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**ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF HUNGER IN NEW MEXICO AND THE PASO
DEL NORTE REGION**

Statement of

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at the

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**Ending Hunger in America: Local Innovations to Inform a
National Strategy**

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The Paso del Norte Region of Southern New Mexico and El Paso, Texas

La Semilla Food Center is based in Anthony, NM, and serves the Paso del Norte region, a culturally diverse area rich in tradition, with a population reflecting Mexican, indigenous, Afro-latino and European backgrounds. The Paso del Norte region includes Doña Ana County, the city of Las Cruces, the urban heart of southern New Mexico, and the state's second largest city with 101,324 residents, and crosses the Texas state line to include El Paso, Texas, delineated by the U.S.-Mexico border and Ciudad Juarez 40 miles to the south. Though there are just over 1 million people in the area, the majority of the region is rural. The Paso del Norte region faces a situation similar to many other border communities with low wages (\$15,704 per capita income), 18% of the labor force unemployed, high rates of childhood poverty (31%), and high rates of obesity (31%). Doña Ana County residents reflect this situation, especially for those living in our rural areas. More than half of the county's residents live in unincorporated areas near Las Cruces or small rural communities throughout the county's 3,808 square miles.

New Mexico has long struggled with poverty, hunger, and unemployment, a situation only exacerbated by the global pandemic. New Mexico's unemployment rate sits 8 percent currently. New Mexico continually ranks last in childhood wellbeing measures by *Kids Count* that examines health, economic well-being, education, as well as family and community to measure a state's prosperity. Along with dismal economic and health outcomes, the region is rife with high poverty and low food access areas, with almost 30% of residents in Dona Ana County and 20% in El Paso lacking access to healthy foods. SNAP and WIC are important tools to bridge the gap for many families. Unfortunately, WIC participation is dismally low in the region, with New Mexico only covering 44.8% of eligible individuals and Texas covering 57.5%. SNAP rates of coverage fare better, with 90% of eligible individuals covered in NM and 73% in Texas. However, these numbers don't illustrate the difficulty that people in the region have with accessing healthy foods for purchase due to lack of healthy food access points and grocery stores and significant barriers to transportation in our largely rural area.

In the Paso del Norte region there is a huge unmet demand for fresh, healthy local foods. This "food gap"—nutritious foods, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables, are not available or affordable—obstructs people and institutions in our region from accessing local foods. New Mexico has one of the lowest food security rates in the nation and many parts of the region are considered food deserts. This situation is compounded by the fact that, as Michael H. Schuman's 2010 report "Prospects for Food Localization in New Mexico" observes, nearly all the raw food grown in the state of New Mexico is for export. And very little of this food is converted into value-added goods. Economists have long understood that a region that primarily exports basic commodities usually remains stuck in poverty. Health providers and advocates know that high levels of food insecurity and low access to healthy foods contribute to increasing rates of obesity and diabetes.

Doña Ana County is home to 2,187 farms with 95% of those being small farms—and 1,466 of those farms are less than ten acres. For more than half of those farms, the annual value of sales is less than \$10,000. Not surprisingly, 36% of those farmers work more than half the year in another industry. In recent decades, fewer younger operators are entering the business, resulting in an aging workforce. The average age of a New Mexico principal operator is 61, while less than 5% are under the age of 35 and nearly a third are 70 or older. Continuing issues with access to water and arable land, and the significant cost to starting and maintaining an agribusiness, mean that newly launched enterprises are few and far between. With a total farm acreage of 659,970, only a small percentage (14.2%) of this land is used for crop production and an even smaller percentage

for healthy foods that could be used for local consumption—only 6,700 acres for the production of vegetables compared to the 69,500 used for pecans, forage, corn (for feed), and cotton.

The statistics are stark, but they are only half of the story. The Paso del Norte region is located in the northern reaches of the Chihuahuan Desert where the potential for a renewed understanding of desert foods and ancestral health and wellness traditions carries the possibility of deep community resiliency. We believe deeply in the cultural value of sustainable, localized agriculture and its contribution as a source of community vitality and prosperity for all families.

The solutions

La Semilla delivers high quality, impactful programs that foster a healthy, vibrant, and localized food system in the Paso del Norte region. Our work is rooted in equitable systems change and we ensure that links between multiple food system points are made in each of our program areas. We do this through administration and implementation of activities within our key program areas:

Edible Education and School Gardens: This program offered in over 30 schools in 4 school districts on both sides of the state line empowers students to understand how food is grown, consumed, and impacts our personal, community and environmental health. Professional development activities train teachers in how to use the garden for instruction that integrates with standards and in leading classroom cooking activities tied to garden production. Edible Education students discover fresh food and make healthier food choices, creates school environments where the healthy choice is the easy choice.

