakfast and lunch at school under one set of rules but who has to fill out another income eligibility statement and other paperwork to be fed at an afterschool program at the Boys and Girls Club or during an emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. He also recommended finding flexible solutions because each county is different, operates differently, and faces different challenges. Mr. Richards also recommended encouraging investment in rural areas and noted that only six percent of private foundation money and business giving in the United States makes it to rural communities, and less than three percent of private giving in Georgia ever makes it out of metro Atlanta.

7. Dr. Allisen Penn, Associate Dean for Extension and Outreach, University of Georgia, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, and Susan Culpepper, County Extension Coordinator for the University of Georgia, Cooperative Extension for Douglas County

Dr. Allisen Penn described the UGA extension system and how it functions within the framework of health equity and well-being through the national extension system. She described nutrition education programs that UGA Extension provides in the communities across the State. She discussed partnering with independent grocers and “mom and pop” stores to help provide more healthy food options, as well as adjusting where those food choices are located within the stores. She described working with mobile markets to take fresh food and vegetables into communities that do not have adequate access to healthy food choices and to help teach the people in those communities how to use the healthy food choices that are available to them.

Dr. Penn described two federally funded programs that come through flow through organizations: EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) and SNAP-Ed, which reach across Georgia to provide education on nutrition, health, and wellness. She noted that UGA SNAP-Ed is one

of four implementing agencies in the State to provide education regarding supplemental nutrition assistance programs through: (1) direct education in communities; (2) online learning programs; (3) social marketing; and (4) working in the communities on environmental change. She then discussed the UGA EFNEP (which has been in place for 50 years), which provided adult direct education in 41 counties and youth direct education in 25 counties in FY 2020.

Susan Culpepper described direct education programs in Douglas County that are focused on obesity, chronic disease, and access to food. She described how the Cooperative Extension for Douglas County successfully created poverty simulations. Ms. Culpepper described SNAP-Ed in Douglas County and how the program is offering education. She discussed Food Talk Better U (series of four classes) and the Food Talk Farmer's Market that can be taught at a farmers market or at other locations (i.e., at a senior center). She also described the Douglasville Church Street Farmers Market and noted that a previous farmers market had failed, and the community did not have a farmers market for many years. Through community collaboration, the farmers market re-started in 2020. Nutrition education is offered at the farmers market, as well as information on home gardening and gardening produce. SNAP and EBT swipe cards can be used at the farmers market; a person with SNAP can swipe the card and get tokens, and Wholesome Wave Georgia will match EBT sales.

8. Vanessa Hayes, Chief Nutrition Officer, Tift County Schools

Vanessa Hayes discussed the importance of partnerships and working with the Second Harvest Food Bank to hand out boxes of food. She provided a historical background on school nutrition in the United States and noted that in the 1960s, the vast majority of soldiers going off to war were malnourished and that malnutrition was a national security issue. She noted that there are 1.7 million children enrolled in Georgia public schools that are touched by the Georgia School Nutrition program.

Ms. Hayes summarized the reach of the school nutrition program in Tift County, across 11 schools and 11 cafeterias. She noted that some parents struggled with the idea of free lunches through CEP (Community Eligibility Provision)¹⁴ due to the misconception that CEP is a "welfare" program. She described other school nutrition program services, including nutrition analysis, nutrition education, community outreach, and at-risk afterschool programs. She discussed nutrition education efforts in Tift County Schools, such as cooking demos, third graders going to the program's farm, making the cafeterias learning centers, and working with internal stakeholders regarding what they want children to consume, how much time they need to eat, allowing the students time to talk, engage, and share. She also expressed concerns about condiments being on the chopping block if there are budget shortages and how she fights to keep condiments in the schools because it makes the food more appetizing to the children. She shared her personal experiences with bringing food into the community.

She also described the Farm to School program and how it is used to educate children regarding how food is grown. She described the at-risk afterschool program which provides healthy snacks to children who are in curriculum intervention programs. She said that more funding is needed for the afterschool snack program. She also discussed the COVID-19 accommodations and noted that a total of 423,272 were served during the COVID-19 feeding program. Ms. Hayes described community outreach with partners such as Georgia Organics, the YMCA, and Tifton Housing Authority. She expressed concerns

¹⁴ As summarized by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, CEP is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas. CEP allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Instead, schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students categorically eligible for free meals based on their participation in other specific means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). More information on CEP is available online at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/community-eligibility-provision>.

over the amount of paperwork that is required under current regulations and the burden that overregulation places on the ability to run these programs. She described the impact that educating children about healthy food choices can have and how the children can create change and influence the adults eating habits.

9. Paige Dukes, County Manager of Lowndes County

Ms. Dukes noted that some local government officials and community leaders may not have a good grasp on what the issues regarding food deserts are. She stated that every city knows that their charter says, and the counties know what the enabling legislation says, and taxpayer dollars can only be used for the purposes in those charters and enabling legislation. She observed that “feed the people” is not in the charters or enabling legislation. In addition, she noted that a lot of the statistics and research is related to the census, and she stated that local governments are mostly focused on the census for matters related to economic development, housing, and transportation. She also noted misconceptions regarding what “rural” communities are like and the lack of food even in the communities near farms that grow fresh food. She described local initiatives related to the COVID-19 pandemic to create boxes of fresh produce to distribute to the community.

10. Christie Moore, President of Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce

Ms. Moore offered a business perspective on issues regarding food insecurity and background regarding why the business community should care about food deserts. She noted that food insecurity is a complex issue with many causes and broad impact. She cited data from Feeding America reflecting that there are 15,060 food insecure adults in Lowndes County and that there are \$24,720,169 in increased healthcare costs associated with food insecure adults in the county. She noted the impact on employers if their employees are food insecure. She also noted that the total healthcare cost associated with food insecurity in Georgia is \$177 per person and that the excess total healthcare cost associated with food insecurity is \$1,686 per food insecure adult in Georgia. She noted other impacts on the future workforce from food insecurity, such as poor academic performance and increased health expenses.

From a business perspective, Ms. Moore noted that SNAP and WIC help to sustain small businesses. She stated that SNAP accounts for 8 percent of the total food that U.S. families buy for their homes and about 80 percent of SNAP-authorized retailers are small businesses. She also described how SNAP increases the purchasing power of poor households and the impact that has on improving the economy. She noted that a recent USDA study estimated that every dollar spent in new SNAP benefits when the economy is weak and unemployment is elevated would increase the gross domestic product by \$1.54.

