

AUA's Urban Agriculture Ward Ambassador Initiative

Advocates for Urban Agriculture (AUA) is a 2,100+ member coalition of urban farmers, community and school gardeners, individual supporters, businesses and organizations.

AUA empowers urban growers to foster thriving communities through sustainable agriculture and equitable food systems. We envision a flourishing local food system with urban agriculture an integral part of community economic development, food security, environmental sustainability, and overall quality of life for all.

We pursue our mission through advocacy, knowledge and skill sharing, informational resources, and connecting growers and supporters through a robust network. Our Urban Ag Ward Ambassador initiative is an essential element in advocacy success, so thank you for your interest! This toolkit outlines our vision, strategy, and how you can help advocate for a more equitable food system.

Effective advocacy requires shared understanding of terms and context. Let's start with our mission: to promote sustainable agriculture and equitable food systems.

What is urban agriculture? What does sustainable actually mean?

[Agriculture](#) is the science, art, and work concerned with cultivating land, raising crops (edible and non-edible, such as flowers or fibers), and raising livestock.

Urban agriculture does this in the city, at scales ranging from small backyard spaces to multi-acre sites, as well as in non-traditional spaces such as rooftops and indoor hydroponics & aquaponics.

The USDA defines sustainable agriculture as "an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term:

- satisfy human food and fiber needs;
- enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends;
- make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls;
- sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and
- enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole."
 - From Subchapter I: Findings, Purposes, and Definitions, [U.S. Code, Title 7, Chapter 64-Agricultural Research](#).

What is an equitable food system?

[The Center for Social Inclusion](#) defines food equity as where "everyone, no matter their race, can access and afford a basic healthy diet and work to support a food system that produces this vision." This also means that participation in the design and evaluation of community food systems is open and accessible to all.

What is the difference between an urban farm and a garden?

The distinction is not size, but purpose. A farm is production-oriented, whereas the primary mission of a community or school garden is not oriented towards production (though incidental sales of surplus produce are allowed by Chicago law).

Urban farm organizational models vary greatly:

- Mission: it may be economic, educational, workforce development, social justice, environmental justice, or all of the above
- Market: some sell all their produce, some donate all their produce to charitable organizations, and many fall somewhere in between
- Business models currently in operation in Chicago include: 501(c)3 non-profit, Limited Liability Company (LLC), Low-profit Limited Liability Company (L3C), Benefit Corporation ("B corp"), General Partnership and Sole Proprietorship

Now that we're on the same page on what urban agriculture is and isn't, what is the urban ag landscape in Chicago?

Agriculture has always been a part of urban environments, and our city is no exception. For a great overview of Chicago's urban agriculture heritage, we recommend reading or listening to [City of Big Agriculture: Here are the Crops Chicago was Once Famous For](#), by Monica Eng and Curious City.

Additionally, at the peak of the Victory Garden movement during periods of war, 40% of the nation's produce was grown in decentralized "[victory](#)" gardens, including yards, parks, and other civic spaces. AUA believes we don't need to be at war to achieve that level of local food production.

A 2012 Google Earth survey performed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Department of Crop Sciences found that Chicago had [4,648 sites of food production](#), most of them small residential gardens.

The [Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project](https://cuamp.org/) (<https://cuamp.org/>), a collaboration between AUA, DePaul University, NeighborSpace, and Chicago State University, lists 850+ urban farms and (non-residential) gardens all across the city of Chicago. Within those sites, CUAMP indicates 40-50 urban farms, 368 school gardens, and 272 community gardens. CUAMP's data is open-source and is itself a living entity with new sites being added as they sprout.

There is currently no aggregate data on the economic impact of for-profit farms, however a 2015 harvest study of community gardens performed by DePaul University and NeighborSpace found that:

- 20% of all Chicagoans (547,360) live within 2 blocks (1/4 mile) of a community garden
 - 517,157 total pounds (259 tons) of food was produced at the community gardens
 - Total value of crops produced at community gardens: \$1,665,698
 - Total acres of community gardens: 42.56 acres
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Wow, there's a lot happening in Chicago. What are all the benefits of urban agriculture?

- Economic
- Community
- Food access & food sovereignty
- Health & nutrition
- Education
- Workforce development and job training
- Environmental
- Utilization and beautification of vacant land

What are potential concerns?

- Rats, smell, and site stewardship are the top potential concerns that neighbors and ward offices typically cite. However, actively managing a site with good practices prevents these public nuisances. The [resources section](#) of AUA's website contains recommended practices for being a good neighbor and is always being expanded.
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Now that we share definitions of what urban ag is and what's happening in Chicago, what is AUA's Urban Agriculture Ward Ambassador Initiative?

