How can we shorten the line?

Michael never imagined that he would find himself needing some help to get by each month, but a cascading sequence of tough life events meant Michael and his young son, Eli, didn’t know where they would find their next meal.

After separating from his spouse, Michael’s hours were cut back at his job. Although he was working, his paycheck wasn’t enough to keep up with rent and childcare. As the head of a single-parent household, Michael was forced to move in with his mother. With little food in the refrigerator, Michael turned to a food pantry out of desperation, but the hours conflicted with his work schedule.
Dear Friends,

Hunger is a public health problem with a profound impact on lower income communities. There is no evidence to suggest that a single strategy solution will ever solve the problems of food insecurity. A bag of groceries provides temporary relief for a hungry family today, but we need to be all in if we are ever to provide a lasting solution to the problem. That is why Project Bread works in communities across the state to strengthen the food systems on the local level, supporting community-based strategies that shift the narrative from “helping others” to “helping each other.”

Feeding America, the umbrella organization for the majority of food banks in the United States, mirrors the values of the “big food” companies that have shaped and sustain it. Feeding America is literally “big charity.” Characteristically, the “bigs” want to be bigger; bigger in size, bigger in defining the marketplace, bigger in profitability. The big charity approach to ending hunger is simple and (of course) big. Every year more pounds of food are distributed and the line gets longer.

Hunger is a complex problem and as you will read in this Status Report, the face of hunger has changed—it affects people of all ages and circumstances. Addressing hunger calls for multiple solutions like healthy meals at school, learning to cook and budget, subsidized groceries instead of no-cost groceries, home delivered meals for elders and subsidized CSA shares. Food pantries still play an important role within this diversified portfolio of help, but we believe there is a better approach. At Project Bread, we work every day to shorten the line in order to open up more dignified and equitable options for people who want a hand up, not a hand out.

Sincerely,

Ellen Parker
Executive Director, Project Bread

Michael then contacted Project Bread’s FoodSource Hotline and he was told how to enroll in his local WIC program, a federal program that provides grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education. And he can shop in a regular grocery store.

“I thought I would be the only dad on WIC,” said Michael, who is among the 22.4% of male-led single-parent households facing low or very low food security. “I was so nervous going to meet with the nutrition counselor before applying for WIC. I was embarrassed, feeling like it was a program intended only for mothers.”

Michael, however, wasn’t alone. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture study released in September 2016, the total number of households facing food insecurity, the people “in line” for services, hasn’t returned to pre-recession numbers.

In 2015, 9.7% of Massachusetts households—or approximately 266,459 households in the state—faced “food insecurity,” which is defined as being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food, according to the USDA’s annual report, “Household Food Security in the United States.”

More concerning to those working in this area is that those households in the state facing “very low food security” is 4.5%—or approximately 123,615 households, according the USDA report. That remains high compared to the 3% of the state’s households facing “very low food security” a decade ago.

“That 4.5% number is still quite high. I think we are facing a new economic condition,” said Ellen Parker, executive director of Project Bread.

CONTINUED FROM COVER

CHANGE IN AVERAGE MONTHLY RENT IN GREATER BOSTON
for a 2-bedroom apartment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rent ($)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>$2,602</td>
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</table>

THE GREATER BOSTON HOUSING REPORT CARD, NOVEMBER 2015

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS TO HUNGER THAT PROJECT BREAD DEVELOPS, FUNDS, AND IMPLEMENTS AT PROJECTBREAD.ORG
director of Project Bread, the only state-wide anti-hunger organization. “The crisis of the recession has passed, but the food insecurity rate has settled at just below 10% and hasn’t returned to its pre-recession levels.”

When all other avenues have been exhausted—their savings, their credit, and their friends and family, those most at-risk for food insecurity face the prospect of having to wait “in line” at a food pantry or a soup kitchen because they are uncertain of where else to turn. Yet repeatedly, our FoodSource Hotline counselors hear from callers like Michael about how humiliated they feel at the prospect of “waiting in line” for services. Not surprising, only an estimated 28% of food insecure households nationally used food pantries in 2015, according to the USDA report.

Parker and her team here at Project Bread are most concerned with those who find themselves facing low or very low food security and are trying to end this cycle of poverty. Just as the face of hunger has changed, so too has the definition of the line and the strategies for how to help people get out of poverty—traditionally referred to as “shortening the line.”

“Beyond the numbers are the people who are struggling with food insecurity and who are more likely to be facing severe conditions—regularly skipping meals and children in the household who are skipping meals. They are the people facing the shameful experience of having to wait ‘in the line’,” said Parker. “Shortening the line becomes even more critical to ensure that these families have access to consistent, healthy food. That is why Project Bread focuses on programs that educate and empower individuals, families, and communities to move from needing stop gap measures to finding sustainable solutions.”