Food Planning and Policy Advocacy. La Semilla leads coalition efforts made up of government officials, nonprofit leaders, private business, and community representatives who collaborate to evaluate and improve our local food system and the availability of safe, healthy, and sustainable food at reasonable prices for all residents and foster a link between food, health, and local economic development. La Semilla was instrumental in its inception and establishment as well as passing the Las Cruces Urban Agriculture and Food Policy Plan, the first of its kind in the state.

Community Education. The program serves low-income and limited resource children, youth and young adults, and families from underserved remote rural and underserved urban communities in the Paso del Norte region, as well as other interested community members. Programs include:

La Cosecha—supports the creation of environmentally friendly, long lasting community gardens in food desert communities, where Cultivadores/Promotoras (community members who apply to train as community garden leaders and organizers) lead gardening and cooking workshops designed to teach about where food comes from, culturally appropriate elements of a sustainable local food system, and how our food system has profound consequences for individual and community health.

Raices de Tradicion y Salud—engages youth ages 15-21 in farm-based production and food systems education and is hosted three times a year for 6-8 week sessions, 12-15 youth per session. Participants explore how food and methods of production are intrinsically tied to the health and wellbeing of a community.

Apprenticeships—We host 2 to 4 apprentices at any given time and each apprenticeship term ranges from 3-6 months. This program provides interested youth and young adults

with intensive education and employment opportunities at the Community Farm and with our other programs, depending on career aspirations and interests

Summer Camps - Summer campers engage in activities connecting history, ecology, farming, and cooking and nutrition

The Farm Fresh Mobile Market brings local, fresh healthy produce and staple food items to farmers' markets, neighborhoods, and to six food low-income and limited resource communities in southern Doña Ana County, New Mexico. Farm Fresh helps build relationships between farmers and markets that establish common grounding in the challenges and opportunities for direct market expansion while providing informed market analysis. Produce is sourced from La Semilla Community Farm and from up to 20 partner farmers.

La Semilla Community Farm is an educational and demonstration farm guided by agroecological farming practices for greater biodiversity, livelihoods and food security. The farm serves as a production and demonstration site, embodying practices that restore ecological vitality, produce high quality food for humans and the web of life, and improve small farm viability as livelihoods and pathways for people in the Paso del Norte region. On farm events, workshops, and tours provide farmer and public education opportunities to increase understanding and application of agroecological practices and to build capacity for local food production.

La Semilla Community Farm serves as a training site for food growing and food safety, in addition to carrying out its own agro-ecological production. La Semilla's Farm Fresh Program, the program most involved in this project, provides training, technical assistance, and market support to over 20 small farmers and food producers from underrepresented backgrounds (beginning, small-acreage or landless, low-income, women, and/or Hispanic) operating in Doña Ana and El Paso County. Farm Fresh provides growers with multiple points of market access through the creation and improvements of produce distribution channels and the facilitation of contracts with restaurants and large institutions. Farm Fresh programs also provide technical support to ensure that beginning growers we serve are prepared to grow consistently, have strong food safety protocols in place, and adequate wash and pack infrastructure.

As we continue our work in the region and in New Mexico on the quest to foster a healthy, self-reliant, fair and sustainable food system through increased food localization and microenterprise development, we can achieve an important win not only for our region's food security and health outcomes, but also for new market opportunities and an enhanced local economy aims to promote agriculture and community and address the root causes of hunger and poverty. Many diverse groups in New Mexico regularly work together to address the pressing issues of the state in a highly collaborative and relationship-based process. There are several programs and initiatives that have actual or potential impact on hunger in the state, outlined below. Solutions to hunger must include both federal and state funding and policy initiatives to move the needle towards a more just, healthy, fair and sustainable country.

Tiny but Mighty Federal Grant Programs

Coined by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the “tiny but mighty” grant programs provide relatively small funding allocations from the Farm Bill but have an outsized impact on communities and food-producing farmers. La Semilla and many other organizations rely on federal grant dollars from programs like the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, Local Food Promotion Program, Community Food Projects, and Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives Program. These dollars, exceptionally small amounts in the grand scheme of the federal budget,

As an example, Community Food Project grants range up to \$300,000 over a three-year grant period. With one of these grants and only \$100,000 per year, La Semilla was able to:

- Launch our Mobile Farmers Market bus and wholesale markets, providing a steady and reliable market outlet to small, diversified farmers, with well over \$20,000 in sales yearly.
- Provide shared use infrastructure to over 25 small farmers, including cold storage, refrigerated distribution, and wash and pack facilities. This leads to huge savings for small farmers, most of whom do not have the capital to purchase infrastructure.
- Provide business enterprise training to small and beginning farmers, community members, youth, and others interested in food and farm small business development.
- Hold garden and nutrition education across the region, with over 1,300 hours of educational sessions and over 500 participants in multi-week sessions.
- Provide spaces for increased community cohesion and social interaction, a vital component for the mental and physical well-being in the communities we serve.

