



MEMO

To: Governor Charlie Baker

Secretary Marylou Sudders, Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Secretary Kathleen Theoharides, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Secretary Jim Peyser, Executive Office of Education
Commissioner Amy Kershaw, Department of Transitional Assistance
Commissioner John Lebeaux, Department of Agriculture
Commissioner Jeffrey Riley, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Acting Commissioner Margret Cooke, Department of Public Health

From: Project Bread

**Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
Merrimack Valley Food Bank
Worcester County Food Bank
The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts (FBWMA)
The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB)**

Re: ARPA Funding Request: Prioritize Cohesive Food Security Investments

Date: August 9, 2021

COVID-19's Impact on Food Insecurity in the Commonwealth

Hunger is a systemic and multi-faceted global public health crisis that touches every community – including those in Massachusetts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a bright light was focused on food insecurity as hunger rose to an unprecedented level. With the assistance of the federal government, our state legislature, and your administration and philanthropy, there were unprecedented resources available to stem the tsunami of need, which enabled access to hundreds of millions of healthy meals by those who were facing hunger here in the Commonwealth.

Hunger existed prior to the pandemic, and in May 2021, The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) published the results of a study it had undertaken to identify the [Gaps in Food Access during COVID-19 in Massachusetts](#), which found that an astounding 1 in 3 people faced hunger statewide between October 2020 and January 2021. Project Bread estimates that during the same time period, over 1 in 5 households with children faced food insecurity.

This research showed the alarming level of need during the height of this crisis and affirmed many of the truths we know about tackling food insecurity and the gaps in access that persist. Your state's hunger relief partners remain steadfastly committed as we know this recovery will not happen overnight. Indeed, systemic issues require not just an emergency response, but sustainable solutions.

MA Hunger Relief Organizations' Call to Action

In the aftermath of the most acute part of the COVID-19 crisis, key hunger relief organizations across the state are eager to assess the impact that the emergency response to hunger during COVID-19 has had on overall food security and seize this moment to make meaningful strides to put an end to this epidemic.

COVID-19 has highlighted the intersectionality of food access with issues such as housing, transportation, workforce development and childcare, and as a result has provided clarity on the fragmented nature of our statewide food security strategy. The establishment of the Food Security Task Force in Massachusetts during the pandemic was a positive first step to streamline communication and action, and we have the opportunity now to build on that progress.

We call for a more coordinated and proactive response going forward. We hope the state will consider establishing a permanent structure with the authority to make decisions around food security and access to food resources. This organized body would oversee the ongoing Food Security Task Force and lead a coordinated vision and food security strategy between various state agencies and non-governmental hunger relief stakeholders in the state.

Project Bread, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, Merrimack Valley Food Bank, Worcester County Food Bank, The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, and The Greater Boston Food Bank have come together to request that the key nutrition-related sources of funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) be leveraged to make significant investments to address the systemic causes of food insecurity.

Food Security Requests

We call on the Governor to consider the following food security investments:

- **Multi-faceted, multi-year statewide public health awareness and communications campaign to leverage, maximize and destigmatize federal food benefits** – Provide funding to continue and expand Project Bread's large-scale awareness and outreach initiative, building upon the investments and learnings from the past 16 months, coordinating across state agencies (DTA, DESE, DPH). The campaign should be based on messaging research and utilize a wide variety of communications tools, in partnership with key non-governmental community-based stakeholders. Some of the \$29 million targeted for Massachusetts's SNAP administrative funds (Section 1101(b) of ARPA) could be used toward this effort.

- **Expanded Access to SNAP** – In combination with the above public awareness campaign, invest in infrastructure related to outreach and program application. Specifically, reduce administrative barriers and streamline application processes for those accessing SNAP and other nutrition and needs-based programs, with specific emphasis on priority low-income populations including communities of color, immigrant-headed households, college students, and veterans. Again, a portion of the SNAP administrative funds targeted for states could be deployed here.
- **Universal School Meals** – Establish a state-level three-year extension of the universal school meals system for K-12 students currently made possible by federal waivers which are set to expire at the end of the 2021/2022 school year, making school breakfast and lunch available at no cost to all students at schools participating in the National School Lunch Program.
- **College Hunger Pilot** – Provide seed funding for a statewide grant program ([S.822/H.1368](#)), along with accompanying capacity support, that will fund 2- and 4-year public colleges and universities and certain not-for-profit colleges that serve a significant percentage of low-income students to implement anti-hunger programs and practices on their campuses.
- **Cliff Effect from Expiration of the COVID SNAP “Emergency Allotments”** – Provide ARPA-funded additional SNAP benefits for 4 to 6 months to help “glide” SNAP households who have relied on the COVID “emergency allotments” (boosted SNAP benefits) since March 2020. The current COVID emergency allotments are scheduled to expire the month following expiration of the federal and state COVID public health emergencies. We are grateful that the Baker Administration has found ways to continue the SNAP emergency allotments to date, but we remain deeply concerned about households whose “regular” SNAP benefits will suddenly plummet. Of special concern are households who may actually qualify for more SNAP but are not familiar with or need assistance claiming and verifying all allowable SNAP deductions, especially medical expenses that can be claimed by households with an older adult or person with severe disabilities. The state can soften the “cliff effect” of the SNAP loss with ARPA funding while proactively screening all households for possible income deductions.
- **Cliff Effect Impacting Working Households Pilot** – Scale up the current proposed Western Massachusetts pilot program to run in all of Massachusetts’ Gateway Cities. The current pilot proposal ([S.119/H.208](#)) would help families transition off public benefits while advancing career paths without the threat of the cliff that occurs when increased income results in loss of benefit eligibility. This initiative is aimed to support a long-term sustainable solution to lift families out of poverty.
- **MA Food Bank System Infrastructure and Capacity Investment** – Leverage the Food Bank Coalition of Massachusetts as a partner in equitable distribution of capacity funds by dedicating 50% of Food Security Infrastructure Grant funds to the Massachusetts food bank system to distribute to their 1,000 partner agencies across the state.
- **Workforce Development and Job Training** – Invest in workforce development and job training to address the shortage in food industry-specific jobs, including truck drivers, warehouse employees, and multilingual resource providers across the Commonwealth.

Our organizations look forward to working with you over the next couple of months to determine how to leverage the federal investments in SNAP, TEFAP, school meals, and WIC, sustain state programs like MEFAP and HIP at appropriate levels to meet need, and also fortify the current Massachusetts food bank system and strengthen our workforce to ensure a recovery that keeps everyone, particularly in the most vulnerable communities, moving forward.