If hunger is viewed as a symptom of poverty, as we do at Project Bread, then the long-term solutions to ending hunger must target poverty as the root cause. People often avoid getting assistance so that they won’t feel stigmatized, and Project Bread funds and administers programs that provide equal access to nutritious food, meeting people within their communities.

“The best services are those that are provided invisibly,” said Parker, “like our Chefs in Schools® program, where we are increasing the quality of lunches served in cafeterias that all students have access to but really make the difference for the 400,000 kids in the state that rely on school meals for half their daily nutrients.”
Michael understands all too well the challenges of trying to keep up with soaring expenses at home while his paycheck refused to budge. “Between childcare costs and another rent increase, my refrigerator was empty. I had to move in with my mom. But even there, I’m still struggling to keep up.”

**Shortening the line**
How do we support families like Michael’s and take them out of the line?

Two effective interventions that will help working families meet the rising costs of living and reduce the rate of food insecurity is significantly accelerating low-income wages and supporting increases to the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). As a starting point, Project Bread fully supports a statewide effort to raise Massachusetts’ minimum hourly wage from the current $10, to $15. And we champion the campaign to increase EITC to 50% of the federal level, which would lift an additional 20,000 Massachusetts families out of poverty.

The Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, a nonprofit organization that provides non-partisan research on economic issues that affect low-income people in Massachusetts, highlighted locations where more than 40% of wage earners are paid less than $15 an hour. These locations mirrored those of which Project Bread has been focusing efforts for over forty years, understanding that strengthening food security in communities with high concentrations of working poor families is critical to shorting the line, and mitigating the need for emergency resources when a paycheck doesn’t last the month.

In Lowell and Lawrence, where the analysis showed that 42% of wage earners would be affected by the minimum wage increase, Project Bread provides a diverse array of anti-hunger efforts to strengthen local food systems and food security at a community level. This includes Chefs in Head Start, 1-on-1 SNAP application assistance at health centers, Summer Food Service Program, supporting community farm and gardens, as well as traditional emergency food programs such as food pantries and soup kitchens.

In Lowell, Michael and his son Eli would have access to these programs in their community which would act as a safety net against hunger. Eli would eat healthy meals in his HeadStart class prepared by a Project Bread Chef Educator and explore food and build healthy eating habits. Michael could take home groceries from the no-cost farmers market, provided by Project Bread through a partnership with Gaining Ground Farm. Additionally, Eli would have access to free summer meals when school is out, all these programs working together to alleviate the pressures on Michael’s food budget.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, whose team conducts the national research, echoed Parker’s concerns about those facing the greatest insecurity.

“The figures released…also remind us that our work to fight for access to healthy food for our nation’s most vulnerable families and individuals is far from over,” Vilsack said in a press release. “We must work to preserve the critical Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, which prevented millions of Americans from falling into poverty or becoming food insecure during the most difficult stretches of the recession.”

In Michael’s case, it was Project Bread’s FoodSource Hotline, where, in addition to WIC, a counselor screened him for SNAP eligibility over the phone and determined he could receive $83 a month in SNAP benefits.

“That extra [assistance] will go a long way in helping me provide for my son while I save for a new apartment,” Michael said. “I’m sure we can get back to where we were before all of this happened.”

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**MINIMUM WAGE: A POVERTY WAGE**

Living wage by county for a single parent household with two children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Living wage (hourly)</th>
<th>Poverty wage (hourly)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowell</td>
<td>$30.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
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<td>Middlesex</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Essex</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex</td>
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<td>$10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlesex</td>
<td>$30.72</td>
<td>$10.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

> **Living Wage is calculated on typical expenses for the county, including: food, child care, medical, housing, transportation, taxes, and other.**

> **Massachusetts current minimum wage is $10 hour, increasing to $11 by 2017.**
ONCE KNOWN AS FOOD STAMPS, THE FEDERALLY FUNDED SNAP (SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM) IS THE SINGLE MOST EFFECTIVE FORM OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR HUNGRY PEOPLE. The SNAP program reaches our most vulnerable Americans: close to 70% of recipient households include children and over 25% of households include elders or people with disabilities (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016).

SNAP was designed to be used in local stores, so it builds the neighborhood economy at the same time it boosts the buying power of families. Project Bread has been a national leader in designing strategies that connect eligible people to SNAP benefits. Our outreach workers work directly in local health centers to assist patients in completing applications. When elderly or disabled people can’t easily leave their homes, our FoodSource Hotline counselors connect to them by phone.

We invest in SNAP application assistance because the return is so great for individuals in need. But SNAP could be, and should be, even better.

