



September 29, 2021

The Honorable Adam Gomez, Senate Chair  
The Honorable Michael J. Finn, House Chair  
Joint Committee on Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities  
State House, Boston, MA 02133

**RE: Testimony in Support of S.108/H.250, An Act Relative to an Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program**

Dear Chairman Gomez, Chairman Finn, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of S.108 /H.250, An Act Relative to an Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program

**Food Insecurity Was a Problem Before the Pandemic**

Project Bread is a statewide anti-hunger organization committed to connecting people and communities in Massachusetts to reliable sources of food while advocating for policies that make food accessible—so that no one goes hungry. As our state begins to recover from COVID-19, food insecurity is still at elevated levels. According to the Census Bureau, over 1 in 7 households and nearly 1 in 5 households with children have faced food insecurity over the last six months. Food is the most basic of human needs, and research has shown time and time again the long-term negative outcomes associated with lack of access to this basic need – people experiencing food insecurity get sick more often,<sup>1</sup> are more likely to be hospitalized, and have higher rates of obesity, depression, and chronic illness.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to speak to why there is hunger in our state. The underlying reason why people struggle to afford healthy food, despite economic growth in our nation and state before and even during COVID-19, is that wages simply have not kept pace with the high cost of living. This is a particularly acute problem in Massachusetts, an especially expensive state in which to live. Someone working full-time making minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom apartment in any community in our state.<sup>3</sup> The costs of rent,<sup>3</sup> childcare,<sup>4</sup> and healthcare<sup>5</sup> are higher than average in our state. And most households do not have enough savings to cover an unexpected expense of \$400.<sup>6</sup> So, when life brings an unexpected change or challenge, as life always does – a divorce, a lost job, a health care crisis – the bills add up and people struggle to put food on the table.





## SNAP is Critical, But Falls Short

This was all true before March 2020, but the pandemic put these problems in starker relief. As unemployment ballooned, food prices increased, and stores struggled with supply, families already struggling found it even harder to make ends meet. Flexibilities and benefit boosts, particularly to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2020 and 2021 helped. Nevertheless, far too many families experienced food insecurity this last year and many will continue to go hungry.

SNAP is the most effective anti-hunger program. Every household enrolled in SNAP is additional federal dollars brought into the state to address food insecurity and an invaluable resource to that family. For every meal our colleagues at Feeding America affiliated food banks provide, SNAP is estimated to provide nine.<sup>7</sup> The crisis before, during, and after the pandemic will not be solved by charity alone.

Unfortunately, SNAP benefits have long been inadequate. Most households run out of benefits before the end of the month,<sup>8</sup> and to stretch food dollars further, many households forgo more expensive whole or fresh ingredients like fruits and vegetables for more filling, cheaper calories. The USDA recently recalculated the Thrifty Food Plan which is primarily used to set maximum SNAP benefit levels. Due to this recalculation, households will receive an average benefit increase of 21%. Even with this increase, SNAP is insufficient to cover the cost of food in Massachusetts.

The Urban Institute analyzed spending among low-income households who were identified as food secure.<sup>9</sup> In other words, these families managed to have enough to eat despite very low wages. They found that the average cost per person per meal among these households ranged from \$2.46 in Hampden County to \$3.29 in Barnstable County. The maximum SNAP benefit in October 2021 will be \$2.58 per meal, and once another pandemic related boost ends in 2022, the maximum benefit per meal will be \$2.32. In another analysis, the recent food insecurity data from USDA found that the national median weekly food spending was 135% of the Thrifty Food Plan as of December.<sup>10</sup> The October 2021 increase brings more households closer to benefit adequacy, but more is still needed to ensure families get the nutritious food they need to not just survive, but thrive – particularly in Massachusetts.

The Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) is one particularly effective way to supplement benefits, increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and support local agriculture. For these





reasons Project Bread urges the committee to report An Act Relative to Agriculture Healthy Incentives Program favorably.

### **The Healthy Incentives Program Improves Access to Local Produce**

Launched in 2017, HIP provides a dollar-for-dollar match, up to a monthly limit based on household size, for SNAP dollars spent on fruits and vegetables purchased at farmers markets, farm stands, mobile markets, and community support agriculture programs across the state. The impact has included:

- As of July 2021, nearly 100,000 households have participated in the program. 45% of the households that have used the program include a senior, 30% include a child, and more than 33% include a person with a disability.<sup>11</sup>
- Over an estimate 165,000 individuals increased their fruit and vegetable consumption by 1 serving per day.<sup>11</sup>
- For every dollar spent on purchasing produce directly from a Massachusetts farmer, an additional \$2 in local economic activity is generated, meaning HIP has stimulated at least another \$46 million in financial transactions in the Commonwealth.<sup>12</sup>

Project Bread's FoodSource Hotline screens callers for SNAP eligibility and provides callers across Massachusetts with information and referrals to community food resources. We are grateful for the Legislature's support of this important program. Through the hotline we have also provided thousands of residents information on HIP. The following are two stories that demonstrate how critical this program is for low-income households.

Noelle from Framingham called us to apply for SNAP. During our call, the hotline staff mentioned HIP and the benefits of the dollar-for-dollar match. Noelle called back to find a winter farmers' market. Unfortunately, the area she lives in does not have a farmers' market during the winter months, but HIP has been so helpful to her that she was willing to travel to a town close by. She talked about not being able to afford fresh veggies before applying for SNAP. Now, she loves making salads and occasionally bakes zucchini bread to share with her neighbors. She reports having more money to go towards her bills and said she hopes this program stays around forever.

In November 2020 during the pandemic, a caller from Roxbury shared that while she already received SNAP, it didn't cover enough of her grocery expenses. Her doctor told her not to eat certain foods for her health, but the alternatives were more expensive, and she was unable to





purchase them. Thanks to HIP, she was able to find a farmers' market near her and afford more fruits and vegetables.

Noelle's story is particularly poignant and demonstrates the need to permanently authorize HIP as a part of the Department of Transition Assistance (DTA), as opposed to the status quo of HIP being authorized only through the annual budget process. With uncertainty and limited funding, DTA has been limited in its ability to plan and maximize the impact of HIP. In the initial implementation, farmers were recruited as vendors on a first-come, first-served basis. This left farmers from marginalized communities, such as farmers who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color out of the program, and created geographic gaps, particularly during the winter. By enshrining HIP in the general laws and as part of the regular responsibilities of the Department, the Commonwealth can more effectively and consistently reach the goals of increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables for households experiencing food insecurity and increasing economic activity for smaller farms.

For these reasons, I urge you to please report *An Act Relative to An Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program* favorably out of committee. Project Bread is grateful to the Legislature for your strong partnership in our work to address and permanently solve hunger in Massachusetts.

I also encourage any individual struggling with food insecurity to contact our FoodSource Hotline—800-645-8333—to begin an application for SNAP and to be connected to nearby community food resources such as vendors that participate in HIP.

Sincerely,

Erin McAleer

President & CEO, Project Bread





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