The importance and impact of these programs cannot be overstated. The possibilities of impact in communities hardest hit by poverty and hunger with even relatively modest increases in spending is astronomical and the return on investment for these programs is, quite frankly, astounding.

Equitable Food Oriented Development through a Healthy Food Financing Initiative Fund

Through strong, relationship-based coalition development across New Mexico, La Semilla Food Center is working with project partners to establish a state-wide Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) fund. The fund will create a community-investment vehicle with low interest loans, forgivable loans, and grants to invest in local farmers, food hubs, and healthy food outlets. Utilizing an Equitable Food Oriented Development (EFOD) lens, the fund creates the opportunity to increase access to local and nutritious food, create quality jobs, revitalize local economies, and diversify our state’s economy. The HFFI utilizes the EFOD framework to correct the generations of racial, ethnic, and gender prejudice that still exists today within federal and private sector grant & lending programs. Directly addressing the status quo of inequitable distribution of land and resources in our food system allows all project partners to take giant strides forward in their missions to cultivate healthy farms, economies, and communities in New Mexico. This initiative and coalition development prioritizes BIPOC leadership and food & farm system entrepreneurs to build out an equitable community investment ecosystem with the long-term goal of increased resilience and prosperity in New Mexico communities.

This work utilizes a systems-based approach and focuses on the root causes of inequities and poor outcomes in the state. Using the HFFI as a catalyst, the fund will support organizations, farms, and coalitions from across the state to increase their impact. By building power of BIPOC-led and community rooted organizations and groups, there is a co-creation of a collective that will be able to design the incredibly powerful tool of a community investment initiative to ensure that wealth and capital flow directly to folks most impacted by systemic inequities in our food system and capital deployment systems; specifically, this coalition will ensure that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, other people of color, femmes, and LGBTQ+ folks are centered and are the direct recipients of funding. This coalition and fund will disrupt standard development, lending, and economic development practices and capital deployment decisions that exclude and often harm these communities.

This work incorporates the EFOD framework, a development strategy that uses food and agriculture to create economic opportunities and healthy communities and explicitly seeks to build community assets and wealth by and with systemically marginalized and exploited communities. The establishment of an HFFI fund rooted in EFOD principles will increase the state's capacity to draw in capital to a unique and innovative funding model. It is well documented that the root causes of most of the state's most pressing issues are poverty, systemic racism, and economic inequity. Hence, the HFFI creates a program grounded in intentional wealth creation, acknowledging the effects of decades of discrimination against Black, Indigenous, people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ people in public- and private-sector grant and lending programs, including through redlining and discrimination within USDA lending programs. The HFFI fund will recognize the innovation and expertise of these communities and invest in their farm and food projects.

We approach our role in coalition building and HFFI fund development in a collective and applied manner. By nourishing and amplifying the practice and voices of people already seeding efforts towards economic and food system development, we seek to mobilize resources directly to partner organizations and their communities. We utilize a communal development process, a non-extractive practice that nourishes potential by virtue of being:

- *Relationship-based.* Recognizes true coalition building as ancestral research and communication practices that create and reaffirm meaning and values within and across human beings and systems. Priority is placed on developing and strengthening relationships within ourselves and between organizations and groups state-wide. We are not 'mining' the time and resources of organizations, farms, and groups - we are weaving them to connect points of communal dignity and strength.
- *Responsive.* Addresses emerging needs to the extent possible by leveraging resources and additional relationships (action-oriented).
- *Adaptable.* Responsive to community & natural rhythms. Prioritizing relationships means are protective of community health - particularly of BIPOC communities that bear the brunt of economic and environmental inequity - and we adjust our time frames and expectations accordingly, particularly in these times of global pandemic.
- *Justice-oriented.* Coalition building that centers and uplifts communities of color. It names power imbalances while remaining rooted in grounded connection and collaboration, with the aim of addressing past and present systemic harm.

The HFFI fund development and coalition building is resulting in deeper, more meaningful, and long-term power, resiliency, and prosperity in all New Mexico communities. While the outcomes of an EFOD driven HFFI fund are exceptional in and of themselves, the intentionality of a process rooted in true relationship building with organizations and communities that are BIPOC-led, serving, and rooted multiplies the impact of this project exponentially. Using this unique, collaborative approach rooted in both relationship and community, this project will direct resources into communities and address root causes of hunger and poverty by providing pathways to community and family wealth and prosperity.

With an allocation of \$100,000 from the state of New Mexico, we estimate that this project will be able to fundraise upwards of \$5 million in federal, state, foundation, and private investments. Every program, issue, and solution in this brief is directly linked to hunger and food security. Namely, these projects directly address the systemic issues that cause hunger in our communities. Emergency services are important and necessary - but long-term, systemic solutions are absolutely vital and non-negotiable if our aim is to reduce hunger and poverty in this country. By strongly investing in communities already doing the work of creating strong local food systems and improving community health and well-being, hunger and poverty alleviation can move from a policy talking point to an absolute reality.

