

May 20, 2020

The Honorable Karen Spilka
President of the State Senate

The Honorable Robert DeLeo
Speaker of the House of Representatives

The Honorable Michael Rodrigues, Chair
Senate Ways & Means Committee

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz, Chair
House Ways & Means Committee

RE: Supplemental funding for food access programs and H. 4707 re COVID-19 spending in anticipation of federal reimbursement

Dear President Spilka, Speaker DeLeo, Chairman Rodrigues, and Chairman Michlewitz,

There is an escalating hunger crisis arising out of COVID-19. In a study conducted in late March, approximately **38% of Massachusetts residents report experiencing food insecurity** during the coronavirus pandemic; that percentage has likely risen in the weeks since. We thank the Legislature and the Administration for partnering with us to address the hunger crisis.

We applaud Governor Baker's Command Center for convening a Food Security Task Force, on which each of our organizations served. The recommendations released on May 17, 2020 address important priorities that we ask you to support. However, our organizations also prioritized state investments in increasing access to and utilization of federal nutrition programs, which leverage federal dollars. We collectively put these forward as critical priorities when we served together on the Task Force.

We ask you to now prioritize additional state budget investments in connecting people to these comprehensive and sustainable solutions. We thank the House for already including \$5M in the IT Bond Bill for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to invest the IT resources to create a common application option, an example of an investment that will ensure more people - MassHealth and Medicare Savings Program applicants - can expeditiously enroll in federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Specifically, we recommend the Legislature act quickly to both raise awareness of and boost access to two federal nutrition programs which are able to scale up quickly to meet the immediate, growing need for food assistance –SNAP and child nutrition programs administered by meal sites.

The federal nutrition programs are critical to responding to this crisis and can readily expand. The 1,600 school meal sites are serving grab and go meals for an estimated 120K kids a day. SNAP has already increased its caseload by 50K households, a 12% increase since mid-March, and can expand more. SNAP additionally provides \$1.70 in economic stimulus for every \$1 spent on food, supporting both big and small grocers while giving eligible households the ability to purchase food that best meets their families' dietary needs. During the COVID-19 crisis, we need to be making a concerted effort to increase enrollment in both of these programs.

We urge you to include funding in the recently filed Supplemental Budget (H. 4707) to ensure the Commonwealth can provide reliable and sustainable access to food for the growing number of residents facing food insecurity, while also leveraging additional 100% federal dollars that will both ease lines at food pantries and boost the local economy. These are critical funding requests needed now, in FY20. This crisis demands urgent action.

Our organizations have been working collaboratively on anti-hunger solutions for many years and will continue to collectively respond to this crisis. We are united in our recommendation for the state budget to also focus on access to federal nutrition programs and are grateful for the Legislature's partnership and support.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Erin McAleer
President, Project Bread

Winton Pitcoff
Director, MA Food Systems Collaborative

Pat Baker
Senior Policy Analyst
MA Law Reform Institute

Maddie Ribble
Director of Public Policy & Campaign Strategy
Massachusetts Public Health Association

Catherine Drennan
Director of Communications & Public Affairs
The Greater Boston Food Bank

Christina Maxwell
Director of Programs
The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts

Jean McMurray
Executive Director,
Worcester County Food Bank

Amy Pessia
Executive Director
Merrimack Valley Food Bank

Jen Faigel
Executive Director
Commonwealth Kitchen

Immediate FY20 Supplemental Funding
Recommendations for Food Access Programs

Support SNAP Outreach

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) program provides eligible recipients with a monthly electronic benefit to purchase groceries. Maximizing access to SNAP will take pressure off the state budget and ease lines at food pantries, providing families with reliable access to food for the weeks and months ahead. There is a critical need for SNAP outreach providers to reach vulnerable populations. Further, SNAP administrative and outreach costs are 50% federally reimbursable. We recommend:

- **\$250K in line-item 4401-1001 for Project Bread’s FoodSource Hotline**, a toll-free call center, to connect callers across the Commonwealth to food resources in their communities and assist households with SNAP applications. Since the start of the coronavirus crisis, the FoodSource Hotline has seen a 300% increase in call volume – an unprecedented demand. Project Bread seeks funding to continue to respond to the call demand, while also expanding awareness, through multiple channels and in multiple languages, about all programs and food resources available.
- **\$1M for the Dept. of Transitional Assistance’s (DTA) SNAP outreach program (4400-1001)**, which funds a range of organizations, including local public schools and councils on aging, to provide SNAP application assistance – especially critical for older adults, persons with disabilities, and those who lack internet access or have limited English proficiency.
- **Increased administrative funding to support DTA in managing the burgeoning SNAP and cash caseload.** DTA has quickly responded to the challenge, and we need to support them to maintain this pace for the long-term.

Support the 1,635 food distribution sites

To date there are 1,635 food distribution sites helping to serve the more than 500,000 children in Massachusetts who rely on free and reduced-price school meals; needs will undoubtedly continue through the summer months. We recommend:

- **\$250K in funding to support school meal sites through the Child Nutrition Outreach Program**, a partnership between Project Bread and the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (line item 7053-1925). School sites have gone through a major transition in their model in order to adhere to social distancing guidelines, and now some will also need to move to a new program (the federal summer food service program) when the school year ends. This funding will support proactive outreach and technical support to districts and partners, as well as promotional materials, including a statewide meal site map and signage and posters for individual meal sites.
- **\$5M in funding through line-item 7053-1925 to support emergency operational costs for these meal sites** during COVID-19. Funding is needed to support transportation, equipment (i.e. refrigeration), and supplies (i.e. packaging).