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Secretary of Agriculture: Agriculture is Strengthening Food Access in Urban Centers, Growing Resilient Communities

Harrisburg, PA – Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding traveled from Erie to Pittsburgh, Harrisburg to Philadelphia, and from Easton to Wilkes-Barre this week in honor of Pennsylvania’s 5th Annual Urban Agriculture Week, visiting 19 urban agriculture organizations directly addressing food insecurity, improving quality of life, and sparking economic development and entrepreneurship.

“This week, we traveled the commonwealth to celebrate and uplift food system leaders who are changing the trajectory of urban communities through food and agriculture,” said Redding. “Food is a basic human right, but it is a right that is often taken for granted. Many of the urban gardens and farms seen this week started because of needs seen within communities. It is a humbling moment to hear these stories, but it is also a moment for hope. Hope that agriculture is creating a more equitable table for all, regardless of ZIP code.”



First photo: Gretchen Gallagher Durney, Associate at Sisters of Saint Joseph Neighborhood Network (SSJNN), with Secretary Redding at one of eight urban garden plots overseen by SSJNN and their student workers. Second photo, pictured from left to right: Susannah Faulkner, SSJNN Associate; Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding; Kristiyona Glover, student worker; Wession Maske, student worker; Tristan Davis, student worker; Gretchen Gallagher Durney, SSJNN Associate; Isaac Harrington, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau. Download these photos and more [here](#).

In Erie, the Sisters of Saint Joseph Neighborhood Network (SSJNN) oversee eight urban gardens throughout the city. When SSJNN first started its urban agriculture initiative, the City of Erie had ten food deserts. Today, the food deserts in Erie have decreased to seven, and SSJNN strives to create food secure communities by increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables through its gardens and farmers market.

Through charitable donations, the Little Italy Farmers Market matches Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) vouchers, doubling the amount of produce seniors and low-income families can receive. The backdrop to the Little Italy Farmers Markets also pays homage to the Italian immigrants and Bhutanese refugees who have greatly influenced Erie's agriculture, food, and cultural scenes.

Gretchen Gallagher Durney, SSJNN associate, oversees SSJNN's urban garden initiative and its student worker program. High school students can join SSJNN to build their agricultural knowledge, grow their skillsets, and earn a competitive wage.

“For well over a decade the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network has been transforming vacant lots in the heart of Erie into oases of beauty, food, education, camaraderie for residents, and more. In 2013 one of the plots became officially registered as the SSJNN Urban Farm, with the purpose of providing growing space for teens in the neighborhood to work in and sell produce at the SSJNN Little Italy Farmers Market, alongside several other local farms,” said Durney. “Through these many gardens and the urban farm, and with our absolutely tremendous volunteers, donors and neighbors, we have been able to provide food, hope, and opportunity to so many. This year will mark more than 100 teens who have been part of the urban farm program, learning agriculture but also soft skills and more, often through adversity. These pieces of our mission have been an inspiration to me, the neighborhood, and we hope to the greater community as well.”



Angelina Cottrill, 1 Sound Urban Farm intern and biology and environmental science student at Allegheny College, pictured at Tuesday's Urban Ag Week tour at 1 Sound Urban Farm in Pittsburgh. Download this photo and more [here](#).

In Allegheny County in the City of Pittsburgh, Redding toured 1 Sound Urban Farm. The urban farm was established by Ebony Lunsford-Evans, or “Farm Girl Eb,” to become a teaching site for community members to learn to grow, sustain, and distribute fresh food to the local community. With the expansion of the garden, Ebony searched for an intern to join her program. That’s when she met Angelina Cottrill, student at Allegheny College double-majoring in biology and environmental sciences, who joined her team in June.

“I grew up in the city of Pittsburgh and have seen firsthand the challenges Pittsburgh residents face when it comes to accessing fresh food,” said Cottrill. “I have always had a passion for serving my community and fighting food insecurity.”

Cottrill says working at the farm is the best part of her week. Her favorite part of interning at 1 Sound Urban Farm is working alongside Ebony. “Ebony is an inspiration. I look up to her. She loves to give back to her community and has a real passion for personal development,” said Cottrill. “We have a purpose here. 1 Sound Urban Farm is a gateway to food sustainability for the Pittsburgh community.”



Rafiyqa Muhammad, Urban Garden Coordinator at Camp Curtin YMCA, provides a tour to Secretary Redding and guests on Wednesday of Urban Ag Week, highlighting healthy habits and educational enrichment for kids and their families. Download this photo and more [here](#).