Unfortunately, the SNAP benefit is too low to get families through a whole month. The national benchmark for setting the maximum allowance a household can receive in SNAP benefits is a conceptual model called the “Thrifty Food Plan.” But that’s a misnomer—it’s not thrifty, it’s inadequate.

The Thrifty Food Plan comes up short because it doesn’t reflect the real needs of real families in 2016. Let’s look at the numbers. In 2015, the USDA determined a typical U.S. household spent $50 per person each week on food—the Thrifty Food Plan model only allows $41 per person per month, or about $10 a week. In many parts of the country—including Massachusetts—“thrifty plan” costs more than the SNAP allotment due to the higher regional prices of food.

The expectations that underlie the model are equally unrealistic. It assumes that families will be satisfied with very little variety in their meals. No allowance is made for special dietary needs or cultural preferences.

It calls on the SNAP recipient to be a super shopper—with skills equal to those of a trained chef. When Chef Mario Balati, owner of Eataly in New York City, tried to survive on a SNAP budget, he reported shopping in four different stores to make the budget work. Most low-income people live in neighborhoods with one store, and the less fortunate live in food deserts. It’s time for a change—time to base SNAP benefits on a more realistic model.

The nation in fact has just run a large experiment about the effect of providing more adequate SNAP benefits, and it worked. Benefits beginning in April 2009 reflected a temporary boost in allotments pursuant to the American Recovery Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009—initially by 13.6% for those receiving the maximum allotment.

Research on the ARRA boost and benefit adequacy suggest that more adequate benefit levels—which could be achieved if SNAP allotments were based on the next level-up model, the “Low-Cost Food Plan,” favorably impact food spending and health. For many reasons (e.g., many households rotating in and out of poverty; the decline in pay of the lower quintiles of American earners over recent decades), research estimates that half of all American children will receive SNAP at some point during childhood, and half of all adults will do so at some point between and the ages of 20 and 65.

This underscores how important SNAP benefit adequacy is to the health and well-being of the nation.
Q&A

Andy Fisher
Author and food activist

Andy Fisher has been at the forefront of the community food movement since its inception in the mid 1990s, as the co-founder and former executive director of the Community Food Security Coalition. He currently serves as the interim Executive Director of the Portland Fruit Tree Project. His book, Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups will be out in spring 2017.

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN “THE LINE” AND HOW DO PEOPLE FIND THEMSELVES THERE?

The food insecure are most likely to be African American or Latino, or live in a household headed by a single parent. On average, a person finds himself or herself food insecure for seven months out of the year. While a significant percentage of the poor are chronically hungry, most people fall in and out of food insecurity. They do so when an unexpected medical emergency eats up their savings, or when the head of the household loses his or her job. A few factors underlie the episodic nature of food insecurity, such as the high cost of rent in urban areas, and wage stagnation. The minimum wage in Massachusetts is $10 per hour, above the federal minimum wage of $7.25. Yet MIT research shows that the living wage for one adult and one child in Suffolk County is over $27 per hour. While SNAP can help people make ends meet, it too is inadequate. SNAP benefits typically do not last families an entire month. As a result of all these situations, many households supplement their food supply with trips to food pantries or feeding programs.

IS THE EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM ADEQUATE TO ADDRESS THE SCOPE OF FOOD INSECURITY?

We live in a nation with a shredded safety net and that pays its workers too little. In that context, the emergency food system does a yeoman’s job of averting the human suffering associated with hunger. Nevertheless, it is woefully inadequate in its size, scope, and structure. It is little more than a band-aid on the rapidly growing societal cancer of income inequality. Unfortunately, the emergency food system causes much collateral damage in its wake. “The Line” degrades the dignity of those who must wait in it, communicating to them that they are objects to be pitied and helped rather than individuals who can provide for their own families. Food banks mislead the public that the solution to hunger is food, when they routinely tout the number of pounds that they distribute. And the close ties between the emergency food system and large corporations, such as Walmart, allow these companies to appear to be contributing to solving the hunger problem, rather than causing it through paying their workers low wages. In sum, the emergency food system manages today’s hunger, but never resolving it for tomorrow.

CAN WE EVER COMPLETELY ELIMINATE “THE LINE?”

Improving the healthfulness of the food that they distribute is an important step for food pantries. But, the emergency food system still needs to make much more fundamental changes to the way it operates. One way in which they can change is to become more than just a place to get a box of food. Instead, they should connect individuals with the services and skills that they need to become more self-reliant.

HOW HAVE EMERGENCY FOOD PROGRAMS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS TO BETTER SERVE THE PEOPLE USING THEM AND HOW COULD THEY FURTHER ADAPT STILL?

