

Community Advocates

An Approach to Constituent Engagement in Local Food
Policy and Activism in the District of Columbia



dcgreens

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The Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program is a social justice program that trains, inspires, and sustains leaders. Fellows gain field experience fighting hunger and poverty through placements in community-based organizations across the country, and policy experience through placements in Washington, D.C. The program bridges community-based efforts and national public policy, and fellows develop as effective leaders in the movement to end hunger and poverty. The Emerson Program supports a diversity of local and national approaches to eliminate hunger, poverty and social inequality, particularly racism. We seek to craft successful and mutually beneficial partnerships between Fellows and partner organizations while developing a new generation of hunger and poverty leaders. Fellows support partner organizations with program development, research, evaluation, outreach, organizing, and advocacy projects.

DC Greens uses the levers of food education, food access, and food policy to advance food justice in the nation's capital. We do this by: focusing on transformational changes at the systems-level; building bridges between government, private sector, communities and non-profits; developing advocacy channels to amplify marginalized voices; curating best practices and leveraging existing infrastructure; responding to community needs and providing thought leadership.

Executive Summary

In the District of Columbia, access to fresh and healthy food is determined more by income level and race than by individual choice. Currently, there is one full service grocery store for every 8,572 residents in DC's Ward 3, the wealthiest ward in the District while in Ward 8--the poorest ward in the District with a majority African American population--there is one grocery store for every 70,712 residents (DC Hunger Solutions, 2017).

This disparity in food access is known as the Grocery Gap and it has sparked a number of legislative, market-based, and non-profit community initiatives to address the food insecurity challenges many low-income residents of color face in DC. Yet these efforts have often lacked meaningful and direct input from those most impacted by food insecurity in the District. To encourage more engagement between DC residents with lived experience and policy makers working on food access issues, local non-profit DC Greens established the Community Advocates program in 2017¹. Over the course of six months, DC Greens provided a group of six DC residents with lived experiences of food insecurity advocacy training, food systems knowledge and connections to push for local policies and food access programs that address food insecurity and create an equitable food system in DC. Following the training of the inaugural cohort, an evaluation was conducted to gauge the impact of the program and uncover strategies for improvement with future cohorts.

This report provides an overview and findings from the evaluation, which consisted of in-depth interviews and skills assessments conducted with five Community Advocates from the inaugural cohort. Among the major findings of the evaluation were the program's strength in increasing Advocates' knowledge about the local food system and expanding their networks in the DC food space. The Advocates revealed that the program helped advance their development as activists and advocates through opportunities to engage directly in local policy spaces among other areas, as well as providing them with a sound grasp of what the food system looks like and how it operates in DC. The Community Advocates also noted areas where the program could be modified in order to bolster its efficacy in training future advocates. These consisted of providing foundational training on how entities such as city council operate, creating more opportunities for Advocates to do direct advocacy and community organizing within their own neighborhoods, and making changes to how cohort meetings are run in order to increase their efficiency.

As an initiative still in its nascent years, the Community Advocates program serves as a case study on how advocacy training programs can be mechanisms for centering and elevating the experiences of

¹ DC Greens is a nonprofit organization based in DC that uses the levers of food access, food education and food policy to advance food justice in the nation's capital. "Mission." *DC Greens*, www.dcgreens.org. Accessed 9 Feb. 2018

target constituents in social change movements to address systemic inequities. To further this work, DC Greens seeks to provide thought leadership on the scaling and implementation of Community Advocates program in other cities through a how-to guide it is set to release in spring 2018.

Introduction

Food insecurity is a national problem found in every corner of the United States. The nation's capital is no different as it currently grapples with its grocery gap. A focal point of food insecurity in DC, the grocery gap exists in the unequal access to healthy and affordable food particularly among segments of the city's low income and African American populations. To date, one in seven households in DC is food insecure, meaning that at some point during a given year, a household cannot provide adequate food for all its members due to limited financial resources (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015). The grocery gap further compounds food insecurity in DC where there is currently one full-service grocery store² for every 8,572 residents in Ward 3, the wealthiest ward in the District; and one for every 70,712 residents in Ward 8, the poorest ward in the District and home to a predominantly African American population. (DC Hunger Solutions, 2017).

Changes in the Number of Confirmed and Planned Full-Service Grocery Stores in D.C., from 2010 to 2016, Compared to D.C.'s 2014 Median Household Incomes and Racial and Ethnic Demographics							
Wards	# of Full-Service Grocery Stores, 2010	# of Full-Service Grocery Stores, 2016	# of Full-Service Grocery Stores in Pipeline,* 2016	Median Household Income, 2014	% Non-Hispanic Black, 2014	% Non-Hispanic White, 2014	% Hispanic, Any Race, 2014
Ward 1	6	8	1	\$80,794	31.4	54.7	20.8
Ward 2	8	7	0	\$99,422	9.0	74.7	9.8
Ward 3	11	9	0	\$109,909	6.0	82.2	9.4
Ward 4	2	5	1	\$71,545	58.6	26.1	19.3
Ward 5	3	7	1	\$55,063	72.8	18.3	8.3
Ward 6	4	10	3	\$90,903	36.7	54.1	6.0
Ward 7	4	2	0	\$39,828	94.4	2.5	2.8
Ward 8	3	1	0	\$31,642	93.7	4.3	1.4
DC Overall	43 (avg. 5.4 per ward)*	49 (avg. 6.1 per ward)*	6 (avg. 0.75 per ward)	\$69,235	49.6	40.2	9.9

Note: A precise comparison between 2010 and 2016 data is challenging due to ward boundary changes in 2012 and a modest change in the application of full-service grocery store definition between D.C. Hunger Solutions' 2010 report and this report.