In terms of proposed solutions, Ms. Moore recommended supporting creative transportation solutions like Valdosta On-Demand, which allows users to go anywhere in the city for \$2 per ride (instead of generic bus routes). She also recommended cutting the bureaucracy and noted that the State often adds additional regulations that make it harder for some organizations to access the funds and address the specific nutrition needs of the local communities. She also recommended funding more than food and putting funds toward transportation, technical assistance, and outreach to address the lack of healthy food access. She also proposed incentivizing partnerships and shared planning between schools, governments, nonprofits, etc. to increase the effectiveness of programs and decrease overlap and waste.

11. Dr. Kimberly Carr, Community Resource Specialist for the Georgia Rural Health Initiative and Davis Perkins, Rural Health Representative

Dr. Kimberly Carr provided a brief overview of the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center, which is housed at Mercer University School of Medicine in Macon. The Center was formed in 2018 by the passage of House Bill 769.¹⁵ She noted that there are 523,050 rural Georgians living in food deserts and that a total of 119 census tracts are designated as food deserts by the USDA. She discussed the 5As framework: (1) accessibility (can they get it?); (2) availability (is it there?); (3) acceptability (do they want it?); (4) accountability (who is responsible for it?); and (5) affordability (how much will it cost?). She described the implications of the 5As framework and how it helps to build community through resiliency, empowerment, and sustainability.

Dr. Moore provided a food environment snapshot for Thomas County from the Center's data hub. She described the Center's community engagement in Thomas County after a church member contacted the Center through the UGA Extension seeking fresh fruits and vegetables for their community and congregants. The Center convened a meeting with multiple stakeholders (such as Second Harvest Food Bank). The result was the creation of a food pathway to that community to receive a food drop. The local church became a recognized agency with Second Harvest and fed 100 families a week or so later.

Dr. Moore also provided a food environment snapshot from the Center's data hub for Talbot County. She described an active project that the Center is doing in Talbot County, which was initiated by a request from a community member seeking food desert data. The community member wanted a grocery store in the county, and the Center discussed the food environment and brainstormed ideas on bringing food to the area, in addition to other opportunities. Multiple stakeholders convened, and the outcome was a discussion of the formation of a nonprofit grocery store or a co-op grocery store. The Center discussed capacity-building among community members, and they are seeking funding and applying to the Center's Sow a Seed grant program. She provided an overview of the Sow a Seed grant program, its goals, and eligibility criteria.¹⁶ Dr. Moore highlighted key takeaways, such as: focusing on the assets of the community first; rethinking how the term "food deserts" is defined; consider alternative food pathways; building capacity among and between community members in the same and neighboring counties; and creating resiliency, empowerment, and sustainability.

Davis Perkins discussed his role as a Rural Health Representative and his engagement in the community and getting key stakeholders together. He described the Center's website and resources that can be used to track health factors, food environment, and food resources in rural Georgia. He provided additional information regarding the grant program.

12. Public Comment

Michael Smith, Executive Director of Greater Valdosta United Way, said that United Way wants to be the hub of the human services sector and bring people together. He stated that it would take businesses, faith organizations, nonprofits, and government organizations working together to address food insecurity, mental health, transportation, and health care issues that the COVID-19 pandemic exasperated. He described the importance of 211.¹⁷ He said that they are asking United Ways of Georgia to make 211 available statewide and noted that some areas do not have access to 211. He

¹⁵ GEORGIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 2018 House Bill 769, <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/52283> (last visited Oct. 22, 2021).

¹⁶ More information regarding the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center's Sow a Seed Grant program is available online at <https://www.georgiaruralhealth.org/grant-program>

¹⁷ The Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") designated 211 as the 3-digit number for information and referrals to social services and other assistance in 2000. The 211 service is provided by more than 200 local organizations that are committed to serving their communities. Many different kinds of organizations operate the 211 service, including United Ways, Goodwill, Community Action Partnerships, and local crisis centers. More information regarding the 211 service is available online at <https://www.211.org/about-us>

stated that the issue is not just the money, but rather, the access to information and resources regarding where services are available. He said that the elderly population is suffering in isolation and that they have issues with getting online and accessing resources. He also noted that disabled individuals are struggling with access to resources. He also noted that the human services sector has been working hard with food banks, shelters, Boys and Girls clubs and Ys providing childcare. The demand has increased, and fundraisers have been cancelled due to the pandemic.

Reverend Fer-Rell Malone Sr., CEO of Fresh Communities, provided his perspective as a business owner who is working to provide innovative solutions in rural communities in food opportunity areas (rather than “food deserts”). He said that they are in the process of purchasing a shopping center with an old Food Lion and that there are two other locations that they are looking at right now. He described working with the USDA Famers to Families food box program and the need in the community with the lines of people waiting for food distributions.

C. Meeting 3 – October 5, 2021

The third meeting of the Study Committee was held on October 5, 2021 at the State Capital. Senator Harold Jones (Chair), Senator Russ Goodman, Senator Freddie Powell-Sims, and Senator Billy Hickman were present for the meeting.¹⁸

The following individuals provided testimony:

- Alana Rhone, USDA Economic Research Service (Zoom);
- Menia Chester, MS, CFCS, CNWE (Zoom);
- Joy Goetz, MS, RDN, LD, CHES on behalf of the Georgia Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Zoom);
- Will Sellers, Executive Director of Wholesome Wave Georgia, and Alex Duncan, Georgia Fresh for Less Program Manager;
- Kay Blackstock, Executive Director of Georgia Mountain Food Bank;
- Brian Elbel, PhD, MPH and Professor of Population Health and Health Policy at NYU Langone Health (Zoom);
- Jamey Leseueur, Vice President of Food Depot (Zoom);
- Dr. Charles Moore, Emory Urban Health Initiative;
- Kimberly Della Donna, Georgia Organics Farm to School Director (Zoom);
- Kwabena Nkromo, Founder of Atlanta Food & Farm PBC and CEO of North America Food & Farm PBC Inc.;
- Grady Hospital, Food as Medicine – Renee Ogoun: Patient Navigator, Food as Medicine; and Katie Mooney, MPH: Sr. Manager of Population Health and Community Benefit;
- Jeb Bush, Executive Director, Forsyth Farmers' Market (Zoom);
- Fredando Jackson, Flint River Fresh; and
- Emory University ENACT Seminar on State Policymaking - Emily Benson, Jamie Constantine, Ethan Feldman, and Cara Waite.

The Study Committee also heard public comments from GFIA President Kathy Kuzava and representatives from Clarkston Thriftown.