Many emergency food programs have improved the quality of the food that they offer. In California, for example, produce comprises up to two thirds of the distribution stream of various food banks. A growing number of food banks are rejecting, or dumping out, soda donations. Food banks have been able to improve the quality of their offerings because they are buying more food instead of relying on the excess of the industrial food system.

Many people are realizing that after 35 years of building bigger and better emergency food distribution centers, we can no longer food bank our way out of hunger. We need to fundamentally rethink our approach to food insecurity. The first thing food banks must do is to stop setting goals for the expansion of the amount of food they distribute. Next, they can start to reallocate their resources toward efforts, such as public policy advocacy, that shorten the line. By 2025, 50% of resources in the food banking network should be dedicated to shortening the line rather than “feeding the need.” This allocation redistribution must be part of a comprehensive long-range plan across the sector that plans for a dramatic shrinking of the field in the next two decades. By that point, the emergency food sector should be distributing food only in response to actual disasters and for short periods of time.
Unexpected circumstances

Life doesn’t always go as planned, and when it takes an unexpected turn, people of all ages and walks of life may find themselves looking for help along the way. The Project Bread FoodSource Hotline speaks to Massachusetts residents every day, each with a unique circumstance and help connect them to resources in their communities.

UNEXPECTEDLY ON YOUR OWN:
For years, 83 year-old Dartmouth resident, Nell, had relied on her son for support and care. This past January, Nell’s son unexpectedly passed away, leaving her suddenly on her own. With high monthly medical bills, she found it increasingly difficult to afford food, so she looked into applying for SNAP benefits. Unable to navigate the application process without the aid of her son, she considered giving up. Luckily, she came across the number for the FoodSource Hotline, and they helped her apply for much needed assistance right over the phone.

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN:
At 68 years old, Louisa has lived in elderly housing in Plymouth for a number a years. Prior to a car accident that forced her into early retirement, Louisa had routinely been a volunteer at local food pantries. “I never thought that I would be the one that would now have to rely on food pantries to get by,” she shared with us. Louisa called the FoodSource Hotline hoping they could connect her to places that could provide her with milk. “Between bills from the accident and rent, there isn’t much left of my pension and social security to keep much in my refrigerator.” While on the phone, the hotline counselor offered to screen her for SNAP. Not thinking she would even qualify, Louisa was eligible for the maximum benefit of $194 a month.

DISABILITY PUTS YOU ON A FIXED INCOME:
At 64 years old, a disability left Lynn resident, Gerry, unable to work and living on a fixed income. His monthly mortgage payment of $2,200 already exceeded his disability benefits of $1,200 a month. Gerry began to utilize local food pantries to help supplement his strained food budget, but this was only one piece of the puzzle. Searching for additional assistance online, Gerry found the Project Bread FoodSource Hotline number and connected with a counselor. Thinking a homeowner wouldn’t qualify for SNAP benefits, Gerry was shocked to learn he qualified for the maximum single person allowance of $194 a month.

UNDEREMPLOYED AFTER COLLEGE:
After graduating from college in 2014, Jordan began a yearlong position as an AmeriCorps VISTA working in Boston. With over 60% of her stipend going toward rent, she found it difficult to stretch her limited income to cover food, utilities, transportation, and other necessities. The benefits she received included a $189 monthly allowance to be spent on food as well as a substantial discount on heating and electric bills. “My SNAP benefits allowed me to afford more nutritious options such as fresh produce, lean meats, and even fish. The FoodSource Hotline let me know that I was able to use local farmers’ market matching programs to double my SNAP benefits, and take home even more fresh produce. The monthly stipend structure allowed me to purchase staples like rice, beans, and stock in bulk at a discount which significantly decreased the cost of my meals.”

PROJECT BREAD’S FOODSOURCE HOTLINE IS THE ONLY COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICE IN MASSACHUSETTS FOR PEOPLE FACING HUNGER. 1-800-645-8333

9.2% OF ALL HOUSEHOLDS OF ELDERLY LIVING ALONE ARE FOOD INSECURE
Congratulations to our very dear friend, Congressman Jim McGovern, for winning the James Beard Leadership Award for his leadership as an advocate in the fight against hunger.

Congressman McGovern shares Project Bread’s belief that the right to food is a basic human right and he continues to be a powerful advocate for fighting hunger here in Massachusetts. For the past two years, he has joined the Child Nutrition Outreach Program at Project Bread in supporting the USDA Summer Food Service Program by visiting meal sites around the state.

He has led the “Summer Food Rocks Tour” to draw attention to the critical meal program which serves an average of 60,000 meals per day to Massachusetts children in need. Working hard to alleviate hunger locally in our home state, Congressman McGovern sets a strong example for the rest of the country to follow. Well-deserved!