Table 1 depicts number of full service grocery stores by Ward in years 2010 and 2016 (DC Hunger Solutions, 2017).

² For the purposes of this report, a full-service grocery store is defined as a business establishment with a minimum of 5,000 square feet primarily engaged in retailing food for preparation and consumption, as well as regularly provides the following: fresh fruits (eight or more types), fresh vegetables (eight or more types), fresh meat (five or more types), dairy and bread. This does not include restaurants or carryout establishments (DC Hunger Solutions, 2010).

The impact of these disparities is evident in poor health outcomes particularly in Wards 7 and 8, two of the poorest wards in the District where rates of obesity and diabetes were significantly higher than all other wards in 2012 (DC Hunger Solutions, 2017). In addition, the paucity of grocery stores in these wards puts financial strain largely on low-income residents who incur high transportation costs traveling to stores outside their neighborhoods. There are also broader economic costs to the city from the grocery gap, as many residents of Wards 7 and 8 who are SNAP recipients often travel to stores in neighboring Maryland and Virginia, thereby spending their dollars and benefits outside DC, resulting in a loss of community investment³.

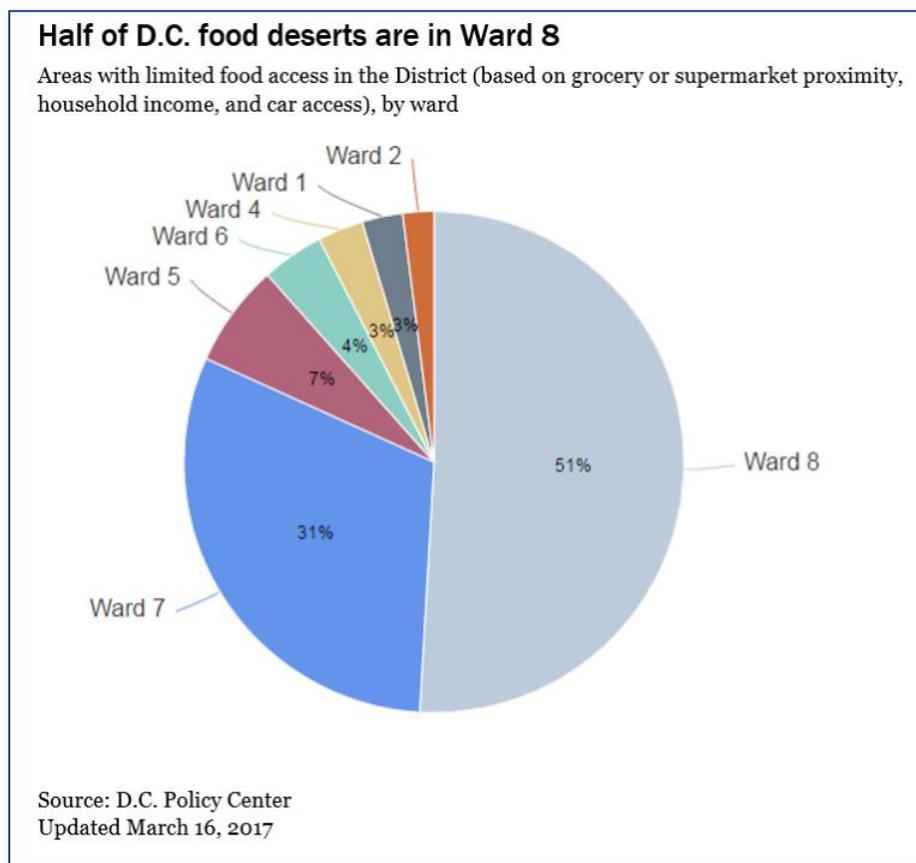


Figure 1 depicts the concentration of food deserts in DC by ward

The challenges of food insecurity and the grocery gap have garnered widespread attention in DC, resulting in a variety of government and community-led initiatives. These efforts include grocery delivery programs, farmers' markets, corner stores, smaller grocery stores, emergency food banks, and community cooperatives among others. On the local policy front, the FEED DC Act of 2010 offers tax

³ According to the USDA, every \$5 of SNAP benefits spent generates \$9 worth of economic activity (USDA, 2011).

incentives to qualifying grocery stores located in low-income areas (*DC.gov*, www.planning.dc.gov). Yet many of these initiatives have fallen short of eliminating the grocery gap and are often lacking meaningful and direct input from the populations who face food insecurity in the District.

This report details an evaluation of a unique initiative started by local nonprofit DC Greens to address food access disparities in a manner that is centered on the experiences of those most impacted by the problem. Known as the Community Advocates program, this initiative builds advocacy and organizing capacity among DC residents to push for more effective government action to address food insecurity at the local level. Rather than depending solely on elected officials to address food access issues, the Community Advocates program was created to invest in building the leadership and power of those most impacted by food insecurity to generate and push for solutions to the problem.