1. Alana Rhone, Agriculture Economist, USDA Economic Research Service

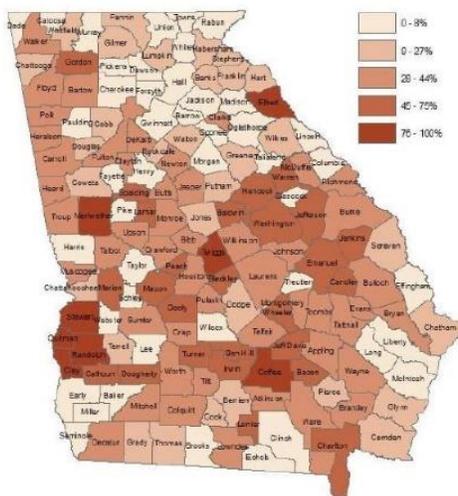
Ms. Rhone presented an overview of Food Access Research Atlas (“FARA”), which is an online interactive mapping tool. FARA allows users to investigate food access at the census-tract level by

¹⁸ The October 5, 2021 was livestreamed, and an archive of the livestream video is available online at <https://livestream.com/accounts/26021522/events/8730585/videos/226365209>

using measures of income, distance to stores, vehicle access, and other relevant indicators. She explained that the FARA focuses on the overlap of low-income¹⁹ and low-access²⁰ (“LILA”) consumers.

Share of LILA census tracts by county in Georgia, 2019

Share of LILA using vehicle access and 20 miles by county, 2019



Assessments were presented about LILA consumers at the national, state, and county level. Ms. Rhone explained that states with the highest share of LILA tracts are mostly in the southern part of the United States. Georgia has the sixth highest share of LILA census tracts at the 1 and 10 mile measures, fifth highest shares of population that live in LILA census tracts at the 1 and 10 miles measure, and second highest share of LILA census tracts using the vehicle access and 20 miles measure. She further explained that in Baker, Glascock, and Toliver counties, 100 percent of census tracts are considered low income low access.

2. Menia Chester, MS, CFCS, CNWE

Ms. Chester completed her testimony to the Study Committee, which she began at the meeting in Augusta. She highlighted efforts made to help educate people about good food nutrition, preparation, and purchasing options and provided the Study Committee with maps reflecting areas with food access issues in Georgia. Specifically, she highlighted programs that she developed while working in Fulton County, which have been duplicated in DeKalb, Chatham, Clayton and Cobb Counties.

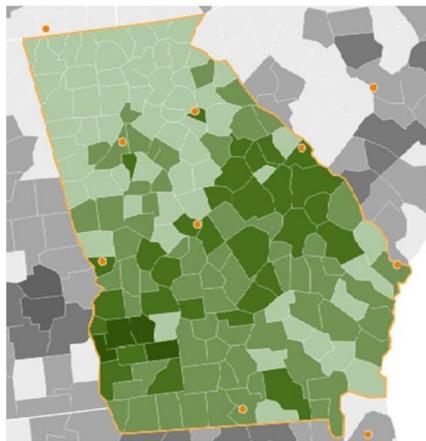
¹⁹ The USDA recognizes a tract as low income (“LI”) if twenty percent or more of the tract is at the poverty rate or if the tract’s median family income is less than or equal to eighty percent of the metropolitan area or state median income level.

²⁰ The USDA recognizes a census tract as low access (“LA”) at three levels, where a significant number or share of the tract population is more than: (1) LA at 1 and 10 miles – 1 mile (urban) or more than 10 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket; (2) LA at 0.5 and 10 miles – 0.5 mile (urban) or more than 10 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket; and (3) LA at 1 and 20 miles – 1 mile (urban) or more than 20 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket. A fourth and slightly more complex measure incorporates vehicle access directly into the measure, delineating low-income tracts where a significant number of households are located far from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle.

3. **Joy Goetz, Georgia Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, also Nutrition and Wellness Program Manager, Atlanta Community Food Bank**

Ms. Goetz testified on behalf of the Georgia Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and she also works for Atlanta Community Food Bank (“ACFB”) as a Nutrition and Wellness Program Manager. Ms. Goetz described food insecurity as being the lack of access to enough food for a healthy, active life. She went on to explain that this could be chronic or situational. She explained the households with the higher risks are large families with children, immigrant families, those families headed by single women, income at or below the poverty level, and black or Hispanic households. She provided a map of distribution of hunger in Georgia:

Hunger in Georgia



Hunger in America, 2018

Ms. Goetz explained that one in eight people are food insecure; one in six children are food insecure; one in 13 seniors are food insecure; and one in seven participate in SNAP. She provided the table below which compares Georgians to the rest of the United States:

Georgia vs. US (2021)

	Georgia	U.S.
People _{1,2}	1 in 8 (13%)	1 in 8 (13%)
Children _{1,2}	1 in 6 (16%)	1 in 6 (17%)
Seniors ₃	1 in 13 (8%)	1 in 14 (7%)
Participate in SNAP ₄₋₅	1 in 7 (15%)	1 in 8 (13%)
>185% FPL ₁	39%	38%

1. Gundersen, C., Strayer, M., Dewey, A., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2021). *Map the Meal Gap 2021: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2019*. Feeding America 2021.
 2. Feeding America Research Team. *The Impact of Corona Virus on Local Food Insecurity*. Feeding America, 2021.
 3. Gundersen, C., Ziliak J., Hilvers J., & Hake M. (August 2021). *The State of Senior Hunger in America 2019: An Annual Report*, and *Hunger Among Older Adults in America 2019: An Annual Report*
 4. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: State Level Participation & benefits: Georgia June 2021, released September 2021. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pdf/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>
 5. U.S. Census Bureau (2021). ACS 2019 5-Year Estimates, Total Population, State Level, Table B01003.

She explained that hunger creates cycles of poor health and people often get into these cycles because of a financial crisis, such as an unexpected medical expense. She explained that high blood pressure, diabetes, and no health insurance are factors commonly found in people experiencing food insecurity. Further, she estimated that food insecurity costs Georgia about \$1.78 billion in additional healthcare costs per year, and each food insecure patient incurs \$1,863 more in medical expenses a year.

4. Will Sellers, Executive Director of Wholesome Wave Georgia, and Alex Duncan, Georgia Fresh for Less Program Manager

Mr. Sellers described how WWG works with its community partners in 77 farmers' markets, farm stands, mobile markets, and brick-and-mortar retailers to double purchasing power of SNAP benefits up to \$50 per visit. He described WWG as using a private sector approach to solve a very difficult problem. He noted that WWG accomplishes its work through three programs: (1) Georgia Fresh for Less; (2) Georgia SNAP Connection; and (3) Georgia Food for Health. He noted that WWG is also an authorized community partner for the Division of Family and Children Services ("DFCS"), and WWG can screen individuals for Medicaid, WIC, SNAP, TANF, and the childcare benefit. He noted that, since WWG was founded by a group of citizens in 2009, WWG has been able to put over \$3.6 million back into the pockets of small independent farmers.

