

# REDESIGNING THE FOOD ECOSYSTEM IN PROSPECT LEFFERTS GARDENS



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In autumn of 2019, I participated in a food access bike tour hosted by Alexis Harrison, Partnerships Coordinator, Center for Healthy Neighborhoods at Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. The bike tour appealed to me as it combined two of my passions, cycling and gardening, and would make stops at three community gardens in Bed-Stuy - Hattie Carthan, 462 Halsey Street and Tranquility Farm. As the long standing Water Czarina at Maple Street Community Garden and scrapper on the compost team, I welcomed the opportunity to observe other community gardens in action. The tour, in partnership with Citi Bike, took place on a Saturday when most gardens host a market day of some iteration, so I was ready to do research.

While all three community gardens on the tour have been in existence longer than Maple Street Community Garden, I was still left in shock and awe at the magnitude of their operation, particularly the intergenerational components and the quality of services rendered, notably the Fresh Food Box program at 462 Halsey Street.

At our next general meeting, I recapped my experiences on the bike tour, shared photos and made my pitch for implementing a Fresh Food Box program at Maple Street Community Garden as we re-evaluated our interaction with our neighbors in Prospect Lefferts Gardens (PLG). Several months later, here we are launching our Fresh Food Box program. In writing my food justice policy report I strive to address the urgency of this program in our neighborhood, particularly during the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, and trust it can serve as a blueprint for us to eradicate inequities both in food and health.

My report would not have been possible without the help of the following gardeners and supporters. Mikeala Sparks, our Fresh Food Box digital strategist, who converted the results of my survey into stellar graphs/charts and created the URL for my report. Bayla Gottesman, Produce Buyer for Fresh Food Box program, who tweaked the list of my survey questions. Fellow attorney Paula Segal, who recapped the garden's legal evolution and gave feedback on my first draft. Neighbor-subscribers to the Fresh Food Box program who took the time to complete the questionnaire on the new customer application form. Cheryl Sealey (PLG resident), Michelle Rodriguez and Lela Chapman (GrowNYC staffers) who graciously participated in my email Q&A. My sister, Alison M. Roberts, who took time off from her courtroom assignments to serve, yet again, as my editor and proof reader. Finally, my teenaged niece Maya, for her invaluable comments.

Cover photo courtesy Better Bike Share Partnerships (BBSP) <https://mailchi.mp/4c739c6e9755/chn-january-newsletter?e=f65795df4b>

# MAPLE STREET COMMUNITY GARDEN EVOLUTION

Green space in an urban setting is a rare commodity. Hence Mayor Di Blasio's Walk to a Park Initiative, focused on increasing access to parks and open spaces, concentrating on areas of the city that are under resourced and where residents are living further than a walk to a park.<sup>1</sup> New York City Parks calculates the number of New Yorkers within walking distance of a park and defines "walking distance" as a quarter mile or less for sites such as small playgrounds and sitting areas; or a half mile or less for larger parks that serve a wider region, typically over eight acres or situated on the waterfront.

Maple Street Community Garden falls within the parameters as outlined in the Walk to a Park Initiative. After a rather circuitous journey, the garden was finally acquired by New York City Parks Department in January 2019.<sup>2</sup> The house at 237 Maple Street was owned by Germaine Kirton, an immigrant from Guyana who passed away in 1990, without leaving a will or any apparent heirs. In 1997, a fire destroyed the property, after which the lot was used as a dumping ground for discarded appliances and household refuse.

In 2012, residents and members of Maple 3 Block Association cleaned up the lot and started the Maple Street Community Garden. At a Community Board meeting in 2018, resident Donnie Grayman who lives directly across from the garden, testified about the transformation of the lot from an eyesore to its current majestic state.

The garden was not without its detractors, including the Makhani brothers (Joseph and Michael), realtors with a history of criminal and dubious dealing, who showed up one summer claiming title to the land and asserting their right to proceed with the construction of a five story condo on the site.<sup>3</sup> A standoff ensued, followed by a temporary lockout for the summer, while the matter worked its way through the court system.