Soon after the inaugural cohort of Community Advocates finished the program, an evaluation was conducted to assess the impact of the program. Conducted through a series of in-depth interviews with the Community Advocates, the purpose of the evaluation was to provide answers and insights on the following considerations:

- Whether Advocates were able to develop professional skill sets that improved their efficacy as change agents
- The knowledge, lessons and new perspectives Advocates gained as a result of the program
- Whether Advocates successfully built relationships within the local food access/advocacy network
- Ways in which the program could be improved to better equip future Community Advocates for effective food justice advocacy

Drawing from the findings of the evaluation, the program's key accomplishments involved helping Advocates expand their networks and providing platforms like city council hearings and trainings for Advocates to effectively engage in local policy advocacy, among other things. Some major areas for program improvement consist of creating more opportunities for Advocates to directly engage with community members from under-resourced neighborhoods, encouraging Advocates to develop issue area expertise within the food and health space, and incorporating logistical changes to increase the efficiency of cohort meetings.

This report provides an overview of the evaluation beginning with a background on the history and structure of the Community Advocates program, followed by a description of the program evaluation process and methodology. In the next section the findings from the evaluation are presented along with analysis of major themes, strengths and growth opportunities for the program drawn from the Community Advocates' experiences. Lastly, the concluding section summarizes key findings from the evaluation and elucidates limitations of the evaluation process as well as final thoughts on the future of the program and the broader work on constituent-based advocacy.

Background

In 2017, DC Greens launched the Community Advocates program with an aim to amplify the voices of DC residents who were most impacted by food insecurity in shaping food policy and supporting food access programs at the local level. Six DC residents were selected to form the inaugural cohort of Community Advocates to participate in the seven-month long program, employed on a part time basis by DC Greens.

Application and Selection

The Advocates were selected based on an application and interview process.

To be eligible for the Community Advocates program, an applicant must first and foremost have lived experience of food insecurity⁴, and an interest in advancing food justice and equity in DC through advocacy. A full position description and list of qualifications is available in the appendix section of this report. Final decisions are made considering both the application and interview portions for each applicant. Some key considerations that went into selecting Advocates included:

- Ensuring that selected Advocates are representative of the populations/geographic areas most impacted by food insecurity
- Choosing a well-rounded cohort of Advocates that vary with regards to age, experience with food justice advocacy, as well as areas of interest and expertise
- What each Advocate can contribute to a cohort learning environment
- Whether a potential Advocate's understanding of advocacy work aligns with that of DC Greens

Once the cohort of Community Advocates was selected, acceptance letters were sent out detailing the description, expectations, work hours and pay rate for the position. Candidates who were not selected for the cohort were notified and provided with information on external opportunities to engage in food policy advocacy in DC.

Program Overview

Over the course of six months (April-September 2017) the Community Advocates attended weekly trainings led by DC Greens staff on a range of topics related to food policy and advocacy. Advocates received issue briefings, read materials and engaged in discussions on local government and the Food Policy Council; the local food system and its current problems; advocacy strategy; community organizing; and anti-racism training. Advocates also received professional development and skills training in areas such as public speaking and testimony writing.

⁴ Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. This may mean you have experienced a lack of financial resources to acquire healthy food, or could mean that you live in an area where access to healthy food is unreliable. This may also include experience as a recipient of SNAP, TANF, WIC, Senior Grocery Plus boxes, etc. (Defined by DC Greens Community Advocates position description).

In addition to these sessions, the Community Advocates engaged externally in food policy activism through the following activities:

- Attending and presenting at select city hearings, community meetings, and events related to food justice
- Working with leading city agencies and private businesses to develop new policies to create a more just food system
- Working closely with the Community Engagement Specialist and other members of the DC Greens Community Engagement team on advocacy projects and events
- Interviewing with local and national media/journalism outlets on food access in DC
- Building relationships with other community members who care about food and ensuring that their voices are heard by decision makers (DC Greens).



Figure 2 depicts a Community Advocates meeting at DC Greens

Community Advocates Program Components

DC
Budget
Hearings

Community
Meetings
and
Outreach

Testifying
at City
Council
Hearings

Food
Justice and
Systems
Training

Spokes-
person
Training

Evaluation Methodology

After the first cohort of Advocates graduated from the program, an evaluation was conducted to assess the ways in which Community Advocates were impacted by the program and indicate areas for future improvement. The primary motivations for implementing an evaluation were to assess whether Advocates' advocacy skills and food justice expertise had been bolstered after completing the program; capture the key successes of the program; and identify potential ways to modify the program based on the interests and needs of Advocates.

The evaluation consisted of in-depth, qualitative interviews with five members of the inaugural cohort. Advocates were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding their overall experience in the program, how it had impacted them as well as a self-assessment of key skills pre- and post- program. A list of the interview and skills assessment questions can be found in the appendix section of this report.

The interview section aimed to capture each Advocate's progression on a series of competencies derived from the original goals of the program. Accordingly, Advocates provided responses to questions covering the following topics:

- What they gained overall from participating in the program and what were some highlights of their experience
- Anything they would want to change about the program to yield better outcomes
- Their level of understanding/expertise on the current food landscape in DC
- Their views on the local government's current role in food policy and whether their perspectives changed after completing the program
- Whether Advocates plan to continue advocating for food justice, food access and other related issues after completing the program
- The ways in which Advocates can be supported by DC Greens after the program and what areas or skills they would like to receive further training on
- What, if any plans Advocates have for future advocacy and how they would like to stay engaged with DC Greens after the program
- Any new connections and relationships Advocates developed during their time in the program

In addition to the interview, each Advocate responded to a series of self-assessment questions on specific skills, subject matter knowledge and their confidence levels pertaining to advocacy work. For the self-assessment, Advocates ranked their level of mastery using a number scale both before and after the program, to assess the following competencies:

- Level of confidence speaking at a city council hearing or a general community meeting
- Level of confidence in their understanding of the local food system and food justice issues
- Ability to engage with and educate members within an Advocate's social community as well as outside their community about food justice issues

Findings



Figure 3: Community Advocates arrive at City Hall to testify about food insecurity in DC.

