

[0:00]

Maggie: Welcome to the Young Farmers Food Safety Focus Group series. I'm Maggie Kaiser, the produce safety training coordinator for the National Young Farmers Coalition. Throughout the summer of 2020, I, along with Bre Sliker, Billy Mitchell and Farmer Facilitators from across the country, hosted a series of focus groups with farmers where we discussed the challenges and successes of implementing various on farm produce safety practices and we recorded them because we want these conversations to be a resource for you. In every session, we bring together farmers with similar experiences for a discussion about a specific farm food safety topic, we begin each one with a farmer presentation followed by a roundtable discussion where farmers share problems and solutions with one another. We hope you enjoy them and find some practical information for your farm.

[1:00]

Maggie: So welcome thanks everyone for coming to the focus group. Today we will be hearing from Raqueeb Bey who is with the Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Co-op, BUGs FPC and she will be sharing about food safety for urban produce, aggregation and distribution. My name is Maggie Kaiser. I'm the produce safety training coordinator for the National Young Farmers Coalition, as well as a farmer and nursery grower in New Orleans. So, I will kick it to Brie first. She has been part of every single focus group this summer, which is really awesome and has really made them happen. So we'll kick it to you and then you can invite the next person.

[1:49]

Bre: Thanks! Hi everyone, my name is Bre Sliker and my pronouns are she/her. Like Maggie said, I've been interning at National Young Farmer Coalition summer, helping out with these focus groups and produce safety projects. In addition to being an intern, I am a graduate student at NYU in the food studies Department, and I'll pass it to you, Adrian.

[2:16]

Adrian: Well, my name is Adrian. I also worked for National Young Farmers Coalition as a Pennsylvania organizer. I am based in Pittsburg and do this work part time and also farm part time. I'll kick it off to Raqueeb.

[2:34]

Raqueeb: Hi, I'm Raqueeb Bey. I am the founder and executive director of the Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh. I am an urban agriculturalist which basically means I mix farming with business and community activism. I also work for Great Pittsburg, which is an urban education organization here in Pittsburg where I manage a library. Let's see what else, I sit on a couple of task forces and boards. Locally, I'm on the Board for Niceall. I like helping people, growing food and growing minds. I'll pick Lisa.

[3:23]

Lisa: Hi I'm Lisa with Vitality Farms Company. I will kick it off to Sabine. You didn't go yet, right?

[3:31]

Sabine: You'll have to bear with me. I'm on my phone and it's really windy here. My pronouns are she/her. I'm in central Pennsylvania and we have a farm here and I'm really interested in this food safety for aggregation. I just started, in response to covid, an online farmers market where I deal with more than 20 vendors.

[3:59]

Maggie: Cool. Thanks everyone for being here today. Raqueeb we're going to pass it to you. You can start sharing your screen and get down to business.

[4:10]

Raqueeb:

So, as I said I am the founder of the Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburg. We have a farm in Homewood. Briefly, about our story, in 2015, we came together as a collective group of black growers to help each other with our own projects, but to also fight injustice that comes along with it, unfortunately. White supremacy has been a barrier to black growers here in Pittsburgh. I started in 2011 with just me and some friends wanting to teach our children to grow food with a youth program called Mama Africa's Green scouts. In 2015 we were doing in the Hill District, but we decided to do our programming in Homewood as well. Basically, we're about growing food and growing minds. We teach African American youth and their children and their families to grow food. We teach community responsibility and development, African center culture and of course, green sustainability and growing food. We started in Homewood in 2015, the same year we founded BUGs Pittsburg. We knew that we wanted to work in a community in Homewood. Homewood is a food apartheid area. We don't say food desert because apartheid is another form of white supremacy. There hasn't been a grocery store in Homewood since 1995. This residence is primarily African American. 48% of Homewood residents worry whether their food will run out before they can buy more. We knew we wanted to work in Homewood, and address food access for fresh produce. Like any food apartheid area, there are some corner stores or bodegas, but the food is processed and expensive and everyone doesn't have transportation to get to a grocery store, or transportation might not be feasible for them. So, we knew we wanted to address those issues. Equity plays a big part of this, so we started reaching out to other people in Homewood that already had gardens so we can all work together. We created, in 2018, an organization called the Homewood Food Access Working Group to address these issues. Working with them to end white supremacy and systematic racism are social justice venues that we wanted to stick to for Homewood and other areas as well, but Homewood is our primary area that we work in. We started a farmer's market. So, the City of Pittsburgh has 17,000 blighted lots, the majority of them are in Homewood, and this is a site of a blighted lot in Homewood. When we started Mama Africa's Green Scouts in 2015, we worked at a community garden and one of our black growers lived across street. It was her garden. So, we looked at all kind of spots in 2017 in Homewood. We chose this lot, it was actually 231 thousand square feet. We work with City of Pittsburgh Adopt A Lot process where you can lease the lots and you can grow a farm, garden, or even if you just wanted to green space to keep it clean. We knew we needed a solution to having no grocery store in Homewood. We started a farmer's market but we wanted to grow food year-round. So, we wanted to use the hoop house. We built this hoop house in 2018. Land access is very important to us, to have Black spaces on Black land. Often, no matter what work we did, who we worked with, we often still go through having land taken away from us or the threat. Recently, a city official threatened to take our farm away from us and she got a whole lot of phone calls, but this is what we go through. More importantly, we have volunteer help all over the place, but it's important to invest in our youth and our elders to see black faces on black land. Our farmers market started in 2016. It didn't go too well. Of course, this is pre COVID. That's our farm manager, Mama Celeste. So, then that's when we started working with the other gardens and organizations in Homewood to make it better. This is our fourth year of our farmer's market. We have a motto: we take food justice in our own hands. That's our green print. We don't mind help from everyone or anyone, regardless of color, but again it's important that our land matters and black farmers matter too. When COVID hit like everyone else, we had to rearrange how we did anything that came from workdays on our farm. We got a late start. The city of Pittsburg wasn't allowing too many gardens or city properties to be open, so we had to do something on social media to get their attention and eventually they opened the gardens back up. We were still on our property anyway because it's like, what are you going to do? It's the pandemic. You can't stop us from growing food. Food is needed and then we had people calling us wanting to learn to grow food and we are a teaching farm, so that's one of the things we knew we had to do. Working with our partners, as you can see here, we had to restructure how we did our farmer's market. There were Zoom meetings all over the place about protocols of what we needed to do to make everyone safe and secure, so masks, sign-ups, and hand sanitizer. We wanted folks to keep their distance to keep them safe. With that being said, we also worked with the USDA to pass out farms to family, and they're doing this all over the