In the interim, gardeners lobbied their elected officials to allocate or commit funds for the purchase of the property, attended court hearing to show solidarity and made presentations before Community Boards and at Universal Land Use Review Procedure hearings at City Planning Commission and Brooklyn Borough President's Office.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nycgovparks.org/planning-and-building/planning/walk-to-a-park>

<sup>2</sup> <http://596acres.org/maple-street-acquisition-by-parks-approved/> and <https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/press-releases?id=21450>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/there-goes-the-neighborhood-episode-6-trickery-fraud-and-deception/>



*A tax lot photograph of 237 Maple St. shows the home that used to stand on the lot before it burned down in 1997, according to advocates of the Maple Street Community Garden, which plants and maintains the empty lot. (Photo credit: NYC Department of Records/596 Acres)*

Paula Segal, attorney for the garden, explained by email, “After the land was purchased by the City, we supported the City in its request to have the money from the purchase be held in escrow by the court until it could be determined who was the proper owner of the property and thus entitled to the money. That was challenging since Housing Urban Development LLC (the company owned by the dee thieves) has its name on the deed, but the court agreed with the City. The money, about \$2.5M, is now in escrow. A family member has retained a lawyer and asked the court to transfer the cases to surrogates court where the estate and proper ownership can be decided together. The courts closed due to COVID before the judge was able to rule on that request.”



## NEIGHBORHOOD PROFILE

Maple Street Community Garden is located in Community Board 9 between Bedford and Rogers Avenues<sup>4</sup>. One longstanding group is Prospect Lefferts Neighborhood Association (PLGNA), whose mission is to promote affordable housing, protect tenants' rights, build positive outlets for youth, expand elderly and disabled residents' access to resources, promote community engagement and maintain the diversity and vibrant character of the neighborhood.

In November 2019, PLGNA commemorated its 50th Anniversary by hosting an event at Greenlight Bookstore. Members revisited the organization's early years fighting redlining and defending diversity in the 60s and 70s, and the impact various initiatives have had on the community over the years. Panelists included Dr. Una Clarke, the first Caribbean-born woman elected to the New York City's legislature and whose daughter Rep. Yvette D. Clarke has her district office on Lenox Road; Brooklyn College Professor Ron Howell, author of *Boss of Black Brooklyn: The Life and Times of Bertram L. Baker*; Brooklyn College Professor Jerome Krase, a former PLGNA Member and author of *Seeing Cities Change* and *Race, Class and Gentrification in Brooklyn*; LIU Brooklyn Professor Deborah Mutnick, PLGNA Board Member and project director of The Voices of Lefferts Community Writing and Publishing Project.

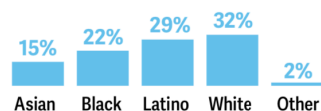


### Who We Are



#### POPULATION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY<sup>4</sup>

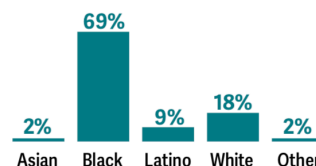
#### New York City



#### TOTAL POPULATION

8,537,673

#### South Crown Heights and Lefferts Gardens



98,650

<sup>4</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2018chp-bk9.pdf>

I reached out to Cheryl Sealey, PLGNA member and a food justice advocate who was instrumental in the launch of the Lefferts Community Food Co-op on Empire Boulevard and invited her to participate in an email Q&A. I posed five questions: What got you started in the food justice movement in our neighborhood, Prospect Lefferts Gardens. In 2014, when you were a key participant in the launch of the Lefferts Community Food Co-op on Empire Boulevard, why did you see the need for one back then? Do the needs the co-op addressed still exist today or have they changed? What do you think accounts for the fact that within one week of Maple Street Community Garden announcing the Fresh Food Box program to members and supporters, we had eighty-three subscribers. Is there any role you would like to see the Fresh Food Box program play other than what we have outlined?

