Massachusetts' Local Food System

Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery

MASSACHUSETTS FOOD SYSTEM COLLABORATIVE

In early 2016 stakeholder organizations that supported the creation of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan formed the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative. The Collaborative is dedicated to working toward an equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system in the Commonwealth, and helps build the capacity of food-system stakeholders to advocate for policy recommendations in the Plan.

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Food choices are at once deeply personal, yet represent collective actions of countless players. Every bite each of us takes has been shaped by a complex range of forces, some in our control and others well outside of our control. By endeavoring to understand those forces better, and to play a more active role in influencing them, Massachusetts residents are working toward a food system that better meets the needs of everyone in the state.

This means a local food system that closes the gaps caused by centuries of systemic racism that is visible today in Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) people having less access to land to grow food, to food system jobs, to the power structures that shape the food system, and to food itself. It means a system that allows farmers, fishermen, and other food businesses to generate fair prices that allow for economic sustainability. It means one where workers are paid fairly, where natural resources are protected, and where healthy food is affordable and physically available for all. It means a local food system that can respond to meet needs in times of crisis. And it means increasing the amount of food produced and then consumed here in Massachusetts.

Statewide food independence or sovereignty is not a realistic option for Massachusetts. Limits on resources, including the limitations of our climate, require that we be a part of an interconnected regional and global food system. But by focusing attention on our local food system – how we produce, distribute, and eat food here in the Commonwealth – stakeholders are working to provide Massachusetts residents, businesses, and institutions an opportunity to exercise far greater control over each of those bites.

Massachusetts' local food supply chain is a complex and dynamic web of businesses and institutions, policies and funding streams, stakeholders and consumers. More than 425,000 people work for the state's more than 42,000 food system businesses, earning $12.1 billion in wages each year. More than 7,000 farmers steward nearly 500,000 acres, playing a crucial role in supporting our environment and natural resources. The state's fishermen landed almost 110,000 tons of seafood in 2017, worth more than $600 million.

But even though we produce a lot of food, Massachusetts simply has more eaters than the growing area, infrastructure, and climate can provide food for. The bulk of our food comes from the global food system outside of our state borders, heavily influenced by corporate producers and processors that favor economic efficiency above social needs, providing scale but often unresponsive to ecological and community needs, and struggling to adapt in times of crisis. Massachusetts' local food system doesn't demand such trade offs.

It is at the local level, where supply chains are shortened and economic and decision-making power

is kept close, that stakeholders have more control and can shape production and consumption to better benefit and meet the needs of their communities. Local food systems can be nimble and innovative in ways that larger ones cannot, and they are inherently more responsive to needs because producer decisions impact their communities and their communities impact producers' ability to prosper. Those local connections also mean that misalignments are easier to identify and correct. It is in the local food system where the choices made by every participant – from producers to consumers and every food chain link in between – make the differences between supporting an equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system, or one that perpetuates inequities and exploitative practices.

The diversity of stakeholders in the local production chain contributes to its versatility and resilience. Farmers and fishermen, from the largest commercial farms and fisheries to the smallest in the state, work to balance their use of natural resources with management practices that protect and restore the environment. Their access to markets ranging from direct-to-consumer to wholesale processing makes them better able to adjust to significant crises and meet changing demand. And their commitment to being reliable members of their communities prompts most to avoid exploitative labor practices to reduce costs, unlike their industrial food system counterparts.

At the same time, while "we can't community garden our way out of these problems," as one project participant said, small growing operations also play a critical role in the state's food system. From teaching agricultural skills to those who want to farm commercially, to offering nutrition education for children, to allowing immigrant communities an opportunity to grow culturally relevant food, to providing fresh produce in neighborhoods underserved by retail markets, to providing a unique natural space in an urban area, these efforts connect people with the food system in ways that profoundly shape individuals and communities. While small community farms will not provide enough food to make the state independent of the global food system, nor negate the importance of local commercial producers, community gardeners become farmers, advocates, and wise participants in the local food system.

Equity, Sustainability, and Resilience

We define:

An **equitable** food system as one in which those most vulnerable and those who have been systematically excluded and marginalized due to race, low wealth, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age or other factors can fully build and exercise power, participate, prosper, and benefit. It ensures economic opportunity and high-quality jobs with living wages; safe working conditions; access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food; and environmental sustainability.

A **sustainable** food system as one where businesses and institutions are financially sound and operate in ways that protect and enhance the environment, and where healthy food is accessible for all.

A **resilient** food system as one that is flexible, adaptable, and able to withstand crises and disruptions without collapse or significant or permanent damage to sustainability and equity.

Despite an abundance of food produced in Massachusetts and elsewhere, for too many Massachusetts residents the food system fails to meet their basic needs. More than 500,000 households rely on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to close the gap between a household's income and necessities like rent, utilities, and food. The state's four food banks distributed 87 million pounds of food in 2019 and saw a 64% increase in the number of people served in the spring and summer of 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis. The demand for support is greater than these resources can meet. And, as a result of centuries of systemic racism shaping employment, housing, and health patterns, among other systems, Black households are nearly twice as likely as white ones to struggle with hunger.

To help ensure access to food, well over one billion dollars in SNAP and other federal food benefits are distributed to Massachusetts house-

holds each year. Those income supports are widely regarded as the most effective and efficient way of closing the gap between income and the cost of food for hundreds of thousands of people in the state, but they still don't reach some families in need and are insufficient for many who do receive them. The food banks and pantries that make up the emergency food system play a critical role, as do food is medicine programs, summer meal programs for children, subsidized Community Supported Agriculture shares, and a range of other local efforts. As with production, these local efforts can't fully address the enormous need, but they can be responsive to racial inequities, geographic challenges, crises, and other variables in ways that the larger supports cannot.