country. We've been doing it all summer long, 30 pounds of produce every week to families. There's no requirement so we needed to keep safe and we're still doing this at the same building with our partner at the House of Manna. We were passing out these food boxes to families on Tuesdays and they could come and get as many boxes as they want. We don't need your name, ID, nothing like that. What do you want? How many do you want? How many children do you have? That might be the most question. I've got five children. Here, take four or five boxes. We wanted to get rid of them, we're distributing 200 boxes a week. You come in one way and you leave the other, and you don't even have to come in because some people don't have transportation. Some people will come and walk in and get these boxes or coming with shopping carts to get these boxes. So, most of the time our volunteers will go out and delivered to them. They have masks. If they don't have a mask, we asked if they don't come inside the building. Early in the morning, around 7:30, this is us in our hoop house harvesting with some volunteers. We make sure there's not too many people there and we keep it at a social distance. So, every Saturday morning they are harvesting in a safe manner. So, this is our stand where they're setting up. You see most things are in the bag. They have gloves on, which is not a requirement, but we deal with cash and cards that she has her hand on our lock box. We just want everyone to be safe. I prefer for people to go online because we have a setup where you can go online and then just come and get your stuff and I'll set it on the table for you. Because Homewood is an underserved area, a lot of people may not have access to a credit card, bank card, or debit card. A lot of people still use cash, so we make sure we have a safe way for cash to be used. When we're giving out these boxes for the USDA, we have a lot of volunteers to come and help, and we work with the city of Pittsburg where people can not only just pick-up food and hot meals once a week, but once a month we give away seedlings to grow. We just want to make sure people get food for their households. After partnering with the USDA, we just thought it was going to be for six weeks, but they extended it to the end of this summer and now extended to October, and we're hearing they wanna go through the end of the year. This food is needed so we will be following the same protocols. Along with distributing the boxes, we distribute hot meals, and you can see the boxes in the background. When the restaurants deliver to have meals, we set it up on the table and ask people how many they want. If they want a meat one or a vegan one, and they get their meals and go. We prefer that people don't come into the building, but sometimes they do. That's one of our volunteers loading up someone's car. That's how we prefer it with the produce boxes. That's me inside our hoop house, so we grow really great greens and they're really good. Yeah, but safety is very important to us. We have about 3 people working the farm stand at any given moment. Some wear gloves, some don't but everyone has to wear a mask. If you come to our farm stand, you don't have mask. We have disposable masks for the clients. Everyone can't come to our farms so we do deliveries for elders. We work with our partner, Operation Better Block. Whatever is left over at the farm stand on Saturdays they deliver it on Tuesday. We deliver hot meals and produce boxes to 15 different elders in the Hill District in 15 different elders in Homewood, so 30 of them and that takes about 2 1/2 hours once a week and we just drop it on their porch. We do that because a lot of people are still in self quarantine. On our farm we have a hand washing station that we made because all the hand washing stations were on back order. I ordered one in June and it was supposed to come in July two weeks ago. So, we made one for the farm also for a tool in the library. So that's it. Does anyone have any questions?

[15:11]

Maggie: Can I ask the first question, because I'm curious about when you made your hand washing sink, how you made it and what you used to do it? Was there a plan that you followed?

[15:21]

Raqueeb: No, I went on YouTube. You know how you might go to a conference in the coffee thing? There it is, and we have a liquid soap on top of it. That's what we use.

[15:36]

Maggie: That's awesome. I love seeing how everyone has adapted and managed to put together hand washing sinks when they couldn't find the supplies to do it.

[15:46]

Raqueeb: Yeah, we did it at the Grow Pittsburg as well. The one at Grow Pittsburg has two stations. The hand washing stations are in demand and they are all on back order. I ordered ours in June. Signage is very important as well. You know, stay 6 feet apart from each other. With the city of Pittsburg, for any land that you're using, you have to have a sign that states regulations and restrictions and things like that.

[16:14]

Maggie: We just had another person that joined. Is it Sharon?

[16:20]

Sharon: Yeah, it's Sharon. So, like 2 names in one. I'm calling from Philadelphia.

[16:28]

Raqueeb: So, we were just going over protocols that we use at our farm organization, which is the Black Urban Gardens and Farmers in Pittsburg Co-op. We started like five years ago and we have a 31,000 square foot urban forum in the East End of Pittsburgh in Homewood. Because of the pandemic, we had to reorganize how we do everything that goes from our farm. We actually have a hoop house. I showed a slide before our harvest for our farmer's market. We do it with safe distance and most people wear masks for washing the food and preparing it for the farmer's market. Most of the stuff we do, bag and label. If someone comes to the market without a mask, we have disposable masks for them. We do take cash, but we use gloves with our lock box of course for cash and debit cards. We have a hand washing station. Before you got on, we were talking about it because I ordered a hand washing station back in June, but their own back order so we had to make our own. We used a container like if you go to a conference, did you get coffee or have water? I just put a liquid soap on top of it. We give away produce boxes every Tuesday, about 200 them once a week. We give out hot meals as well. We are also doing produce distribution when we distribute the produce on Tuesdays. There are people who self quarantined, so we do about 30 deliveries on Tuesdays mostly to elders and we just put it on their porch and it's the same thing on Saturdays. Whatever is leftover we deliver it to elders when they call in their orders for their produce. Yeah, but so far so good. Everything has worked out. Everyone's healthy and safe. It's August, so everyone's tired of growing food and it's hot and it's raining a lot, so yeah.