Ms. Duncan provided an overview of Georgia Fresh for Less, which is a SNAP nutrition incentive program that matches SNAP participants' purchases dollar-for-dollar on fresh fruits and vegetables. Ms. Duncan described how a shopper could bring his or her EBT card to one of the WWG participating partner markets and swipe the EBT card for \$10, he or she would receive \$20 to spend at that market. She noted that the program improves access to fresh food for SNAP recipients, puts money directly into Georgia farmers' and growers' pockets, and supports the local economy at these local food system outlets. She cited research that had been completed at the national level which shows that every dollar that is put into a SNAP nutrition incentive program like the one run by WWG generates \$6 in the local economy where that participating site exists. She stated that WWG is actively recruiting more community partner sites throughout the state. She described WWG's partnership with four other organizations (MARTA, Open Hand, Community Farmers Markets, and ACFB) that created the Fresh MARTA Market initiative, which began as a pilot at one site about five years ago and is now available at five MARTA stations. She noted that this initiative addresses both issues regarding access to transportation and mobility, in addition to access and affordability of fresh food. She stated that, since 2017, the Fresh MARTA Markets have seen over \$66,000 in sales just from shoppers using EBT cards at these fresh produce stands at the MARTA stations. She also described WWG's partner sites outside of the metro Atlanta area and noted target areas for expansion in rural communities, LILA communities, and South Georgia.

WWG was asked to provide information about a recent program with Lyft in the Atlanta area. Mr. Sellers stated that, in 2019, Lyft had a partnership with the City of Atlanta, Community Farmers Markets, the Georgia Farmers Market Association, and WWG's Georgia Fresh for Less program. Lyft allocated about \$200,000 for rides, and there would be a \$2 fare to a farmers market, farm stand, or grocery stores, and a \$2 fare home for the shopper. (As reflected in WWG's presentation materials, EBT recipients would sign-up for the Lyft program once a month at a community site.) Mr. Sellers noted that the program did not work for a number of reasons, including: (1) the partners were not aligned, (2) data was not consistently shared between the partners, and (3) a lack of implementation funding. He was hopeful that a different leadership strategy could support the program in the future.

WWG provided three recommendations: (1) increase local stakeholder awareness and spread the word about WWG programs; (2) work with Georgia’s congressional delegation to secure federal funding (USDA funding is critical to WWG programs); and (3) allocating State funding to end food deserts. Regarding the third recommendation, Ms. Duncan explained that, in order to obtain federal funding, a one-for-one match with state funding is required, for GusNIP²¹ funding. She described speaking with a peer organization (Double Up Food Bucks Mississippi) that does similar work, and they were able to secure funds from the State of Mississippi to increase longevity and sustainability of the program and increase the fund matching, resulting in more federal funding.

In response to questions from the Study Committee about the process for becoming a WWG partner site, Ms. Duncan stated that a prerequisite is to be a USDA SNAP retailer and that farms, farmers markets, and grocery stores can apply. Once approved, the retailer receives a FNS number, which is an identification number from the Food Nutrition Service Department, after which, the retailer obtains an EBT machine to begin accepting EBT as payment. She stated that another criteria to participate in the Georgia Fresh for Less program is having local growers at a farmers’ market or emphasizing local sourcing, to support the local economy and the local food systems.

5. Kay Blackstock, Executive Director of Georgia Mountain Food Bank

Ms. Blackstock showed a video representing the work of Georgia Mountain Food Bank (“GMFB”). She stated that donations to GMFB come in primarily from retail stores and that GMFB is very heavily dependent on retail salvage. They have 28 partners in their five county service area from which they pickup donations daily. In FY2021, GMFB distributed 5,750,000 meals. However, she stated that, according to data provided by Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap, more than 3 million meals are needed to close the gap on hunger in GMFB’s service area. She expressed concerns over the expansion of dollar stores, but she noted that there could be a huge impact if dollar stores are successful in offering fresh fruits and vegetables.

6. Brian Elbel, Professor of Population and Health Policy at New York University

Dr. Elbel explained the NYC Fresh Program. This program includes tax incentives for mortgages, reduction or no taxes on building materials, and other zoning incentives to support the establishment of grocery stores in certain areas of the city. He discussed his research regarding whether the NYC Fresh Program impacted eating habits and childhood obesity rates. He noted that in a dense urban area like New York City, new supermarkets might influence eating/shopping behavior and childhood obesity rates for those that live very close to the store, but these results may be quite different in other area, particularly other non-urban areas. He stated that new supermarkets may be one potential solution for some areas, though will need to think much broader than just supermarkets, and he opined that to truly influence obesity and nutrition, a broad array of policy solutions will be needed.

7. Jamey Leseueur, Vice President of Food Depot

Mr. Leseueur joined the Study Committee by Zoom. He explained that Food Depot is a cost plus operator; they sell everything at cost plus 10 percent. He explained that his stores are 100 percent

²¹ According to the USDA’s website, the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) exists to providing funding opportunities to conduct and evaluate projects providing incentives to increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables by low-income consumers. Additionally, it provides grants to help foster understanding to improve the health and nutrition status of participating households, facilitate growth in states with low participation, and collect and aggregate data to identify and improve best practices on a broad scale. <https://nifa.usda.gov/program/gus-schumacher-nutrition-incentive-grant-program>

employee owned. There are 42 stores ranging from 23,000 to 55,000 square feet. He expressed that Food Depot does not go into high income areas; rather they target lower to middle income and provide a wide variety of produce and meat. He explained that to make this model work, the store needs high customer counts and sales.

He explained that the delay in obtaining a WIC license upon opening a store has been a big issue for him. He explained that turning people down immediately hurts his business, and it takes a lot of time and money to regain those customers. He expressed that he has had conversations with WIC representatives about having separate categories for chain stores with warehouses versus chain stores without warehouses. He stated that the WIC representative said there would be a differentiation in categories but that did never did happen. Mr. Leseuer commented that any efforts to stabilize or cap liability for the grocery industry would be very helpful. Additionally, he mentioned recent Department of Revenue changes that allow stores to print tobacco, beer, and wine licenses, which he would like to see adopted by WIC.

8. Dr. Charles Moore, Emory Urban Health Initiative

Dr. Moore explained the mission of the Emory Urban Health Initiative (“UHI”) to provide health disparities education and advocacy, build collaborative partnerships, and develop best practice models with low-wealth communities and those who work with them to advance equity in health and well-being. He described research which reflects that food insecurity is higher in lower income, women-headed, and non-white households with children. He stated that UHI focuses on factors related to food deserts, such as accessibility, individual barriers, and neighborhood indicators. He showed videos highlighting UHI’s mission and a project with support from Emory University and Word of God Ministries to address transportation issues in a food desert community.

