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To The USDA Data Science for Food and Agricultural Systems Grant Committee:

I am writing in support of the "Sustainable Agriculture for Food, the Environment, and Economic Opportunities (SAFE)" grant applied for by Kennesaw State University Professors Vanessa Slinger-Friedman, Amy Gruss, and Jason Rhodes.

I am writing this letter because I am a longtime resident of the Southwest Atlanta community of Pittsburgh, a food desert community. I have seen with my own eyes the transformative power of sustainable urban agriculture, and what happens in food desert communities when residents come together to replace trash-filled empty lots with beautiful community gardens and food forests that produce healthy food. In 2012, I was living next to an empty lot that was being used as an informal garbage dump. Finding the situation intolerable, I began clearing the trash. This inspired an older gentleman, who was being treated for alcoholism at the nearby Salvation Army, to begin gardening in the lot. I joined him, as did several neighbors, and two amazing things happened. First, the garbage dumping immediately stopped: the lot was now respected as valuable community space. Second, the man was cured of his alcoholism as he poured his energies into beautifying this new garden space, and became respected in the neighborhood for doing so. That to me came to symbolize the healing potential of providing people with the skills to grow healthy food, and transform spaces that have been neglected and abused into spaces of community and hope.

I have been involved with Good Food, Green City since its inception in Spring, 2021. I have seen grant-funded projects come to our neighborhood before, with promises to combat the food desert through sustainable urban agriculture. They typically put a few plants in the ground, and leave. Good Food, Green City is different. They pay economically disadvantaged youth $15/hr., making participation in the program of real benefit to these students' families, while giving the students the skills necessary to produce healthy food in abundance in a community that desperately need it. We have planted hundreds of edible, perennial plants in Pittsburgh in a short period of time, and it's exciting to watch the program grow, largely through word of mouth, as homeowners continue to come forward offering to convert their lawns into food forests, and new volunteers join the effort each week.

I am so excited about the proposal to connect our community members to an agricultural training program that will allow us to directly confront the problem of hunger, which is real in this neighborhood. Our neighborhood of Pittsburgh isn't just a food desert. It's also an education desert, in terms of the quality of education that many of our young people receive in comparison with students in other parts of Atlanta. If given the opportunity, I will participate in this educational program, and share what I learn with my neighbors. It is hard to express the pride that we would feel if Pittsburgh were placed at the cutting edge of sustainable urban agriculture through participation in the SAFE program, and in particular if our youth – written off by so many – were able to play a positive role in the transformation of our community through the planting of healthy food. It is my hope that participation in this program will lead to employment opportunities for the young people of our community.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this. It will take a community of effort to transform Pittsburgh from food desert to Atlanta's leading example of sustainable urban agriculture, but education will be the key to getting us there, and that's why I'm so excited about the proposed SAFE program, and the educational opportunities it will provide. Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions for any additional information.

Sincerely,

michelle mills

Michelle Mills
Neighborhood Food Security Advocate
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