*My introduction to food justice began over forty ears ago when, as a young adult, I joined the Crown Heights Food Co-op although I did not fully understand the concept of food co-ops. I saw it as something new and revolutionary. It was at a time when I could embrace working with other young black people not only to create more progressive ways to bring or control better food options but also instill healthier changes to my community. It also introduced me to the manner food influenced politics. I was a student at Hunter College when I heard about the Black Panther Party's 'Free Breakfast For School Children Program' and I saw firsthand how food could be used in political movements. The food co-op was another component of how the food we select, can prepare us to fight and eliminate racism and food inadequacies that permeates our communities.*

*In the early 1980s, shortly after subscribing to the Crown Heights Food Co-op, I became a member of a community garden on Eastern Parkway which I believe has since become a GreenThumb garden although the property was owned by New York City Transit Authority. I was an active member for almost ten years, despite the persistent tension between the community and the City of New York over the direction of the garden. Connie Lesold, a local community organizer, emerged as an advocate for the garden, fighting tooth and nail to move this garden to where it is today. I often look back and smile, because I felt my first labor pain with my first child while working in the garden. The very first watermelon I grew was stolen and I had to bring water from my apartment on Eastern Parkway(two buildings away from the garden), as we initially had no water source in the garden. I can still see my eldest child, Alyna, now 37 years old, running through the garden as if it was her personal playground. This was my first experience growing food communally.*

*In 2014, I became a member of Lefferts Community Food Co-operative. As described on their website, "Lefferts Community Food Co-operative is a member-worker run food coop whose mission is to bring high quality and fresh foods to the Flatbush, Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Crown Heights and surrounding communities". I accepted their invitation to become a board member as I saw it as a way to bring healthier food options with affordable prices to the*

*Prospect Lefferts Gardens area. This community has been deprived of decent food options for years. Also the idea of owning one's own food entity was quite phenomenal.*

*The most critical concern was how does a community like Prospect Lefferts Garden successfully sustain and maintain a food co-operative. Membership was paramount in the success of the co-op. Often the concept of food justice and equity are embraced by the newer community members, however its was often much difficult to attract long-term members in an economically, racially and culturally diverse community. Just how do you engage your long term neighbors to see and embrace a vision that is not the norm? How do you successfully engage your long term community residents to become involve in a concept that is so different from the norm? How do you encourage these community residents to understand the importance of ownership, creating their own food entities or demanding 'food justice'? How do you earn their trust? How do you keep the coop affordable, yet sustainable.? How to address the systemic racism that exists? The co-op is currently on pause since late 2018-2019 and is evaluating many of these concerns and how best to move forward.*

*As a resident of this community, it is extremely important that I use myself as an example for embracing food justice as a human right. I am an avid gardener and use my love of gardening and growing food for myself and my family. To show how healthy and sustainable food can empower our community physically, mentally and politically. It is not enough to want decent food, we have to demand decent food. We have to demand our political leaders and electeds advocate for policies that provide avenues that can sustain and encourage merchants and community members to work together to provide healthy food options.*

*As the community becomes more gentrified and more affluent, the needs of the community also change. However, we must protect the needs of long-time community members, including the less affluent who are also major stake holders. Food has to be healthy yet affordable and we also have to respect the diversity of the food in the community. For example, white bread is way less healthier than spelt or sourdough but it it cheaper. Now we have to reach out to those members of our community and compromise on what is more nutritious yet affordable. What's important is how we can share or accept our differences in food choices or confront or food prejudices.*

*I believe PLG is hungry for food options that is affordable, yet sustainable and this is why I believe the Fresh Food Box program became so popular so quickly. It was advertised with minimal restrictions and and much flexibility. Community members also see very little pressure to commit. I think we can use the program to bring resources to the community that will encourage healthy food options for our selves and our families. The program can also be used to reinforce the commitment that the garden is a community entity that requires cooperation and involvement from community members to keep it productive, sustainable and equitable.*



## RETAIL FOOD ENVIRONMENT

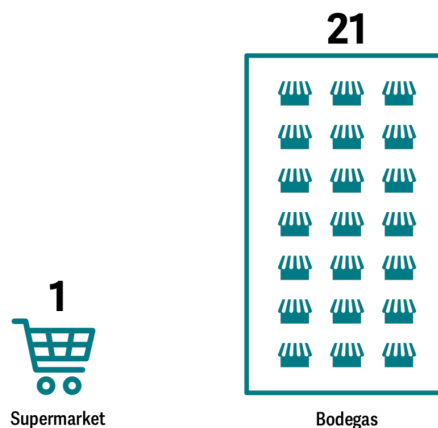
### Food environment

Bodegas are less likely to have healthy food options than supermarkets. The lowest ratio among NYC community districts is one supermarket for every three bodegas (healthier); the highest is one supermarket for every 57 bodegas (less healthy). **South Crown Heights and Lefferts Gardens** is home to two of NYC's farmers markets, another source of healthy food.