In Harrisburg, at Camp Curtin YMCA, Secretary Redding was joined by Jamien Harvey, Camp Curtin YMCA executive director and Rafiyqa Muhammad, urban garden coordinator. There, they toured the Camp Curtin YMCA community garden, which received a \$2,500 Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant to purchase garden materials to expand its operation. Community garden harvests – squash, carrots, tomatoes, watermelon, cantaloupe, cauliflower, and more – benefit meals prepared at the YMCA for its children’s programs. The garden is maintained by volunteers, many of whom are children participating at the YMCA, and their families, teaching youth how food is grown and instilling healthy habits.

Rafiyqa, a Harrisburg native, says that the garden program is just getting started with hopes it will be an asset to the local community. “Getting engaged helps to keep these kids involved, it’s a holistic approach,” said Rafiyqa. “While we may not solve all the issues that are going on, exposing these kids to new opportunities they have never seen before builds those interests and keeps them safe. It’s a great feeling to see the kids’ faces when it’s time to harvest and see the final product they helped grow.”

The garden is part of the “Big Green Block” community partnership project that will prevent storm water runoff from damaging the sewer system while beautifying Camp Curtin and the surrounding neighborhoods.



First photo: Chris Bolden Newsome of Sankofa Community Garden cleans and prepares vegetables after they're harvested. Second photo: The Sankofa Community Garden sign next to garden beds. Download these photos and more [here](#).

In Philadelphia, Sankofa Community Garden at Bartram's Garden is a staple for Pennsylvania Urban Ag Week; it is one of the original locations from the first tour in 2018. The word Sankofa means "to retrieve" in the Twi language of Ghana, embodying a spiritual component of reconnecting people to the land. Sankofa Community Farm strives to reconnect people of color with culturally appropriate foods from Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia, distributing more than 15,000 pounds of produce each year.

The vision of farm managers Chris Bolden Newsome and Ty Holmberg has also created experiential learning opportunities for youth. Student interns learn and assist with planting, harvesting, processing, marketing, sales, and culturally appropriate cooking techniques.

"This food triggers the power of memory, and then we're able to start the work of community building and rebuilding," said Newsome. "We're helping to heal the community."

In 2021, the farm received a \$50,000 Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant to improve its compost collection and distribution and expand its on-farm operations through the purchase of a hoop house and gardening equipment.



Left to right: Rep. Eddie Day Pashinski, Secretary Redding, and Easton Community Gardens Manager Ross Marcus tour the gardens and discuss its impact on the community. Download this photo and more [here](#).

In Northampton County in the City of Easton, Easton Community Garden is an initiative of The Neighborhood Center, which operates a community food pantry every Friday. Nearly half of all that the garden grows directly supports the work of the pantry, feeding more than 400 families - roughly 1,400 people. The other harvests support community markets and other charitable organizations.

“Last year, the Easton Urban Farm harvested over 11,000 pounds of produce on two-thirds of an acre,” said Ross Marcus, The Neighborhood Center executive director. “Half of the harvest was distributed through The Neighborhood Center’s food pantry, while the remainder of the produce was distributed through Vegetables In the Community (VIC), a program of Lafayette College.

“With the funding through the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture’s mini-grant program, The Neighborhood Center was able to buy a rototiller, which enabled our staff person to till the soil when it was needed, rather than when another organization’s machine was available to borrow, greatly assisting our production.”

“No matter who you are or whether you live in a rural, suburban or urban community, if there’s food available to eat, it’s thanks to agriculture,” said State Rep. Eddie Day Pashinski, chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee. “Pennsylvania Urban Ag Week highlights the diverse growers and producers providing quality, locally grown food in urban areas. Locally, we are fortunate to have a growing urban agriculture community, including the Wilkes-Barre Community Gardens. This week is also an opportunity to showcase how the historic PA Farm Bill and PA Department of Agriculture have awarded \$1.5 million to support our urban farmers in just the past three years.”

Since 2019, the Pennsylvania Farm Bill Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Program has invested \$1.5 million in 93 urban agriculture projects across 19 counties. The program has leveraged an additional \$1.5 million in local investments through matching dollars, totaling a \$3 million initiative to grow food access in urban communities.

The \$500,000 2022-23 Pennsylvania Farm Bill [Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Program](#) will open for application later this summer.

To learn more about the Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program that's growing and nourishing Pennsylvania's cities, visit agriculture.pa.gov/pafarmbill.

Note: Photo and video of several of the tours will be available at PACast.com. High-resolution photos and captions from the full week of tours are available on [Flickr](#).

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