He described collaborations in the community and providing education that is usable in daily life. He discussed using the “stoplight system” to label foods on a shelf in a Walmart and in a neighborhood store to highlight which foods were and were not healthy. He discussed working with partners to increase shelf space for healthy items and creating an inviting space that is overlaid with education. He described a community garden that was created in a grocery store parking lot and how that program impacted the neighbors and the increase in sales and benefit to the store. He also stated that the garden was used as a platform for education using books about gardening that were age-level appropriate. He also discussed the senior nutrition and exercise program. He described UHI going into a local store to train employees to know more about healthy nutrition, in partnership with others like Open Hand, to provide cooking demonstrations, so the store employees knew about healthy nutrition, affordable shopping, and how to refer shoppers who needed additional assistance to the HEALing Community Center.

9. Kimberly Della Donna, Georgia Organics Farm to School Director

Ms. Donna described Georgia Organic’s initiatives to increasing healthy food access through Farm to School and Farm to Early Care and Education. The programs allow children to become educated and develop healthy habits. Further, these programs support the local economy, local farmers, and teach children good habits at an early age. Ms. Donna mentioned that these programs are funded by the GusNIP. She proposed ways to improve access to foods, such as the state piloting agency that led buying cooperatives in rural areas of the state, automatically doubling SNAP/WIC benefits for families that purchase fresh local food from GA Farms up to \$20 month, and investing in cold storage infrastructure to help small farmers and nonprofits serve and meet community where they live.

10. Kwabena Nkromo, Founder of Atlanta Food and Farm PBC and CEO of North American Food and Farm PBC, Inc.

Mr. Nkromo stated that a lot of the solutions relating to access to healthy food already exist but that there is not a coordinated statewide infrastructure and support or big picture approach. He noted that a lot of work is being done within silos and that there is not enough connectivity. He encouraged the Study Committee to affirm, fund, and frame a food policy that addresses the current situation in Georgia. He described the Georgia Food Policy Council (“GFPC”), which was an initiative from the Georgia Department of Public Health that was funded by a grant from the CDC and facilitated by the Andrew Young Policy Center at Georgia State University. He stated that the GFPC did statewide outreach and created a strategic plan, but there was no funding for operations and implementation. He stated that the Study Committee could activate that existing network professionals, citizens, and stakeholders from GFPC.²²

Mr. Nkromo discussed the work of the North America Food and Farm PBC, Inc., a social enterprise consulting group that provides experienced community food systems planning as well as urban agriculture project management, development, installation, and management, to create successful local food projects that are integrated into the community. He described several projects, including: (1) the NPU-T Community Food Project; (2) the edible schoolyard for Atlanta Preparatory Academy, with funding from Post Properties Foundation; and (3) the Welch Street Park Community Garden, with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Park Pride, and the National Wildlife Federation. He described the system work that his company does in systems work and the work they have done for the Food Commons. He described the Southwest Atlanta Fertile Crescent, a neighborhood scaled adaptation of the Food Commons model for a regional food system. He discussed work on a food system assessment for the Atlanta Housing Authority regarding what could be possible for three neighborhoods that were part of a planning grant from HUD, and food strategy was included into this traditional funding stream.

He described the role of food policy councils, which bring together stakeholders from diverse, food-related areas to examine how a food system is working and provide ways to improve it. He noted that Atlanta has a food policy council, known as ALFI (Atlanta Local Food Initiative) and the work that ALFI did to reform Atlanta’s zoning code to include urban agriculture. He concluded by asking the Study Committee for funding and policy support for the GFPC.

11. Renee Ogoun, Patient Navigator, Food as Medicine, Grady Hospital; and Katie Mooney, Sr. Manager of Population Health and Community Benefit Food as Medicine Program

Ms. Mooney and Ms. Ogoun reiterated what previous speakers had presented explaining the cycles of food insecurity and chronic disease. They explained that 50 percent of the patients at Grady experience food insecurity, which amounts to more than 140,000 patients. They talked about such programs as the Fresh Food Cart, the Jesse Hill Market, and the Food as Medicine Program. They made the following recommendations to support the mission of Grady’s Food as Medicine program: (1) preserve vital, health promoting food benefits including SNAP and WIC; (2) make medically-tailored meals and comprehensive nutrition programs reimbursable; (3) support innovative care coordination models to ensure patients are connected to services; and (4) increase funding for programs that increase access to fresh produce.

²² The GFPC report from Mr. Nkromo is available online at <https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/GFPCStatePlan.pdf>

12. Jeb Bush, Executive Director of the Forsyth Farmers' Market

Mr. Bush explained that parts of Chatham County suffer from high poverty rate, low access to grocery stores, high unemployment, low graduation rates, and high instances of diabetes. He shared that the market participates in the Double Your Dollars program and talked about how the market converted an old bread truck into Mobile Farm Truck 912.

13. Fredando Jackson, with Flint River Fresh

Mr. Jackson explained that Flint River Fresh is a 501(c)(3) non-profit based out of Dougherty County. Their mission includes several goals including: increasing access to fresh, local, affordable, healthy food; creating new economic opportunities for local farmers; and developing young people through agriculture. Flint River Fresh has distributed 15,000 pounds of produce during the local COVID-19 response. The core program areas include community farm projects; fresh to door produce deliveries (over 30,000 pounds of produce delivered in 3 months), Grow Your Own Groceries home garden installations, garden bucket giveaways, and school gardens. The non-profit also partners with the local elementary schools, who have box gardens and the food in the cafeteria comes from that garden.

14. Emory University's ENACT Seminar on State Policymaking - Emily Benson, Jamie Constantine, Ethan Feldman, and Cara Waite

Students from Emory University's ENACT Seminar on State Policymaking (Emily Benson, Jamie Constantine, Ethan Feldman, and Cara Waite) presented findings from their undergraduate research project. The students gave their definition of a food desert and opined that transportation might not be as big of an issue as other research suggests. They estimated the cost of food insecurity on the State to be close to \$10 billion due to healthcare cost and cost due to loss of productivity. They commented on and offered support of the fruit and vegetable prescription program FVRx. They also commented on local grocery taxes in Georgia and provided examples of what Providence, Rhode Island and Portland, Oregon are doing to combat food insecurity.

15. Public Comment

During the public comment period, representatives from Clarkston Thriftown, an independent grocery store, shared testimony with the Study Committee. They explained that this area has a large population of immigrants and refugees, many of whom are on WIC. They stated that this particular store lost its WIC license with recent ownership change and that it will be several months before they can get a new license. Currently, WIC is about 20 percent of the store's business.