It is easier to make healthy choices when healthy, affordable food is readily available.

### SUPERMARKET TO BODEGA RATIO

For every one supermarket in **South Crown Heights and Lefferts Gardens**, there are 21 bodegas.



Source: Farmers Markets: NYC DOHMH Bureau of Chronic Disease Prevention and Tobacco Control, 2017; Supermarket to Bodega Ratio: New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, October 2016

## COMMUNITY HABITS

### PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, DIET AND SMOKING (percent of adults)

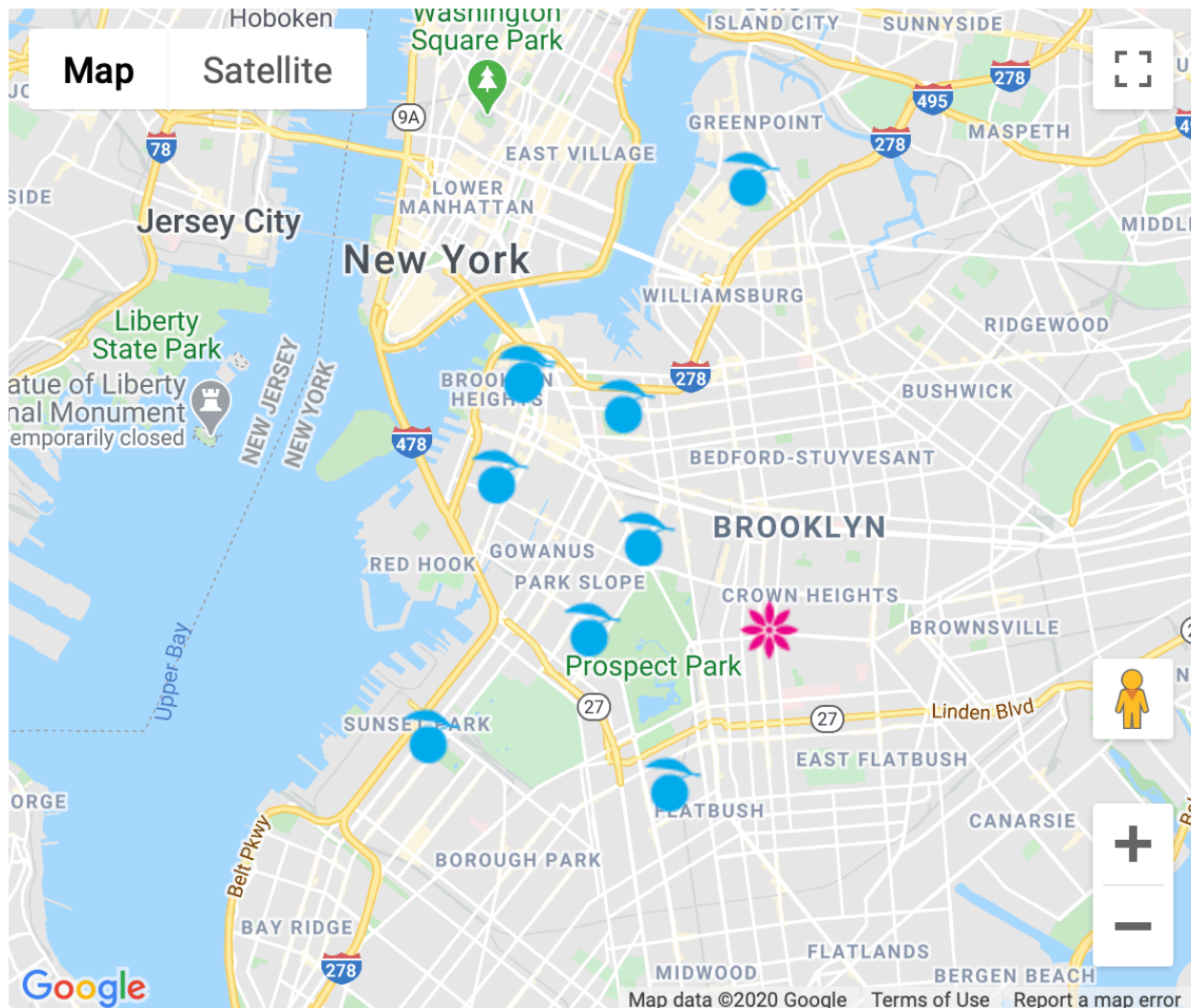
	South Crown Heights and Lefferts Gardens	Brooklyn	NYC	Highest %
Any physical activity in the past 30 days	77%	72%	73%	90% Financial District, Greenwich Village- Soho
At least one serving of fruits or vegetables per day	81%	86%	87%	96% Financial District, Greenwich Village- Soho
	South Crown Heights and Lefferts Gardens	Brooklyn	NYC	Lowest %
One or more 12-ounce sugary drinks per day	32%	24%	23%	8% Financial District, Greenwich Village- Soho
Current smokers	8%	14%	14%	8% Upper East Side