Drawing on the results of evaluation, this section details the key findings regarding the impact of the Community Advocates program and implications for future program development.

Below are narratives that characterize each Advocate's responses regarding their overall experience in the program and what they gained from their time as Community Advocates. The responses were analyzed in the context of the program goals to uncover whether the program was successful in supporting the Advocates to accomplish the following:

- Build community power to effect change at a city level and create a more just food system
- Sharpen professional skills and improve efficacy as a change agent through in-depth training
- Form meaningful relationships and inclusion in the local food justice/advocacy network
- Make clear, positive changes in the local community
- Engage in policy advocacy and prepare for policy implementation
- Develop a self-replicating train-the-trainer model that enables Advocates to train others in the community

- Gain historical context of food access and sovereignty issues in DC's Wards 7 and 8
- Have direct engagement with policy makers
- Expand healthy food incentives under SNAP by driving policy change as a community member (DC Greens, dcgreens.org).

Each Advocate's narrative is broken down into four sections that comprise the main themes from the interview and skills assessment. These sections comprise the Advocate's view of their program experience; their perspectives on advocacy and local food policy in the DC context; what their future plans and needs are following the program; and their assessments on a range of skill sets including public speaking and community organizing.

Michael

Michael deepened his understanding of the food system and food justice issues. He valued making connections with Advocates, receiving spokesperson training and plans to continue advocating for the Produce Plus⁵ program as well as affordable housing.

Program Experience

Michael gained increased knowledge about how the food system operates, both locally and nationally as well as the injustices that exist in the system. He has come to recognize the connection between access to healthy food and a community's overall welfare. From his time in the program, he values the connections he made with fellow Advocates and considers testifying to the DC City Council to be a highlight of his experience. He also enjoyed the activities that expanded his self-awareness such as the spokesperson training.

"They help you learn about yourself here."

Michael also mentioned having made meaningful connections with DC Greens staff and others working in the food space locally. He has concrete indicators of the relationships he has built (names, phone numbers) and sees these connections as potential resources he can call on in the future.

"I could tap into [connections made] for information and because we seem to be working on the same issues..."

Policy and Advocacy Perspectives

Michael expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of local funding for food programs. In particular, he is frustrated by the lack of change and inertia in city government when it comes to forming legislation and funding initiatives that effectively tackle food insecurity. He wishes DC

⁵ Produce Plus is a farmers' market incentive program administered by DC Greens. The program provides coupon checks that can be spent at farmers' markets to DC residents who receive welfare benefits such as SNAP, WIC or Medicare.

government would move with a sense of urgency on issues of food insecurity and housing as well. On his end, Michael plans to continue advocating for Produce Plus because he sees it as valuable information to share with those who face obstacles to accessing healthy food. He is also involved with affordable housing advocacy efforts and has been canvassing with the Washington Legal Clinic⁹, an advocacy organization that focuses on homelessness in DC.

Post Program Plans and Support

In the future, Michael would like to receive more spokesperson training as well as instruction on power mapping and learning how to cultivate allies for a movement. He also plans to find opportunities for engagement in the new neighborhood he recently moved to, as he wants to help empower people and work on pressing issues in his community. Lastly, Michael wants to stay informed about future events and initiatives at DC Greens.

Skills Assessment

Over the course of the program, Michael saw significant growth in his public speaking skills and feels he has improved in his understanding of local food justice issues. He also saw improvement in his ability to educate people about these issues.

Ms. Beatrice

Ms. Beatrice's biggest gains from the program were the connections she made and the subject matter knowledge she gained. She feels cohort meetings could be made more efficient by cutting down on the check-in time and plans to continue advocating for food justice along with elderly rights.

Program Experience

Ms. Beatrice expressed having made connections as a valuable takeaway from her time as a Community Advocate. She valued the networking opportunities of the program and considers the highlights of the program to be the Spring Dig fundraiser hosted by DC Greens, attending Advisory Neighborhood Commission⁶ meetings, as well as the [Grocery Walk](#) because of the opportunities they afforded her to meet and engage with new people. In regard to ways the program could be improved, Ms. Beatrice felt that during cohort meetings too much time was devoted to check-ins and personal life updates. She would have preferred to place a shorter time limit on these sessions to allow ample time for each agenda item during meetings. She also mentioned the idea of having each Advocate focus on an issue area of interest to them such as school food or urban agriculture that they can develop expertise on by attending meetings on the topic during the week and reporting back to their fellow Advocates on what they learned. She believes this would ensure Advocates stay abreast of different current issues without overwhelming their schedules.

⁶ Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) are locally elected officials that represent the interests of each of the eight wards in DC. ANCs advise DC and the Federal government on issues pertaining to their respective wards.

Policy and Advocacy Perspectives

When it comes to the role of the city government in addressing food injustice, Ms. Beatrice expressed frustration with the lack of inclusion of the people most impacted by food insecurity at the decision-making table. To her those most impacted are only included after a decision has already been made, in a superficial attempt at community engagement.

“[The city officials] don’t even give the information to the people so that they can know until after the fact.”