Kathy Kuzava, President of the Georgia Food Industry Association, joined the representatives in giving testimony and shared that none of the licenses are transferable, but that SNAP works really well so that the application can be prepared ahead of time and the store can open with SNAP. Ms. Kuzava explained that WIC does not allow that out of concerns over previous fraud in the State WIC system. She also mentioned the WIC moratorium, the six month period during which retailers cannot have their applications processed, has been a stumbling block for many grocers. She explained that for Publix groceries, Georgia is the only state they operate in where they cannot open a store with a WIC license. She also addressed the length of the application, which is 42 pages.

D. Meeting 4 – October 6, 2021

The fourth meeting of the Study Committee was held on October 6, 2021 at the State Capitol. Senator Harold Jones (Chair), Senator Russ Goodman, Senator Freddie Powell-Sims, and Senator Billy Hickman were present for the meeting. Senator Gooch joined the meeting via Zoom.²³ The following individuals provided testimony:

- Jon Anderson, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Human Services, Family Independence;
- Melvin Benson, There's Hope for the Hungry (Zoom);
- Stephen McRae, President, Atlanta Emerging Markets, Inc. (Zoom);
- Debra Shoaf, CFO of Atlanta Community Food Bank (Zoom);
- DeKalb County Commissioner Lorraine Cochran-Johnson;
- Temitope Walker, Ph.D., Senior Hunger Nutrition Coordinator, DHS;
- Matthew Kulinski, Georgia Grown Program Director;
- Permeil Dass, Board Chair of Market 166 Grocery and Coop;
- Dr. Amy Sharma, PhD Vice President, Science for Georgia; Brooke Lappe, MPH, PhD Student, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University; Jordan Ellison, 4th year student, Georgia State University;
- City of Atlanta – j. olu baiyewu, Urban Agriculture Director (Zoom);
- Tammy Reasoner, Director of Programs for Open Hand Atlanta;
- Reverend Fer-Rell Malone Sr., CEO of Fresh Communities (Zoom); and
- State WIC Program – Sean Mack, State WIC Director; Yvonne Rodgers, WIC Deputy Director of Vendor Management; and Todd Stormant, WIC Nutrition Operations/Education Manager.

The Study Committee also heard public comment from Steve Brophy, Vice President of Government Affairs, Dollar General Corporation.

1. Jon Anderson, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Human Services, Family Independence

Mr. Anderson explained that the office serves about 1.35 million families state wide through its 3 programs: SNAP, Medical Assistance, and TANF. He explained that SNAP is a 100 percent federally reimbursed program administered by the State. Mr. Anderson explained that SNAP has a strong economic impact on the community. For every dollar of SNAP funds used, the program generates \$1.70 in economic activity, according to a study by Moody's Analytics. He further highlighted the accommodations the programs made at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Melvin Benson, Chief Operating Officer, There's Hope for the Hungry

Mr. Benson explained that the program is 18 years old and operated out of Cumming, GA. They serve North Georgia in smaller towns and rural areas. He explained that they get food from four different food banks: Atlanta Food Bank, Georgia Mountain Food Bank, Chattanooga Food Bank, and North East Georgia Food Bank. They purchase the food from the banks, store it in their warehouse, have volunteer packing teams put the food into palettes and boxes, then load on trucks and take to various churches. When asked, he explained that the consistent metric that reappears are elderly people taking on family members and dealing with health problems.

²³ The October 6, 2021 meeting was livestreamed, and an archive of the livestream is available online at: <https://livestream.com/accounts/26021522/events/8730585/videos/226388357>

3. Stephen McRae, President of Atlanta Emerging Markets, Inc.

Mr. McRae gave an overview of what New Market Tax Credits (“NMTC”) are and the structure of entities that allow those tax credits to be used to benefit the community. He explained that over \$308 million NMTCs have been awarded since 2007 to such projects as general community facilities, health clinics, YMCAs, homeless shelters, hospitals and more in the Atlanta area. Mr. McRae explained the type of projects NMTCs support. Specifically, he noted that housing and hotels are not the type of projects approved by the NMTC program, but grocery and mixed used projects are. He further suggested that NMTCs could be used for food banks.

In describing how NMTCs are applied for and awarded, Mr. McRae explained the role of Community Development Entities (“CDE”). CDEs are private mission-driven entities serving low-income communities. They act as an intermediaries who apply for and receive NMTC allocations through a competitive process, and they make decision on what projects to support with their NMTC allocations. Atlanta Emerging Markets, Inc. is a CDE.

Mr. McRae further provided the Study Committee with descriptions of what makes a project attractive to a CDE and more likely to be awarded allocations. He also provided a hypothetical project and gave details about what a leveraging model would look like and what entities might be involved (i.e. private groups such as Truist, J.P. Morgan Chase, etc.). Mr. McRae expressed that only about 30 percent of applicants will receive credits and that the federal program is not permanent. However, it has been renewed several times in five year increments.

Study Committee members asked questions about the availability of using NMTCs outside of the Atlanta metro area, and Mr. McRae explained best approaches for those communities and provided some references.

4. Debra Shoaf, the Chief Finance Officer of the Atlanta Community Food Bank

Ms. Shoaf discussed the construction of the new facility by ACFB and the use of NMTCs. She showed a video with an overview of the food bank and response to the food crisis over the last year. She further explained that food banks are not like food pantries. Food banks focus on sourcing and warehousing facilities; they are the corporate equivalent to a wholesaler. She explained that ACFB is a member of the Feeding America Network and that food banks provided nearly 5.2 billion meals to food insecure individuals. In response to questions regarding how ACFB used NMTCs, Ms. Shoaf outlined the structure and reporting requirements of the food bank.

5. Lorraine Cochran-Johnson, DeKalb County Commissioner, Super District 7

Commissioner Cochran-Johnson explained the county’s moratorium on small box discount stores and discussed the effects of dollar stores on communities. She explained that the moratorium halted the expansion of dollar stores, ceased the issuance of additional building permits, and called for a study to determine the effects of discount box stores within the community. She expressed her position against the proliferation of any industry that has a negative effect. She stated that the DeKalb County moratorium recognizes that a store less than 10,000 square feet is not required by the county to have a lighting plan. She further expressed her belief that many small box discount stores have just under 10,000 square feet and would, therefore, not be subject to that restriction. She was also alarmed that the stores tend to locate in areas where the African American population is above 50 percent. She also voiced concerns about the absence of healthy food items in these stores. She explained that DeKalb County plans to take action which will address distance requirements, lighting, security, and staffing

problems with discount box stores. Further, she mentioned legislation to require security if the county deems it appropriate for certain stores.