Source: NYC DOHMH, Community Health Survey, 2015-2016

# INTRODUCTION TO GrowNYC

GrowNYC is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year. According to their website, the entity was originally created in 1970 as the Council on the Environment of New York City (CENYC) and was initially a policy-based organization writing comprehensive reports about quality of life issues like air quality, traffic and noise. One key program administered by GrowNYC is the Greenmarket - a network of Farmers' Markets, Youthmarkets, and Fresh Food Box programs - designed to let all New Yorkers access fresh food that is also locally sourced.

GrowNYC currently has several Farmers' Markets in Brooklyn and two Fresh Food Box programs - the Brooklyn Army Terminal and the Bed-Stuy Fresh Food Box. Lela Chapman, Sales and Relationship Manager at Greenmarket, explained to me via email, "GrowNYC Wholesale is a local food hub. As we define it, a food hub strives to build a supply chain that considers all parties to be stakeholders - farmers, farmworkers, staff, consumers, communities, as well as both urban and rural economies. We would like members and supporters to know that their participation and feedback is what enables us to continue to build a better food system and supply chain, keep local farmers farming, and supply great food to New Yorkers".



Ms. Chapman believes the Fresh Food Box program is in alignment with Governor Cuomo’s Vital Brooklyn Initiative, launched in 2017 to transform Central Brooklyn with a new model of community development and wellness addressing chronic disparities, such as systemic violence, affordable housing, lack of access to open space and entrenched poverty in high-need communities.<sup>5</sup> She writes, “As you know, there are many other allied health benefits from this type of program - the food sovereignty of growing your own food, the health benefits of gardening, being outdoors and connecting with other community members. In addition, it is well documented that people are much more likely to talk to their neighbors at farmer’s markets than at traditional supermarkets, and that sense of community building very much extends to community garden and Fresh Food Box programs as well. It’s often lamented that people today have ‘forgotten’ how to prepare healthy food from scratch. But in fact, there is usually a great deal of knowledge that exists in the community, and these programs are natural forums to swap recipes, tips, and stories that enrich our collective knowledge and amplify culinary traditions.”



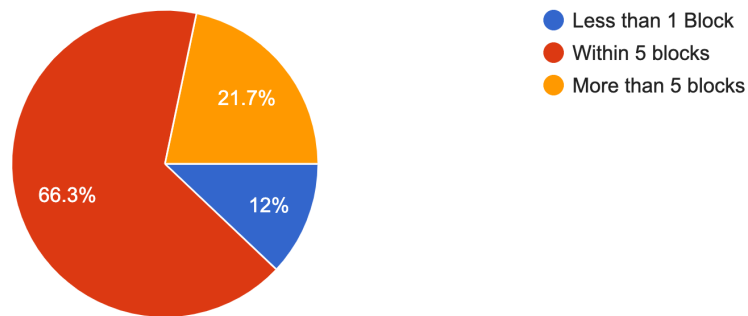
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ny.gov/transforming-central-brooklyn/vital-brooklyn-initiative-0>

# WHY IS MAPLE STREET COMMUNITY GARDEN FRESH FOOD BOX PROGRAM NECESSARY

At the beginning of April the Fresh Food Box team at Maple Street Community Garden launched its marketing campaign and I included a survey with the enrollment form. Within one week, there were 83 subscribers, 153 subscribers by the second week and 202 subscribers by mid-May. The responses were a clear indicator of the urgency and appeal of the Fresh Food Box program.