She also feels that the city government should mobilize more resources towards providing sustainable and accessible food stores for residents of Wards 7 and 8.

Post Program Plans and Support

Ms. Beatrice’s frustration with the lack of inclusion of marginalized communities in city government decisions has motivated her to continue advocacy work after the program. She plans to continue advocating for Produce Plus, seeing her role in this as empowering her community and family of “blue collar workers” with information that can improve their lives by increased access to healthy food. Ms. Beatrice also plans to expand her advocacy efforts to housing and the elderly. Currently, she is working to improve disability accommodations in her apartment building, which is mainly occupied by senior citizens. In this context, she also sees her role as empowering her neighbors by being their representative to the building managers. She plans to leverage knowledge of City Council officials, which she gained from the program to alert councilmembers from the local Committee on Aging about the situation in her building. Lastly, she plans to be involved with her local food bank and health alliance group in 2018.

Ms. Beatrice hopes to remain in touch with DC Greens and to stay updated on future events and initiatives within the organization. She feels confident that she will carry on the relationships she has formed with DC Greens staff members, Advocates, as well as other food activists she met during her time in the program. One particular area she would like support in is with training on grant proposal writing, as she plans to start initiatives of her own in the future and will need funding to accomplish this.

Skills Assessment

Ms. Beatrice made improvements in her public speaking, community organizing and education skills as well as in her subject matter knowledge. Her most significant improvements were in community organizing and education, which she attributes to the knowledge on different issue areas and the local political process she gained during the program and is now able to share her findings with other community members.

Ruth

Ruth's main takeaways from the program were gaining a deeper understanding of the DC food system and enhanced public speaking skills. She would have preferred more community outreach activities and a more accommodating schedule but plans to continue advocating after the program and is expanding her advocacy work to include affordable housing.

Program Experience

Ruth gained an understanding of the local food system, the laws surrounding it, and how the system operates. This understanding has empowered her to want to seek change using the political process. In line with this, Ruth found testifying in front of the City Council to be a highlight of her experience in the program, particularly because it was a new experience and one that she never imagined she would have. Ruth also valued the cohort learning environment and felt she learned a lot of DC history from her fellow Advocates through listening to their experiences growing up in the District and their perspectives on how the city has changed over time. With regards to the program design, Ruth would have wanted more outreach/engagement opportunities with the populations most impacted by food insecurity. She felt that most of the engagement opportunities Advocates had were in spaces largely occupied by people working in food justice and food access professionally, not necessarily having personal experiences with food insecurity. Ruth would have preferred more direct interaction with individuals and groups from disadvantaged neighborhoods in DC as part of her education on food insecurity and inaccessibility in the city. Ruth also found the cohort meeting schedule to be challenging to make work with her personal and work schedules and would have preferred a more accommodating time slot for the meetings.

Policy and Advocacy Perspectives

Ruth finds the way the city currently funds food to be insufficient and feels the city government should take more concrete action to address food access challenges using policy measures such as providing more subsidies for low-income residents. While she acknowledges that it is not a panacea for food insecurity and food access challenges, Ruth plans to continue advocating for the Produce Plus program. She also aims to expand her advocacy efforts to pushing for affordable housing.

"I think it's important and while none of them [food access programs like Produce Plus] are like all of the solutions to all of the problems in this city, I think that they're all a little piece of the puzzle that together... help to make a better city with more food access."

Post Program Plans and Support

Moving forward, Ruth plans to continue her advocacy efforts for food justice on a national level. She will be incorporating scientific research in her advocacy work based on her position with the Union of Concerned Scientists and is also interested in working in public policy. In the future, she feels she

could benefit from political leadership training such as how to play an active role in government or how to run for office. Ruth would also like to keep in touch with upcoming events and initiatives at DC Greens and is open to speaking and sharing about her experience as a Community Advocate with future cohorts.

Skills Assessment

Ruth made significant improvements in public speaking and subject matter knowledge as well as modest improvements in her community organizing and education skills. She attributes the modest change to her involvement with BYP 100⁷ prior to becoming a Community Advocate, where she received training on community organizing and education. The most significant improvement came from her understanding of the local food system and public speaking in a local government setting.

Octavia

Octavia deepened her understanding of the local food system and how food access disparities impact her community. While she is disenchanted with the local government’s current response to food access issues in DC, she plans to continue advocating for programs like Produce Plus to expand food access.

Program Experience

Octavia felt she learned the most about food and urban agriculture in the District, as well as the disparities and food justice issues present in her own community. She also gained a greater sense of professionalism and was motivated by what she learned to become more active in her community. Her highlights from being an Advocate were participating in the Grocery Walk and a SNAP Roundtable event, where she got to share some of the challenges she and other SNAP recipients face. She felt validated by the success of the Grocery Walk in seeing so many people turn out for an issue that was important to her and which she had worked to spread awareness about.

“...you do this work all year and you wonder who’s listening, who’s picking up the flyers, and so the [Grocery Walk] turnout was great.”

She enjoyed the SNAP Roundtable because it was an opportunity to make her concerns known to a larger audience about the inefficiencies and discrimination many SNAP users in her community face when using their benefits. With regards to improving the program, Octavia suggested creating a folder that consists of all the notes, handouts, and informational documents that Advocates need, which they can then review on their own time. She sees this as a way to cut down on the “classroom” time of the program so that there can be more room for outreach activities such as canvassing. She also suggested collecting information on the people that Advocates interact with during canvassing as a way to stay

⁷ BYP 100 is a member-based organization of 18-35-year old adults that uses leadership development, organizing, advocacy and political education through a Black, queer feminist lens to fight for black liberation.

connected with them and engage them in advocacy efforts in a more sustainable manner, rather than a one-time interaction.