[18:31]

Adrian: I'm wondering on Saturdays, if you harvest everything for market the same day?

[18:37]

Raqueeb: At 7:30 in the morning that day, we wash it, weigh it, and bag it up. Then we take it to the market. Sometimes people are still bagging up when we're at the market because we want to be there on time. It's not just our food, so, Operation Better Block and Grow Pittsburg, brings some food. Grow Pittsburg does their harvest on Friday evening. Our harvest is 75% of the market. So we have a lot of greens, we are especially good at that okra, tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant and peppers.

[19:18]

Adrian: How far is your farm from the Eastern Food Co-op, because that's where right I am.

[19:26]

Raqueeb: Next door, basically. So, the Eastern Food Co-op is in Point Breeze and we're Homewood. From our farm, which is called the Homewood Store Carbon Farm, a person can drive to the Eastern Food Co-op in about 4 minutes. I actually had a meeting with the Eastern food coordinator and Adrian like wow a lot of people don't know this but we are a food apartheid community.

[19:50]

Sabine: This is Sabine. How many shoppers or how many families do you provide food for?

[19:58]

Raqueeb: So thus far, since the beginning of June , giving away these boxes we have served over 2000 families. On average, for the farmer's market, we sell about 25 pounds of produce. That's just from our farm though. We decided to increase our yield because of the pandemic. We give a lot of food away too, not just on Tuesday. Our neighbors have a work share. So, we don't have a grocery store in Homewood, and we haven't had one since 1995. Before the pandemic, we were holding bimonthly meetings with residents to see what they want. About a month and a half ago, the manager of the Eastern Food Coop reached out to me and I have had two meetings with her and our City Council representative. They're moving the Eastern Co-op, they're looking at Homewood because they need a bigger space. It's not up to me, we work with other organizations in Homewood for this cooperative community grocery store, and we have a meeting in the beginning of September, so the larger group can talk about it. Like I said, it's not me. I don't like to reinvent the wheels and it's not up to me alone. We have a bigger group that would have to be OK with it. You don't see a lot of us shopping at the Co Op, so even if everybody was OK with it, the community would have to be OK with it. In Homewood you would have to hire people from Homewood. With the Eastern Co-op, their food is very expensive so that's one of the things that we talked about was his pricing and culturally relevant foods as well. It's a big long shot. I don't know if it's going to happen.

[21:49]

Maggie: I have a question as well. What I understand about Pittsburgh, it's definitely a city that's changing and new industries coming in and new people moving in. So, when you're talking about land access, I was just curious if maybe gentrification of some neighborhoods or more people moving to Pittsburgh if that's really affecting the ability to get land and to create growing spaces.

[22:17]

Raqueeb: I am an activist, I'm not just a farmer. I have an activism background in housing and anti-gentrification work. So, the neighborhood where I live is called the Hill District. I've been living here since I moved from Philadelphia in 1989. It has come a long way, but what happened is I was on the board for the local nonprofit and we got a nationwide award for Eco Innovation District. You're talking about five years ago for this neighborhood. I'm like, yeah, you got wonderful but when we met with the developers at board meetings, they're telling us all their elaborate plans. They're building an NRG center on UPMC, which is Temple University. OK, they're putting solar panels in at Duquesne University. There could be models like that for underserved people, low-income people, so it was a big fight. If I wasn't on the board, I don't know what would have happened. So, I had to throw that word gentrification in, and everybody got nervous. Everybody knows that I have a big mouth. I would say five years later there's door knocking. Now, we basically stop gentrification, because my definition of gentrification is when redevelopment isn't fair, just, or equitable. I'm not against redevelopment, however I am against it when you don't involve community. I actually used anti gentrification models in Philadelphia that we brought here. When you're fighting social injustice, there's always something else. Yeah, so land grab and land loss is an issue, especially for indigenous and black people. In my neighborhood, we don't want our taxes to go up on our house, which can happen, but the mayor promised me that there's something on the books that could put a freeze for people's taxes. We have to follow up on that. However, for urban ag, that's the issue. We can't afford to buy or farm all right, there is the threat of Jennifer Kacian with someone taking it. We have a good relationship with the city so that they don't want any smoke from us, you understand what I mean? We are working with City Council for some pilot programs and I looked at some of them in Philadelphia, dollar lots. You can get lots in some neighborhoods for a dollar, so we're using models from other cities, we are starting with Adopt A Lot participants and I don't know if you knew this, Adrian, but the panic slowed down a lot of things. We can use the time to create policy and get the mirror on board where we can say hey, you know we got 10 lots here we want to start with and maybe you can get it for a dollar a lot. So that's very important for us because we can't afford to buy it. You know not right now at least. But even if we can, we want to continue working with City Council for this program. That's just very progressive. I mean, there's 17,000 blighted lots here and that would help. So, land access is not just land access. We have a program, your called TRALI, which stands for Three Rivers Agricultural Land Initiative, where people can