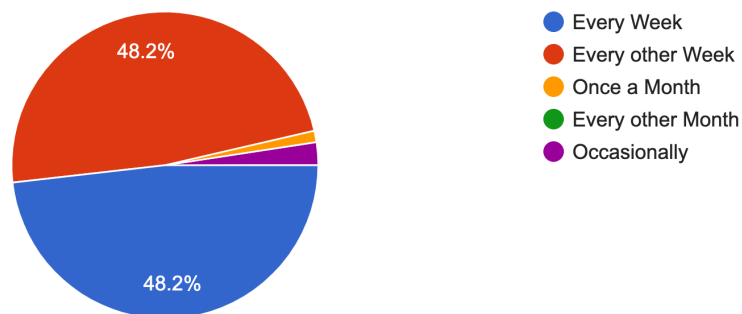
How far/close to Maple Street Community Garden do you live?

83 responses



How often would you anticipate purchasing a Food Box?

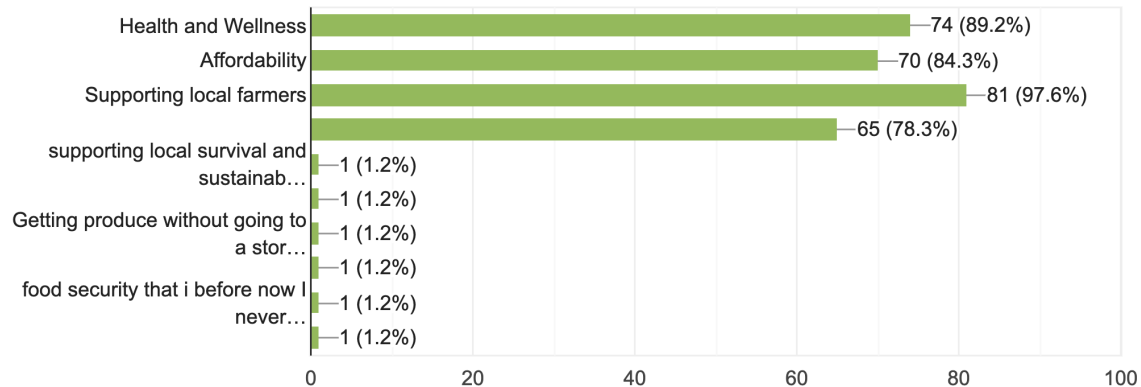
83 responses



Among the top reasons new subscribers listed provided were health and wellness as well as affordability, which is even more significant as I write this report in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic which has severely impacted Central Brooklyn, and disproportionately so the communities of color.<sup>6</sup>

#### What is your motivation/inspiration for subscribing to the Fresh Food Box program?

83 responses



The Coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the levels of food insecurity or lack of “access at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life”, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture<sup>7</sup>. In the aftermath, it is imperative that we strive to provide residents with healthy food that is both economically and physically accessible as part of an ongoing effort to eliminate health deficits and disparities.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-19-cases-by-zip-05172020-1.pdf> and <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-19-deaths-race-ethnicity-05142020-1.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/43164/15815\\_efan02013f\\_1\\_.pdf?v=0](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/43164/15815_efan02013f_1_.pdf?v=0)



## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

My goal in writing this food justice policy report is to reignite the discussion about access to healthy, affordable food in Prospect Lefferts Gardens. To that end, I have compiled a list of recommendations that can inform future initiatives:

### **A. QUALITY OF PRODUCE**

The respondents in our new subscriber application survey made it abundantly clear that availability, affordability and proximity are all factors that influence their decision to subscribe to the Fresh Food Box program. This model is beneficial to both residents and local farmers whose businesses are being supported by a core base and should be expanded to adjacent neighborhoods.

### **B. EDUCATION**

As Lela Chapman of GrowNYC previously mentioned, Fresh Food Box programs are natural forums “to swap recipes, tips, and stories that enrich our collective knowledge and amplify culinary traditions.” Education remains an important vehicle for empowerment. Cooking demonstrations and workshops, with an emphasis on teaching kids about healthy eating choices can reinforce the importance of nutrition.

### **C. COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS WITH HEALTH SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS**

Fostering community partnerships with health service organizations, such as local hospitals, to provide health and wellness checks is a more holistic approach to the Food Box programs.