- AUA's Ward Ambassador initiative seeks to have knowledgeable volunteer representatives for urban agriculture in all 50 of Chicago's wards. They represent urban agriculture in their neighborhood, develop relationships with their local ward office, and are a grassroots network of advocates across the entire city.
- This initiative takes the long view. It's about building a long term coalition, partnerships independent of any single issue or bill, and civic engagement skills for working with anyone in any office. Thus, while Ward Ambassadors' roles often involve specific policies, fundamentally it goes beyond them and is about a robust, informed, place-based network of relationships throughout Chicago; civic infrastructure that operates all the time and can rise to the occasion as needed.
 - The idea was born out of the near ban on backyard chickens in 2007, and seeing the importance of having people on the ground who already had friendly relationships with their alders and ward staff, and who could direct them to good information and good examples.

- This initiative was formally launched in 2016. Over half of Chicago's 50 wards are currently represented in the initiative, with the goal to reach all 50 by the February 26, 2019 election.
- Ward Ambassadors are about putting a local face on urban agriculture. It's about ensuring ward offices are aware of urban ag operations, sites, and businesses in their ward, as well as city wide. Raising the level of awareness of food system issues also means it's easier to start the conversation with public officials in the future.
- Ward Ambassadors help ensure ward offices are aware their constituents care about urban agriculture, sustainable local food systems, and the City policies that support or hinder their development.
- In summary: the initiative is about two-way relationships with ward offices:
 - Ward Offices → AUA: Ward ambassadors and AUA develop trust as a source of objective information for elected leaders (even sustainability-minded ward office staff are typically not experts in urban agriculture issues).
 - AUA → Ward Offices: Ward ambassadors and AUA develop a strong network of relationships with the City Council to leverage when important urban ag action is required on their part.

What's the criteria for being a ward ambassador?

Ward ambassadors come from all professional, personal, and geographic backgrounds. Ward ambassadors include: urban gardeners, urban farmers, parents, students, teachers, artists, activists, and all ages. We ask that Ward Ambassadors:

- Are members of AUA. It's free and means you support sustainable agriculture in Chicago
 - Have attended an AUA Ward Ambassador training and subscribe to our Ward Ambassador Google Group, which is the primary communication channel for and between Ward Ambassadors
 - Take a constructive approach to relationship building
 - Have a connection to the ward they represent
 - Commit to reach out to their ward office twice a year (spring and harvest)
 - Know what's happening in their ward with regard to urban agriculture and related topics.
- Ambassadors are not expected to be trained lobbyists or experts on all the issues. But to be successful, Ambassadors should take the time to be familiar with urban agriculture topics explored in this document and be able to explain and advocate for them.

What if I have a connection to more than one ward?

While ward offices care most about voting constituents of their ward, some ambassadors have more significant relationships in the ward they work in, and may want to leverage those relationships there.

Wait a second, this is Chicago. Why focus on ward offices? Doesn't the mayor have all the power?

Yes and no. Aldermen and women wield significant influence within their ward and [by charter](#), the City Council actually has more power than the mayor. So in addition to working with the Mayor's office, relationships with individual alders are essential to successful advocacy.

Additionally, within the City Council are committees, which is where much of the substantial legislative process occurs. The [Health & Environmental Protection](#) Committee typically has jurisdiction for matters that affect urban agriculture.

City departments such as Public Health or Planning & Development are also important in the legislative process, but do not introduce bills themselves.

Finally, the term '[alder](#)' derives from Old English, meaning 'elder.' AUA uses the gender neutral (though less commonly used) term 'alder' instead of 'alderpeople.'

As we've seen, urban agriculture has always been a part of Chicago; however only recently has it become officially incorporated and recognized at the city level. **Here is a short history of urban agriculture policy in Chicago:**

- 2007 Attempt to Ban Backyard Chickens in Chicago
 - This measure ultimately failed, thanks to the strength of many pre-existing relationships that practitioners and citizens had with their alders. This episode birthed the idea for the Ward Ambassador Initiative.
 - 2011 Urban Agriculture Zoning Ordinance
 - This established urban agriculture in Chicago municipal code for the first time, formally endorsing it as an accepted activity and use of land.
 - 2015 Compost Ordinance change
 - This changed city ordinance to allow urban farms and community gardens to accept off-site food scraps. As part of this ordinance, all sites must register their operation through the [compost portal](#) on the Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project.
 - 2017 Good Food Purchase Policy
 - This resolution, passed by the City of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools and other city agencies, pushes these large institutions to direct their food purchasing power toward five core values: local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare and nutrition.
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We hope this brief overview of urban agriculture, policy and civic engagement inspires you to further explore and research on your own!

Please contact AUA's Programs Manager Nick Lucas with questions related to this initiative at outreach@auachicago.org.

Now let's take a look at what meetings with your alders actually look like.

Ward Office Meetings

Good Practices for Meeting with Elected Officials

- Remember they are not doing you a favor by meeting with you - it's their job! That said, we want to ensure meetings are a good use of everyone's time. Stay on topic, focused on why you're there, and what we want the alder to do. The meeting will be over before you know it!
- Lobbying is a process of giving and gathering information. Be succinct: make short points and let the representative respond.
- Listen actively. To someone outside food systems work, they may hear "urban agriculture" and think rats, odors, or eyesores. Hear them out and assure them that AUA sees being a good neighbor as fundamental to urban agriculture.
- Strength in numbers: bring fellow ward residents, ambassadors or urban ag practitioners.
- Alders have busy schedules. Developing relationships with your alder's chief of staff, policy aides and/or sustainability advisors are incredibly useful also. These relationships build toward meetings with your alder and ultimately, a lot gets done through them.
- Remember to both 1) personalize the issue and 2) show how it impacts the ward.
- Be solution-oriented. For a view from the inside, an alder once shared with AUA: "Most of what my or any ward office deals with are complaints. We're looking for you to help solve problems, not potentially create them."