put their farms in Land Trust and has been going on for maybe two years. I think my sister is on the steering committee and they got a couple farms and gardens up under their belt so far, which is great.

[26:10]

Maggie: We don't have a Land Trust like that that's preserving green space in New Orleans, but I would love for there to be something like that because it's all marked for development and whatnot. We don't need more development. We have flooding issues already, so why pave more green space, right? Right? But it's a super cool model. I mean, I think it's a super cool model.

[26:33]

Raqueeb: It is, it really is. I don't work directly with them, but the flip side of that is my colleagues in Philly are telling me we had better land access in Pittsburgh than they do in Philly. So yes, the one farm in North Philadelphia, they worked it out with the city where they have their land in perpetuity. Everyone in Philly isn't like that and it could be a struggle. When I was in Philly in December for the Pennsylvania women's agricultural network, which I'm on a steering committee for now, we had a symposium. I was talking to some of the people and one lady who facilitated a workshop that I was doing, it took her three years to get her garden in Germantown and finally, City Council paid attention because she did a protest. So, it depends. From what I learned in Philly, they want to use our models, but I'm like I wanna use your model.

[27:36]

Maggie: Do you have a lease for the property that you grow.

[27:39]

Raqueeb: Yep, I just signed the lease.

[27:41]

Maggie: What are the terms of that lease?

[27:43]

Raqueeb: It's for three years and we gotta keep up with maintenance. They want to know what we're growing, but it can be finicky. So, on hoop House, we had to get permission from the Art Commission. Sounds weird, right? That's how the city set it up because the hoop house is over 8 feet tall. So, we had to present to the Art Commission, but it was fairly easy and they approved it. We are building a tool shed and I don't want to go through our Commission so I'm just making sure it's under 8 feet.

[28:15]

Maggie: Raqueeb, I was asking about the lease because y'all are putting infrastructure on these spaces, so I was just wondering about the mental game. So, you're not guaranteed to be there forever. How does that plays into your choices of putting infrastructure on this space?

[28:33]

Raqueeb: So, we're expanding next spring. We just got approved from the NRCA in our CS for another hoop house. We're going to do that next spring. We're working with City Council for this pilot program. So, 5 to 10 Adopt A lot participants in the city of Pittsburgh. We can get this land without any problems, if not free, at least a dollar a lot because we can't afford to buy it. So, hopefully that would be progressive for the city of expense. Don't get me wrong, in a release it does state if they want our property, they could come and get it within 30 days. However, we're hellraisers, we're not gonna let that happen. So, this is why we're working with the Pittsburgh City Council. About a year and a half ago, we had an organization called the Urban Redevelopment Authority, or URA. They have a lot of property in Pixar, right? So, they mirrored the City of Pittsburgh, Adopt A Lot Program and it's called formula. They came up to us. With their power, they can take the land from the city and put it in their name, and we would not have

to ever worry about redevelopment. When I was on good terms with the open space specialist, I said, you know, I really like working with you, but our growers are leaning more towards formula. She's kinda upset about it, because they basically mirrored her program. What makes it better is we don't have to worry about redevelopment. It could kind of be ours in perpetuity. It'll be like hands off, and so I told her last November. Alright, then what are you gonna do about it because my members wanted go with formula. You know what I mean? The only difference in formulas is we would have to pay the taxes. Those taxes wouldn't be more than 600-700 dollars a year from my research, but nevertheless it would always be ours, right? So, then she sat down with us with City Council to work on this college program. That's the only way we gotta remove in one year.

