

Dear Members of Insurance and Real Estate of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Mary Claire Whelan, I am from New Haven, Connecticut. I am a farm worker, and a member of the New Connecticut Farmers Alliance as well as the National Young Farmers Coalition. I support S.B. 842: An Act Concerning Health Insurance and Health Care In Connecticut.

S.B. 842 will make health care equitable, dependable, and affordable by creating new public options for health insurance in our state.

Connecticut needs to take all possible measures to strengthen its local food system in order to build a more just and resilient economy. That means supporting young farmers. The average age of a farmer in CT is almost 59, and more and more farmers are retiring or closing up shop each year.

Thankfully, there is a generation of new and beginning farmers excited and ready to build the type of food system that will help our state thrive, particularly in the face of crises like the covid-19 pandemic. However, *one of the key issues facing young farmers is access to affordable health insurance*. In a 2019 ranked choice poll, 42% of New CT Farmer Alliance members ranked "Health Insurance for Farmers" as their top policy priority.

I am a farm worker at a small non-profit (Massaro Community Farm in Woodbridge, CT), and I absolutely love growing food for my community. This will be my seventh season working on a farm, and I tie this work with advocacy and network-building for my fellow farmers through the New CT Farmer Alliance. The work is challenging, but there is nothing I would rather do. I hope to one day open my own farm and community space to help grow food sovereignty in Connecticut.

However, I know that in only one year, I will no longer be eligible to receive health insurance through my mother's work as a dependent. Due to financial constraints and the state of the insurance market in CT, my job is unable to provide employer-sponsored health insurance. It seems almost inconceivable that without consistent access to affordable healthcare I will be able to take the risk required to begin my own farm venture.

Will I continue to work to build our local food system and grow my skills as a farmer so I can one day open my own farm in Connecticut? Or will I change careers, or perhaps move to a different state where healthcare is more affordable and accessible? The answer depends, in part, on the outcome of SB 842.

Almost none of the farm workers or young and aspiring farmers I know have access to healthcare through their farming job. Passing SB 842 would encourage young farmers like myself to keep their experience and expertise in Connecticut by giving small farms and community organizations access to healthcare through the State Employee Plan administered and leveraged by the State Comptroller, therefore lowering costs.

Furthermore, as is surely evident from the testimony of my fellow CT residents, health care is a crucial racial justice issue. Before the pandemic, Connecticut's overall uninsured rate was 5.3%, but it reached 6.8% for Black residents and 13.1% for Hispanic or Latino residents. Today, the pandemic is sickening and killing Black, Latino and Native Americans at higher rates than whites, reflecting and compounding health care disparities that have long gone unaddressed.

Farmers of color, including undocumented and migrant farm workers, grow much of the food in Connecticut, and contribute their skill and years of expertise to our state despite having extremely limited access to healthcare. This plan seeks to address the lack of racial equity in our system by expanding access to care. This is a crucial step to support *all* of those who work to make CT's food system strong and resilient.

We can also address these disparate health outcomes by expanding access to healthy locally grown food. But again, this will only happen if we support young farmers, critically Black, Indigenous, and POC farmers by passing SB 842 and making healthcare affordable and accessible to the next generation of CT farmers.

I urge the Committee and Connecticut lawmakers to support S.B. 842 this session to expand high-quality, dependable, and affordable health care by creating new public options for health insurance.

Thank you for your time,
Mary Claire Whelan