



September 30, 2021

The Honorable Michael Rodrigues, Chair, Senate Ways and Means Committee
The Honorable Cindy Friedman, Vice-chair, Senate Ways and Means Committee
The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz, Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
The Honorable Ann-Margaret Ferrante, Vice-chair, House Ways and Means Committee
The Honorable Dan Hunt, Chair, House Committee on Federal Stimulus and Census Oversight

Via email

RE: Food Insecurity/ ARPA Funding

Dear Chair Rodrigues, Vice-chair Friedman, Chair Michlewitz, Vice-chair Ferrante and Chair Hunt:

When the full impact of the pandemic reached our state, food insecurity more than doubled from 8.4% of households to 19.6%. Among households with children and Black and Latino households, the rate has consistently been higher. During March and April 2020 alone, more than 690,000 jobs were lost in Massachusetts. Schools closed and nearly 500,000 low-income kids needed an alternative to the school meals they relied on every day. Parents wondered how they were going to afford to feed their kids.

Nonprofit and community organizations, school districts, state agencies, and local, state and federal policymakers came together to ensure supports were available – opening school meal sites, investing state funding in outreach and awareness, and increasing access to and benefits for federal nutrition programs, like school meal sites and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – the top two sources of food for families experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic. Our state prioritized these programs because they are scalable and federally reimbursed, maximizing the resources available to communities in a time of crisis.

Food insecurity continues to impact families

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt across our state. Food insecurity rates have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels and the reality is that even if they had, success cannot be defined as a return to the status quo. As need for support continues, barriers to the nation's most effective anti-hunger program, SNAP, persist. A Project Bread study on [Barriers to SNAP](#) found that stigma, misinformation, and language challenges were prevalent, particularly among communities of color and immigrants. Nearly a third of survey participants reported a lack of awareness of available resources. And as a new school year is underway, nutrition programs are dealing with a very different school meal experience and parents are wondering what will happen if they need to quarantine.





ARPA Provides a Critical Opportunity to Address Food Insecurity

The pandemic shed a stark light on the ways that our systems were not working for those who needed support the most, and food insecurity continues to impact a disproportionate share of families and individuals in our state. Additionally, a number of supports that were available over the past 18 months have already or will soon come to an end, including Pandemic EBT, SNAP benefit enhancements, and universal school meals. Research shows that many communities, particularly BIPOC communities, experience a longer recovery during an economic downturn, demonstrating that too many families will continue to struggle long after the public health emergency is declared over at the state and federal levels. The funding available to the state through the American Rescue Plan Act provides a once in a lifetime opportunity for the Commonwealth to invest in and strengthen those systems, and to support communities as they continue to recover, setting them up to build back even stronger.

As the legislature works to determine the best use for these federal dollars, we appreciate the opportunity to weigh in and ask that the following investments be included:

Statewide Awareness Campaign to Increase SNAP Participation (\$1.28 million/year)

While federal nutrition programs are scalable, sustainable resources for families and individuals facing food insecurity, many do not know or have misconceptions about these programs. According to a survey conducted by Project Bread during the pandemic, more than 46% of respondents believed that by enrolling in SNAP, they would take benefits away from others who needed them more and 38% were concerned about being judged for using SNAP. With more than 650,000 people in Massachusetts eligible for SNAP but not enrolled, it is critical to address these barriers.

In March of 2020, as schools shut down, many lost their jobs or were unable to work, and food insecurity increased, Project Bread became the “one stop shop” for individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Using a multi-lingual, multi-tactical approach, Project Bread launched a wide-scale campaign to connect individuals and families with food resources. Understanding that efforts must be accessible across multiple communities, Project Bread interviewed SNAP participants and key partners to inform campaign strategy and content. An external creative agency was engaged to partner on development of the campaign concept, based on these perspectives. These awareness efforts have continued and expanded over the past year and a half, raising awareness and reducing barriers to federal nutrition programs, such as SNAP and school or summer meals.