Policy and Advocacy Perspectives

Coming into the program, Octavia was dissatisfied with current local government efforts to address food injustice and has remained disenchanted by the city's work on this issue after the program. Octavia feels the city could do more to address food access issues and senses that there is a discrepancy with the resources the city government employs to curb food access and results produced by those efforts.

“We were just talking about \$250,000 going to the Healthy Corners [Initiative]; I go to the different Healthy Corners markets around the City...and there's only 2 cents worth of onions on the table, so I'm very disappointed...”

Despite this frustration, Octavia plans to continue advocating for Produce Plus along with expanding her advocacy to other issues such as environmental justice. She has made connections with the Chesapeake Climate Action Network⁸ and the Washington Legal Clinic⁹, where she serves as a volunteer. In addition, Octavia formed strong bonds with some of her fellow Advocates and continues to do advocacy work with them. She also feels encouraged to advocate because of the connections she made with staff at DC Greens and is confident that these relationships and support from DC Greens will continue.

Post Program Plans and Support

Looking ahead, Octavia would like to be part of any Advocate trainings in general that are open to her. For future canvassing, she mentioned that having access to iPads or tablets would help her work more efficiently. She also wants to stay connected and be kept in the loop about upcoming events and initiatives at DC Greens.

Skills Assessment

Octavia reported modest improvement in public speaking. This is because she already considers herself to be a confident public speaker, so the program did not have that strong of an effect on her skills in this area. She showed more significant improvement in the community education and subject matter knowledge areas. She attributes this change to the new knowledge on food and agriculture she gained from the program, which helped her feel more confident in sharing knowledge with others in her community.

⁸ Chesapeake Climate Action Network is a grassroots organization focused on addressing climate change exclusively in the DC, Maryland and Virginia area. (*Chesapeake Climate Action Network*, chesapeakeclimate.org/mission/).

⁹ Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless is a nonprofit that provides legal services to DC residents struggling with homelessness and poverty (*The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless*, www.legalclinic.org/about/).

“I feel like we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing, and let’s just keep it like I said, keep it going hard and strong.”

Toni

Toni has grown her network in the food justice space and improved in her public speaking skills and knowledge on advocacy strategies. She would have liked prior training on how entities like the City Council operate before attending meetings, but continues to advocate for food and health issues, although not necessarily for Produce Plus.

Program Experience

Toni feels she gained confidence in her public speaking ability, particularly in a political setting. She also learned about strategic thinking in pushing for change and on the structure and techniques of advocacy.

“I’ve always been an advocate all my life but I got a textbook, not literally, but a textbook experience on how to do it, how to get it started, who to contact, what to say.”

She also bonded with some of her fellow advocates and continues to stay in contact with them. Her highlights from the program were testifying in front of City Council and attending the Spring Dig fundraiser because of the opportunity to network and engage with people she wouldn’t have met otherwise.

“This allowed us to broaden our horizons and it’s an experience that I will remember forever.”

With regards to ways to modify the program, Toni would have liked more contextual training on how local government entities such as the Food Policy Council or the City Council operate, so she could more effectively participate and contribute during meetings.

“I understand that we had to jump in feet first because the Food Policy Council meetings were starting [but]... I was like a fish out of water, I didn’t know what to expect or what to do...so it took a lot of time... I had a learning curve...”

Policy and Advocacy Perspectives

Toni's perspective on how the city currently funds food programs is one of dissatisfaction because she feels the city government has no incentive to do better. She is also frustrated with what she views as lack of engagement among residents, whom she feels don't fight back and hold the government accountable.

“We don't band together, we don't speak up...we're always waiting for somebody to come and save us and when people come to save you, they give you what they want you to have not necessarily what you need.”

As far as advocating for Produce Plus, Toni was dissatisfied with how the program operated and preferred another food access program run by Martha's Table, a nonprofit organization focusing on food insecurity and child development in DC. She also touched on the disparities she has noticed in the food quality between farmers' markets west and east of the Anacostia River and how this impacts the benefits Produce Plus recipients receive based on where they shop.

Post Program Plans and Support

In addition to the Community Advocates program, Toni was involved in other advocacy work with the Ward 8 Health Alliance and Bread for the City and plans to continue this work after the program. She is also working with a grant from Sibley Hospital and Johns Hopkins University to create a health-related program to reach people in her community. Moving forward, Toni plans to focus on food and health advocacy exclusively. She would like support in developing her event planning skills and opportunities to plan events like the Grocery Walk. Additionally, she wants more reading materials on food justice and related issues to build her expertise on the subject matter.

Skills Assessment

Toni feels she improved her public speaking at hearings, community organizing and education skills the most during the program. She showed modest growth in her food justice subject matter knowledge.

Analysis

Through the narratives of the Community Advocates, we find notable indicators of the program's impact and how this relates to the stated goals and objectives.¹⁰ Firstly, the program achieved a number of its intended goals, related to providing local food justice education, facilitating network building, and engaging the Advocates in local policy advocacy efforts. In a parallel fashion, the Advocates' responses also point to several opportunities for improvement of the program in order to more effectively serve future advocates and achieve more of the program goals.