Commissioner Cochran-Johnson presented a slide of potential solutions. Along with the slide, she discussed DeKalb County strengthening its planning review policies, increasing education about health eating and lifestyles, developing local organization to raise awareness about the negative impacts of small box discount stores, community gardens, and supporting financing for locally owned grocery stores by creating a fund from the renege tax incentives for chain stores. Study Committee members were interested to know if the moratorium attracted new grocery stores. In response, Commissioner Cochran-Johnson said that grocers were excited about the moratorium.

6. Temitope Walker, Ph.D., Senior Hunger Nutrition Coordinator with the Department of Human Services' Division of Aging Services

Dr. Walker explained the mission of the Senior Hunger Nutrition division is to support older adults who want to remain independent as long as possible where they wish to be. She presented a slide showing the Georgia State Senior Hunger Plan and Recommendations, where most of the objectives have been achieved. This included such steps as establishing a senior hunger position, developing regional coalitions, establishing a policy review council, coordinating data collection and analysis, developing and provide education and training, continuing and expanding the What a Waste Program, and providing entrepreneurial mini grants.

Further, Dr. Walker explained that five areas of focus were established by the plan which considers: (1) today's seniors (person centered in how address their needs); (2) meeting the needs of the community (partnerships are important- how can we work with them); (3) food access (resources that can be used); (4) food waste and reclamation; and (5) health impact on senior hunger. Dr. Walker provided recommendations for what should be included in the next iteration of the plan. In addition, she provided recommended next steps for the Study Committee which included: supporting regional senior hunger coalition efforts and innovations; continuing work with senior hunger interagency council; expanding partnerships to better serve vulnerable older Georgians; conducting listening session for next senior hunger state plan, and raising awareness and seeking solutions at each Senior Hunger Summit.

7. Matthew Kulinski, Deputy Director of Marketing and Manager of the Georgia Grown program

Mr. Kulinski explained that Georgia Grown is the economic development arm of the Department of Agriculture. He described the produce distribution models created by the Department during the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, he spoke to the challenges associated with the dissolution of foodservice supply chains, schools shutting down and the closing of restaurants where agriculture buyers disappeared from the marketplace. He explained that the Department created three distribution solutions and provided metrics for the success of those programs. They included (1) the Georgia Grown To-Go Box program, (2) Georgia Grown Cares Baskets, and (3) Farmers to Families (where the Department worked with the USDA).

Mr. Kulinski also provided a summary of lessons learned from the process and an outlook for the future. He noted that how we handle e-commerce in the future will be huge and that a large population of the community cannot participate in that new food economy. Mr. Kulinski shared a slide listing several recommendations, including such actions as: (1) providing additional education and guidance to consumers to help ease their worry; (2) allowing online SNAP purchasing to be expanded to give

lower income consumers more purchasing options (currently only available through Amazon and Walmart); and (3) providing new investment in State Farmers Markets, cooler facilities, and fruit, vegetable, and meat processing is needed to prepare for any future supply or demand crisis.

In response to questions from the Study Committee members, he noted challenges for accessing the food economy, particularly, restrictions on transportation or delivery of produce via e-commerce, or limited access to internet, which he noted is a barrier for participation. However, an optimistic advance he shared is that SNAP recipients can now use benefits on Amazon and Walmart.

8. Permeil Dass, Board Chair of Market 166 Grocery and Coop

Ms. Dass described her company's vision, which is to be a sustainable community owned grocery store supporting the financial and healthy well-being of their neighborhood. She explained the differences between co-ops and grocery stores and added that her company is considering establishing its first grocery store in East Point. Additionally, she is interested in having a commercial kitchen, a space where the community gathers, and learns and prepares foods together. She would like for SNAP to be easier to use for mobile markets and she would like to see double the benefits for consumers. She also provided several other recommendations. There was discussion about the structure of the co-op and the liability of shareholders with differing corporate structures.

She provided the following recommendations: (1) make it easier for Mobile Markets to accept SNAP and double benefits; (2) encourage nutrient dense prepared foods to be purchased with food assistance programs; (3) incentivize programs that connect GA farmers to coop grocery stores; (4) advocate for special tax breaks for cooperatives; (5) support federal efforts to level the playing field for cooperatives to access special financing that does not require personal guarantees for loans as stated in S. 1736-“Capital for Cooperatives Act”; (6) update Georgia law to include cooperative laws on the books that go beyond agriculture, electricity, telephone, insurance, and credit unions; (7) increase start-up funds for grocery stores in areas that reduce food insecurity; and (8) knowing that grocery stores have a slim profit margin, there should be continued support in grants for cooperative grocery stores that operate in food deserts proportional to the percentage of low-income customers they serve.

9. Dr. Amy Sharma, PhD Vice President, Science for Georgia; Brooke Lappe, MPH, PhD Student, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University; Jordan Ellison, 4th year student, Georgia State University

Dr. Sharma, Ms. Lappe, and Ms. Ellison presented on behalf of Science for Georgia. Dr. Sharma began by explaining that the current food policy is based on a 1969 White House conference, where people were concerned about a lack of access to calories. Today, people have access to calories, just not nutritious calories. The percentage of households that lacked access to adequate food has remained about the same for the past 20 years. She proposed using the scientific method to approach the issue, and presented a slide showing the method including steps to (1) identify the problem, (2) measure the scope of the problem, (3) try some pilot programs, (4) analyze the results, and (5) replicate the successes.

Ms. Ellison presented her findings on the true cost of food, claiming that food cost is more than the price tag you see at the grocery. She examined a report by the Rockefeller Foundation in which the cost of food was also examined across five different impact areas. When taking these factors into account, the true cost of food a year is around \$3.2 trillion instead of the estimated cost of \$1.1 trillion. The current system does not take into consideration societal costs, agriculture subsidies, disproportion costs of the food system on marginalized communities, and many others.

Ms. Lappe presented findings from a roundtable hosted by the Science for Georgia. When asked how to eliminate the need for SNAP and food banks, the roundtable proposed the following recommendations: (1) create uniform and transparent reporting metrics (one state agency to set standards, collect data, and report to the public); (2) support community-based food coalitions who share information and share infrastructure; and (3) support Farm to School programs. Dr. Sharma pointed to the approach taken by the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative as a good methodology for approaching the issue of food insecurity.

10. j. olu baiyewu, Urban Agriculture Director for the City of Atlanta

j. olu baiyewu explained the goals of his office, expressed with whom they partner, and described what he called the community intersection which his office deals with. He expressed that he would like to see an expansion of the Marta Market Program, the on-site sale of food on all farms and gardens citywide, and the creation of a food system master plan for equitable development. To these points, he discussed the food forests present in Atlanta and changes to a city zoning ordinance that would allow farm stands to sell food directly onsite.