To date, the campaign has reached more than 50 million impressions statewide through digital, print, radio, direct mail and community engagement efforts. Calls to the Food Source Hotline increased three-fold during the pandemic, and calls helping individuals determine their eligibility for SNAP increased to around 24% of total calls during the awareness campaign, compared to 10% in the months immediately preceding. In May of 2021, after an intensive postcard mailing campaign addressing misconceptions around SNAP, these SNAP pre-screen calls





climbed to a high of 50%. Awareness efforts have also increased reach to callers who speak languages other than English. A wide range of multilingual efforts have focused on reaching Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Cape Verdean, Chinese, and Vietnamese speakers, increasing the percentage of non-English speaking callers to the Hotline. In April 2021, 40% of callers spoke languages other than English, compared to 20% immediately preceding the campaign.

With every call to the FoodSource Hotline, Project Bread seeks to address the caller's immediate needs and ultimately support participation in the available federal nutrition programs whenever possible. We ask that the legislature invest in a continuation and expansion of this campaign in order to continue to reach eligible individuals and families, maximizing federal dollars and ensuring that support is available as communities around the state continue recovery from the effects of this pandemic.

State Extension of Universal School Meals (\$100-120 million/year)

Before the pandemic, school meals provided a valuable source of nutrition for children. Up to half of many low-income children's daily calories can come from school meals.¹ Unfortunately, the status quo was not working for far too many of the children and teens in Massachusetts, nor the school districts that serve them. Before the pandemic, in 2019, 26% of food insecure households qualified for support in the form of free or reduced price meals.

We know that when children have access to proper nutrition, they are better able to learn and live healthier lives. Undernourished students have poorer cognitive performance, particularly when they miss breakfast.² Beyond academic success, children who experience hunger are more likely to have behavioral and attention problems as compared to other students.³

Beyond the benefits of school meals directly to school-aged children, school meals reduce food insecurity and poverty. Using the Supplemental Poverty Measure, the Census Bureau estimates that in 2018 school lunch lifted 1.45 million people out of poverty, including 800,000 children out of poverty making it the sixth most effective anti-poverty program.⁴ Two separate studies out of Johns Hopkins University and Children's HealthWatch found school meals lower food insecurity for students and their families.^{5,6}

We ask the legislature to invest \$110 million per year from three years to fund an extension of the universal school meals program that was made possible by federal waivers in the 2020-2021 school year and is currently set to expire at the end of the 2021-2022 school year. Students who are eligible to receive free school meals under federal guidelines would continue to do so, but for reduced-price and full price meals the state would use ARPA dollars to cover the portion of meals traditionally covered by families.

For households, this would provide a glidepath as economic recovery continues and would allow them to transition from the 2021-2022 school year with continued access to free school meals. For schools, this would represent a more gradual reduction in revenue following the federal waivers. Universal school meals can also





streamline meal service, which is crucial when schools take public health precautions by serving meals in the classroom, serving meals outside, or requiring students to stagger their time in the cafeteria.

Thank you for your consideration of these two investments which have the potential to make a direct impact on impact on food insecurity in our state. We are grateful for your ongoing commitment and partnership.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Erin McAleer.

Handwritten signature of Jennifer Lemmerman.

Erin McAleer
President & CEO

Jennifer Lemmerman
Vice President of Public Policy

¹ Cullen, K.W., Chen, T. (2017) The contribution of the USDA school breakfast and lunch program meals to student daily dietary intake, 5, 82-85.

² Taras, H. (2005) Nutrition and Student Performance at School. *Journal of School Health*, 75(6), 199-213.

³ Murphy, J. M., Wehler, C. A., Pagano, M. E., Little, M., Kleinman, R. F., & Jellinek, M. S. (1998). Relationship Between Hunger and Psychosocial Functioning in Low-Income American Children. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 37, 163-170.

⁴ Fox, L. (2020). The Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2019. Current Population Reports, P60-272. U.S. Census Bureau.

⁵ Poblacion, A.; Cook, J.; Ettinger de Cuba, S.; Bovell, A.; Sheward, R.; Pasquariello, J.; Cutts, D. Can food insecurity be reduced in the United States by improving SNAP, WIC, and the community eligibility provision? *World Med. Health Policy* 2017, 9, 435–455

⁶ Gross, S.M.; Kelley, T.L.; Augustyn, M.; Wilson, M.J.; Bassarab, K.; Palmer, A. Household Food Security Status of Families with Children Attending Schools that Participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and Those with Children Attending Schools that are CEP-Eligible, but Not Participating. *J. Hunger Environ. Nutr.* 2019, 1–16.