¹⁰ See “Findings” section.

Program Achievement	Corresponding Goal
Supporting Advocates in making connections and building networks in the food justice and policy spaces	Form meaningful relationships and inclusion in the local food justice/advocacy network
Facilitating Advocates' participation in local policy work through testifying at hearings	Engage in policy advocacy and prepare for policy implementation; Have direct engagement with policy makers
Developing a commitment among Advocates to continue championing Produce Plus	Expand healthy food incentives under SNAP by driving policy change as a community member
Providing training to Advocates on the local food landscape and food injustice in DC	Gain historical context of food access and sovereignty issues in DC's Wards 7 and 8

Recommendations for Improvement

Create a folder of handouts and informational documents that Advocates have access to as a resource throughout their training

Incorporate more time in the program schedule for community outreach activities such as canvassing; create processes and tools for Advocates to keep track of individuals during canvassing

Encourage Advocates to center their community engagement activities (ie. what meetings they attend outside of cohort meetings) on 1-2 issue areas of interest to them

Reduce the time set aside for group check-ins to allow more time for other agenda items during cohort meetings

Provide contextual briefings to Advocates on how City Council and Food Policy Council meetings operate in preparation for their first meetings

Cross-Cutting Themes

Each of the Advocate narratives although distinct in their own right, shares a number of common themes across various categories assessed in the evaluation. Among Advocates, a similar takeaway from the program was an enhanced awareness about how the local food system operates and a clearer picture of the disparities in food access across neighborhoods in the district. All of the Advocates reported an increase in their understanding of the local food system. This knowledge was both general for some Advocates, but others gained knowledge about specific areas of the food system such as with Ruth who learned about regulations surrounding gardening and urban agriculture in the District. In line with this, the Advocates all attested to the new relationships they built during the program along with their desire to further cultivate these connections after the program.

Another key theme was a shared dissatisfaction with the local government's current approach to food insecurity challenges in DC. Among the Advocates, there was a sense that issues such as the grocery gap do not seem to be a priority for the DC City Council. Additionally, they felt that the local government could do more to address these issues and that those most impacted by food insecurity should be an integral part of policy making and deriving solutions to these challenges.

Advocates also expressed a desire to do more community outreach with people from their neighborhoods, with a focus on organizing. Activities such as canvassing and education events for community members on their role as citizens in advocating for food justice were among the things Advocates mentioned regarding how they would have engaged in community outreach during the program.

Lastly, each of the Advocates shared a conviction to continue engaging in advocacy after their time in the program. Not only were the Advocates committed to championing food justice, they also were also drawn to other issues areas such as housing, healthcare, and elderly rights. The Advocates' interest in advocating for these other issues speaks to their awareness of the crosscutting nature of food insecurity particularly in DC and how it intersects with other issues such as homelessness and healthcare access.

Key Themes from Community Advocate Responses

Increased understanding of the local food system

New relationships and expanded network

Dissatisfaction with local government efforts on food insecurity

Desire for direct community engagement

Continued commitment to advocacy

Conclusion

The disparity in fresh and healthy food access in the District of Columbia presents a justifiable need for local government to mobilize resources towards expanding access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food for every resident regardless of income level and race. The economic losses and high rates of chronic diet-related diseases disproportionately concentrated among DC's low-income communities of color in Wards 7 and 8 highlight the racial and socio-economic nature of the grocery gap. As a result, a concerted and targeted government effort is needed to successfully eliminate the grocery gap and food insecurity in a manner that centers the concerns and visions of those most impacted by these issues in the District.

By establishing the Community Advocates program, nonprofit DC Greens took a key step towards tackling the grocery gap and achieving healthy food access equity in DC. Through training a cohort of six DC residents with lived experiences of food insecurity to engage in local food policy advocacy, the program vision was to build up a critical mass of community leaders to leverage policy and the political process in pushing for an equitable and just food system in DC. This report summarizes an evaluation of the Community Advocates program conducted after the first group of Advocates had completed the program. Through in-depth qualitative interviews and a skills assessment from five of the six Community Advocates, this report elucidates key findings on the impact of the program as told from the perspectives of the Advocates.

Among the major findings of the evaluation were the program's strength in increasing Advocates' knowledge about the local food system and expanding their networks in the DC food space. Judging from Advocates' responses, the program helped advance their professional development and exposure as activists through opportunities to engage directly in local policy spaces. Additionally, the Advocates learned new information about the features and dynamics of how the local food system works. The Community Advocates also noted areas where the program could be modified and improved in order to bolster its efficacy in training future advocates. These consisted of providing further training on how entities such as the city council operate, creating more opportunities for Advocates to do direct advocacy and community organizing within their own neighborhoods, and making changes to how cohort meetings are run in order to increase their efficiency.

The findings detailed in this report offer insights into how advocacy training programs can be a mechanism for increasing target constituent engagement in social change movements to address systemic inequities. Yet this evaluation is not without limitations due to the nature of how the responses were generated. A key limitation involves the self-reporting aspect of the evaluation. The skills assessment was self-reported by the Advocates which allowed for subjectivity in their responses. Additionally, social desirability bias may have potentially informed the Advocates' interview responses, which may have impacted the validity of the evaluation results. Researchers and practitioners conducting similar evaluations in the future should consider these and other potential limitations as they assess the impact of constituent engagement programs.