Step 1: Do Your Homework Before the Meeting:

- Review and complete the entire [Ward Ambassador](#) outline
- Make sure you're [registered to vote](#)
- Do you know what ward you're in? And who your alder is? Refer to the City of Chicago [Board of Elections](#)
- Research time: come into the meeting with [a base of knowledge](#) on:
 - Your Alder: What positions do they have? What do they support? What are they against? What committees are they on? Any pet peeves?
 - Find this through the [City Clerk website](#) in addition to independent research.
 - Your Ward: What urban farms, community and school gardens are in your ward? Are any other types of urban ag organizations in your ward?
 - Check out the [Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project](#) as a starting point and explore from there. Important note: in addition to searching the map by zooming in and out, you can set search filters such as just your ward.

Step 2: Contact Your Ward Office

Many wards have drop-in Ward Nights. If you don't see one on their website, call to schedule a time. Sample Phone script:

- “Hello! I’m a constituent of the ward and a member of Advocates for Urban Agriculture, a citywide coalition of over 2,100 citizens dedicated to promoting sustainable agriculture in Chicago. I’m our ward’s Urban Agriculture Ward Ambassador and I’d like to meet with Ald._____ to hear their positions on urban ag topics and ensure s/he knows about urban ag in the ward. When is the alder’s next available time?”

Step 3: Meeting Your Alder:

In broad terms you have a “Give” (resources, good PR for the alder), and an “Ask” (their support for urban ag supportive policy). If you’ve met your alder before, abbreviate the following as applicable.

Goals for your Meeting:

- A friendly visit that builds rapport
- Establish yourself as a resource for your alder
- Get current policy initiatives on your alder’s radar
- Leave AUA and other urban ag info with their office as a resource

Ward Office Meeting Format:

1. **Thank** your alder/ward office staff for their time
2. Reference your **homework**:
Has the alder voted in support of the 1) Good Food Purchase Policy, 2) Compost ordinance, or 3) Urban Ag zoning ordinance? If so, thank them. If not, make a general positive statement recognizing Chicago city council’s progress in supporting urban ag.
3. **Brief introduce yourself** and your ward connection
4. Introduce **AUA** and your role as an Urban Agriculture Ward Ambassador:
 - a. “I’m here as one of Advocates for Urban Agriculture (AUA)’s Ward Ambassadors. AUA empowers urban growers to foster thriving communities through sustainable agriculture and equitable food systems. We envision a flourishing food system with urban agriculture an integral part of community economic development, food security, environmental sustainability, and overall quality of life for all.”
 - b. “We pursue this mission through our coalition of 2,100+ members in all 50 of Chicago’s wards; by sharing free educational resources; and through policy, including advocating for the 2011 urban agriculture zoning ordinance and 2015 reforms to our municipal compost ordinance.”
 - c. “I’m our ward’s Urban Ag Ambassador, which means I’m here on behalf of the urban farmers and gardeners in our ward, as well as to serve as a resource for you and your office on urban agriculture issues and topics.”

5. Briefly share your **personal connection** to urban agriculture
6. Briefly share examples of **urban agriculture in the ward**
7. Engage Your Alder:
Are they interested in or **familiar with urban agriculture**? Do they have any questions? Are they familiar with the urban ag happening in the ward?
8. The Ask
These will change over time, but there's always an ask. Here are the most pressing [urban agriculture topics](#) we're discussing with alders.
9. Conclusion
Offer to take your alder to urban ag sites or events in your ward.
End by asking when and how best to follow up with your alder/ward office staff
10. Leave behind
Your contact info & AUA Brochure

Congratulations! You did it! You are the 'demos' in democracy!

Step 4: Follow-through

1. Send a thank you email or call to your ward office: thank them for their time, follow up on any unanswered questions, and reiterate any important topics you discussed.
2. Let AUA know how the meeting went! Fill out this [brief debrief survey](#), and reach out to us at ambassadors@auachicago.org to fill us in.

Step 5: Stay civically engaged

This is about long-term relationship building. We ask that you check in with your ward office at least twice a year (during planting and harvest time), following a modified version of this meeting format. Also, if you have an event at your farm or garden, extend the invite to your alder (they love photo ops)!

Stay engaged with AUA for important urban agriculture updates, news and resources. These range from policy action alerts to ward ambassador events where you can share your experiences and learn from other ambassadors.

AUA's listserv is our primary channel for all these urban agriculture topics, and our Ward Ambassador google group is specific to this initiative.

Thank you for supporting local food systems! Stay in touch!