11. Tammy Reasoner, Director of Programs for Open Hand Atlanta

Ms. Reasoner described the original food prescription program with Grady Hospital and WWG. She scaled and expanded the program beyond Grady and is now in South Georgia partnering with Barnes Healthcare Services. She discussed Cooking Matters, a six week SNAP education program, that teaches students how to shop on a budget, how to prepare foods, and how to make healthier choices. Other programs allows students to be enrolled for up to six months. She believes these programs are working in South Georgia.

12. Reverend Fer-Rell Malone, Sr., CEO of Fresh Communities

Reverend Malone explained their mission is to facilitate restoration for equitable and sustainable healthy communities. He showed a video regarding his organization and its mission. He also explained that diabetes and hypertension are directly impacted by food access and nutrition.

13. State WIC Program – Sean Mack, State WIC Director; Yvonne Rodgers, WIC Deputy Director of Vendor Management; and Todd Stormant, WIC Nutrition Operations/Education Manager

The representatives from the State WIC program shared a brochure which contained information about which foods are WIC eligible. They further explained that beyond food supplementation, WIC provides additional benefits including nutrition education.

Ms. Rogers stated that the authorization process for a WIC license is roughly seven steps and that there are two application periods in a year (March through June 30, and the beginning of October through December 31). She stated that the applicants fill out the application and include licenses, certificates, and other materials to show that the vendor is an authentic vendor, grocery store, or pharmacy, then the State WIC program will complete the application process with those applicants. The applicants are required to go through an interactive training session regarding the WIC program itself and its expectations. The representative from the store takes a test immediately following the interactive training, and if his or her score is 80 or better, they move on to the next part of the process. A representative from the Office of the Inspector General goes to the store location to verify that the information in the application is real, to put an eye on the store to confirm the store's preparedness to

work with the WIC program clientele, and to look at the inventory to make sure the store is ready to serve WIC participants. Once this process is completed, the WIC program sends two agreements to the vendor, which the vendor and the WIC program sign. Then, an identifier known as the vendor stamp is sent to that store location, which is used to stamp vouchers before they are deposited. Ms. Rodgers state that there are twenty-four tenets in the selection criteria, most of which are satisfied by completing the application. She stated that 75 percent of those are federally mandated, and the remainder are unique to the State of Georgia

Director Mack described the temporary increase in fruit and vegetable vouchers and how the program allowed substitutions for WIC-approved foods that were out of stock. He also stated that the WIC program nationally has recently been charged with working on modernization and outreach, including looking at how to make the WIC program more accessible, whether some requirements could be reduced, looking at modern ways to do business, and streamlining the process.

In response to questions from the Study Committee regarding why retailers cannot apply year-round to become WIC vendors, Ms. Rodgers stated that there are federally required activities that the State WIC program goes through each year and that the State WIC program is trying to balance the staff workload. She stated that, as WIC changes over to EBT, there will be another moratorium. She stated that the standard processing time on an application once all information has been received is from 60 to 70 days. In response to questions regarding whether a WIC license would be lost if a store owner in a small town retired and sold the business, Ms. Rodgers stated that there is a waiver process and that an applicant could submit an appeal. She stated that, in cases involving inadequate participant access, the State WIC program would be obligated to honor that process. Ms. Rodgers said that the State WIC program is asking for the applicant to have a SNAP history, but the program is required at the federal level to make sure that all grocers have SNAP licensing. She said that the State WIC program is also looking for vendors with extensive grocery store experience but that there are creative ways of meeting that requirement (for example, based on the experience of the staff).

14. Public Comment

Steve Brophy, Vice President of Government Affairs for Dollar General Corporation, gave remarks to the Study Committee concerning the company's approach to picking store locations. He expressed that they try to have the customer at the center of everything the company does. He added that they have experts in nutrition on staff and that a consumer can find complements to healthy meals in Dollar General stores. Mr. Brophy also explained that Dollar General has partnered with Feeding America and is expecting to donate 20 million meals a year to help combat food insecurity.

Mr. Bophy responded to comments made by Commissioner Cochran-Johnson and her concerns about Dollar General stores being present in DeKalb County. He specifically expressed that while the Commissioner showed a correlation between the presence of dollar stores and the lack of grocery stores, she did not provide a causal link. He agreed that the stores are in areas where people live paycheck to paycheck, and that the stores are present there, in fact, because those people need them. They are the people that Dollar General is intending to serve. He also added that despite the moratorium, which has been in effect the past two years, no grocery stores have built in unincorporated DeKalb County, nor does he believe that anyone has begun paperwork to try to build. He mentioned that three grocery stores have been built in the incorporated side of DeKalb County.

E. Meeting 5 – November 2, 2021

The fifth and final meeting of the Study Committee was held on November 2, 2021 at the State Capitol. The Study Committee discussed and adopted this Report and Recommendations.

STUDY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Study Committee strongly encourages the legislature to adopt legislation in the 2022 legislative session that designates a state agency to maintain a central website which makes available information for consumers that names available resources concerning food accessibility in multiple locations or regions throughout the state.
2. In an effort to ensure continued research and the develop of relevant legislation, the Study Committee strongly encourages the legislature to create or establish a commission composed of representatives from both legislative bodies, the Governor's office, community stakeholders, and other relevant agencies.
3. The Study Committee encourages representatives from the State WIC Program to continue conversations with the grocery industry to resolve concerns in the licensing process.
4. The Study Committee encourages the continued use of tax credits to support the expansion of the grocery industry into food deserts.
5. The Study Committee encourages local government officials to establish relationships with community development entities ("CDE") that address projects such as, or supporting, the placement of grocery stores in food deserts with the New Market Tax Credits ("NMTC").
6. The Study Committee encourages the funding of educational programs that support consumers' informed purchase of healthy foods.
7. The Study Committee encourages the support and strengthening of food banks and food pantries by the State providing funding.
8. The Study Committee encourages the growth of programs to increase the number of farmers' markets that accept SNAP payment.
9. The Study Committee recognizes the valuable role that co-ops, small farmers, and community gardens play in providing food for consumers. The Study Committee also supports and encourages the continued formation of these establishments.
10. The Study Committee encourages state entities to collaborate with nonprofits and private groups to further the address food insecurity.

SIGNATURE PAGE

Respectfully submitted,

FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS
AND ENDING FOOD DESERTS STUDY COMMITTEE
(2021 SENATE RESOLUTION 283)



Senator Harold Jones II, Chair
District 22