Looking ahead, future analyses of constituent advocacy programs should consider addressing questions such as how programs like the one discussed in this report can be scaled up both with increasing the number of participants in the program and in replicating similar programs in different communities across the United States. DC Greens is beginning to tackle these and other questions on the program's future in a how-to guide set to be released in the spring of 2018. The guide will include information and detailed guidelines on how to establish and implement a Community Advocates program and will include details on the selection process and curriculum used in the program. The guide will also provide lessons learned from the first cohort as well as future goals and next steps for scaling up the program.

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Appendix

Community Advocates Exit Survey

Open Response:

- What have you gained from your participation in the Community Advocates program? Have you experienced growth? If so, how?
- Please give two highlights of your time as a Community Advocate:
- What are two things you think we should do differently in future cohorts? Something you would add to the schedule or take away from the schedule?
- What is your perspective on how the city currently funds food versus how it should fund food? How has your perspective changed (or not) during your time in the program?
- Will you continue to advocate for food programs in the city, including Produce Plus? Which ones? Why or why not?
- If you don't see yourself advocating for food programs, do you see yourself continuing to be an advocate for other important social and justice issues in the city (ex: housing, recidivism, etc.)
- What do you need to be an effective advocate/in what ways would you want DC Greens to support you after this program is done?
- What additional information or training would you like to have access to in the future to be a more effective Advocate?
- When you picture your advocacy after the end of the Community Advocates program, what does it look like? What are your plans?
- What are the best ways to keep you engaged with DC Greens, food justice, and the future Community Advocates?

Relationships:

How many new relationships have you built during your time as a Community Advocate that you feel confident continuing after your paid time with DC Greens is over? Remember to think about fellow Advocates, people you've met at meetings, etc. We understand that this number is an estimate.

Areas where you increased your skills, knowledge, tools, or confidence:

- How would you rate your skills in public speaking at a City Council hearing?
 - Before the program:
(I don't have skills in this area) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)
 - After completing the program:
(I don't have skills in this area) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)

- How would you rate your skills in public speaking at a meeting (Food Policy Council, Ward 7 Health Alliance, etc)?
 - Before the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)
 - After completing the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)

- How would you rate your skills in community organizing (ie. identifying a target and then considering tactics to build community power and move decision makers towards that target)?
 - Before the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)
 - After completing the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)

- How would you rate your ability to educate people *in your community* about food access and justice issues?
 - Before the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)
 - After completing the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)

- How would you rate your ability to educate people *outside your community* about food access and justice issues?
 - Before the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)
 - After completing the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)

- How confident are you in your understanding of the local food system and issues of food justice?
 - Before the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)
 - After completing the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)

- How confident are you in your ability to engage people in your community to attend meetings or activities they wouldn't otherwise attend?
 - Before the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)
 - After completing the program:
(I don't have skills in this area)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (I feel expert)



Community Advocate

DC Greens, a nonprofit organization working to advance food justice in the District of Columbia, is hiring a team of Community Advocates. These Advocates will be supported by our Community Engagement Specialist to build community power that affects change at the city level and creates a more just food system. We encourage people of all ages to apply. If you care about food and justice, want to change the voices at the table, and are interested in contributing to a dynamic team, read more below!

Key Responsibilities:

- Attend 5 trainings on advocacy, community organizing, storytelling, DC's budget cycle, and food justice in DC
- Attend and present at select city hearings and community meetings related to food
- Build relationships with other community members who care about food and help them make sure their voices are heard by decision makers
- Work with leading city agencies and private businesses to develop new policies to create a more just food system
- Work closely with the Community Engagement Specialist and other members of the Community Engagement team
- Grow your own knowledge about food in DC

Qualifications:

We're looking for a lot of different types of people—you don't have to have every qualification on this list! The most important quality we are looking for is people who are excited about working on these issues as a part of a team.

- Experience and/or interest in advancing social justice/equity in DC
- Willingness to develop strong relationships with people and organizations in your community
- Interest in DC food policy and programs
- Interest in public speaking
- Interest in convening community meetings for discussion
- Familiarity with food assistance programs in DC (SNAP, TANF, WIC, senior grocery plus boxes, etc.)

Pay:

This is a flexible, part-time (18 hours per month = ~4.5 hours/week), temporary (5 months), hourly position. The pay is \$20 per hour, minus tax withholdings and does not include benefits. A travel stipend will also be provided that will cover some portion of any transportation costs.

What You'll Gain:

- In-depth trainings that will sharpen your professional skills and make you a more effective agent of change

- Meaningful relationships and inclusion in the network of food access and food justice advocates in the city
- Clear, positive changes for your community

DC Greens is an equal opportunity employer. We strongly encourage and seek applications from people of color, including bilingual and bicultural individuals, as well as women, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. Applicants shall not be discriminated against because of race, religion, sex, national origin, ethnicity, age, disability, political affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, color, marital status, or medical. Reasonable accommodation will be made so that qualified disabled applicants may participate in the application process. Please advise in writing of special needs at the time of application.

Want to Apply?

Send your contact information and answers to the four questions below to asha@dcgreens.org or mail your response to Asha at 2000 P St NW Suite 240, Washington, DC, 20036. If your application is selected, we will contact you to set up an interview! Call with any questions at 202-601-9200 ext. 212.

Questions:

- What makes access to healthy food important to people's lives?
- What types of injustices do you see when you try to shop for, eat, or sell food in DC?
- What gifts, skills, or talents will you bring to a team of people who will learn and grow together?
- What do you want to gain from your time as a Community Advocate?