[30:46]

Bre: I think that's great and it will hopefully just set a good precedent because the Adopt A Lot program and as awesome as it is, it's a site use agreement,. Not everyone's a hell raiser and not everyone is as close with the city.

[31:04]

Raqueeb: People don't ask a lot of questions. Yeah, and redevelopment gentrification is happening and I would hate to see anyone lose, even if this pilot program with City Council takes a year or two, no one's going to really bother us. You know what I mean? It would be they don't want smoke, but it could happen to anyone. I don't plan on living in Pittsburg for a couple years. I just want to make sure that folks have a solid way they can pay for land and land access to grow food. Yes, I want to move out of Pittsburg eventually and move back down South?

[31:52]

Maggie: Please join us in the South.

[31:54]

Raqueeb: Not right now though, I'll be patient.

[31:59]

Maggie: We have just a few more minutes and so if people had questions in our last few minutes, now is the time.

[32:10]

Lisa: I do have one question. We live right next to a church as well, and the church that we live next door does the same kind of thing. They give away food every week and we had thought about maybe how we could maybe partner with them. I was just wondering if we did something like that, is that something you did grants or did you just do that where you made money on one end of your business and subsidized the other?

[32:35]

Raqueeb: Our main partner is a church it's called the House of Manna and that's where our farmers market is set up. On Saturday and Tuesday we distribute the boxes for their families out of the House of Manna. We work with the American Heart Association here in Pittsburg through the USDA to distribute these boxes. She's a great partner and we when we applied for a grant we did it along with other gardens in Homewood and Grow Pittsburg to get this grant for the farmers market. So, she gets money for letting us use her space but we were like constantly fundraising. That's my job. I'm not constantly doing it. I should be doing it more.

[33:37]

Sabine: Quick question for Raqueeb. I know Pennsylvania is doing a pilot program to accept WIC Programs online. Do you know anything about that program?

[33:39]

Raqueeb: No, I didn't know online, but we accept WIC vouchers but I am not familiar with online but I know Pennsylvania made it so three stores can accept SNAP online. Walmart, I can't remember the other store, and it's another store where it's close to Philly. I never heard of him before.

[33:58]

Sabine: I think there's definitely a demand for it because we have our online farmers market and it's really nice that people can pay online. For those people that have WIC or SNAP or any of those, they can't take advantage of it. Your program is so inspiring. I really want to explore different ways that can make our online market more accessible to low-income demographics.

[34:33]

Raqueeb: We actually had people call us and we enter their snap numbers. We sell ceilings too so you can buy ceilings with SNAP.

[34:43]

Sabine: Thank you Raqueeb.

[34:43]

Maggie: We've come to the end of our focus group.

[34:49]

Raqueeb: This was fun, it was nice meeting some of you and nice seeing those who I already know.

[34:53]

Maggie: I feel like you keep making food accessible to people and standing up for the people that need the food the most.

[35:00]

Raqueeb: Great. Sharon if you come back to Pittsburg, I dropped my email so give me a call I would love to give you a tour!

[35:08]

Thanks for listening to our produce safety focus group series. For visuals from the presentation, more information on this series and other produce safety resources, visit youngfarmers.org/focusgroups. This podcast was edited by Hannah Beal and recorded in partnership with the National Farmers Union Foundation over the summer of 2020 as part of our EFSA produce safety programming.

[35:46]

Transcribed by Mackenzie Jeter, National Farmers Union