The diversity of stakeholders is mirrored in other sectors of the Commonwealth's food system. Shared-use kitchens help entrepreneurs develop new products, and large processing plants provide jobs and local economic impact while producing food that is shipped around the world. Neighborhood farmers markets co-exist with national chain supermarkets. Local restaurants and food trucks serve millions of meals a year, as do fast-food franchises. Individual farmers have launched home-delivery services, and the Commonwealth's intermodal transportation hubs see more than 100 billion pounds of food flow in and out of the state each year.

No matter the scale, every element of the local food system is impacted by regional, national and global markets and economies, social and political trends, and worldwide climate patterns. There is no insulating even the most independent enterprise from these forces – every farmer, business, service provider, and eater must contend with factors that are outside of their control and yet have an impact on their choices. While individual choices, or even statewide ones, may not have an immediately visible impact on the global food system, building an equitable, sustainable, resilient local food system strengthens the Commonwealth's ability to contend with those forces. And modeling success and demanding change at the local level will influence the larger systems as well.

About this report

It has been five years since the completion of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan (the Plan). That Plan, commissioned by the Commonwealth and developed by more than 1,500 food system stakeholders, laid out a set of goals and recommendations toward a sustainable and equitable Massachusetts food system.

The Plan's overall theme was one of systemic change: how could local food system stakeholders not just meet immediate needs and address current challenges, but together create policy and processes that would best serve the Commonwealth over the long term. Nonetheless, the Plan is a snapshot in time, representing the priorities that were most top of mind in 2015 for the farmers, consumers, businesses and

The goals of the 2015 MA Local Food Action Plan

Increase production, sales and consumption of Massachusetts-grown foods.

Create jobs and economic opportunity in food, farming and fishing, and improve the wages and skills of food system workers.

Protect the land and water needed to produce food, maximize environmental benefits from agriculture and fishing, and ensure food safety.

Reduce hunger and food insecurity, increase the availability of healthy food to all residents, and reduce food waste.

institutions, and researchers and policymakers who participated in the process, a group that, while sizable, was not able to fully represent all food system stakeholders. Most of the recommendations contained in it are still relevant, but conditions have changed in the intervening years. Stakeholders have learned a great deal as political and economic realities have shifted, climate change has become a more pressing reality, and the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted problems and shifted how the food system works.

Some progress has been made toward the goals of the Plan: the growth of the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP); passage of estate tax reform for farmers; better enforcement of the Commercial Food Waste Disposal Ban; updates made to food safety regulations; enactment of Breakfast after the Bell legislation; increased coordination between urban agriculture stakeholders; and many other public and private efforts have contributed to a healthier local food system. At the same time many of the Plan's recommendations remain unaddressed, new issues have arisen that deserve attention, and many stakeholders who were not part of the process that developed the Plan, particularly communities of color, have valuable insights and strength to offer in moving toward a healthier food system.

With that in mind, the MA Food System Collaborative has developed this document not as a revision to the Plan, but as an update that reflects current input about local food system needs that are particularly urgent at this time and some new or more specific ideas that have arisen in the last five years. We see this as part of a necessary and iterative process that will continue to improve and update our understanding of these issues.

Methodology

In Spring 2020 the staff of the Collaborative began a series of conversations with food system stakeholder networks around Massachusetts. Municipal food policy councils, communities of practice of sectoral-based service providers, advocacy coalitions, and producer and other networks were engaged. They were asked to provide their thoughts not just about the current moment and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis, but also more broadly about the needs of the local food system.

While the Collaborative's focus is on amplifying voices that have traditionally not been engaged in policy advocacy, invitations were sent to groups of all sizes and from all sectors of the food system. Since not every sector of the food system chose to participate at the same level the concepts in this document do not represent a universal perspective, but are representative of those who contributed most. Responses and participation tended toward community-based nonprofit service organizations, groups that represent direct-to-consumer farmers, and other small organizations with missions that target a particular sector – community agriculture, food access, land protection – but that recognize the importance of connecting their work with the broader food system. Efforts were made to engage communities of color and organizations that represent them, but participation by these groups was limited. More work is needed to undo the history of exclusion and marginalization in projects such as this one for these sort of processes to be truly representative of all communities in the Commonwealth.

In all, we held 35 listening sessions (Appendix) with more than 300 participants, representing well over 250 organizations and institutions that represent and support farms, food producers, businesses, and communities across the state.

While every conversation was unique, each group was asked to consider these questions:

- What does it mean to you to have a sustainable, equitable, resilient food system?
- What examples have you seen during this crisis (as well as before it) of the food system functioning well?
- Where have you seen flaws?
- What role does/would your organization/business/community play in the local food system?
- What obstacles are there to you playing that role?
- What recommendations do you have for helping the local food system become more resilient and better able to withstand future crises?
    - What changes to laws or regulations at the state, federal, and local levels would be helpful?
    - What additional funds from the government would be helpful?
    - What kind of education is needed for practitioners, the general public, other stakeholders?

We asked each group to consider their answers using a racial equity lens, recognizing that current food system policies and practices have contributed to systemic inequities in communities of color.

The input we received was gathered into a set of problem statements and recommendations, sorted thematically, and shared back out with all the networks that the Collaborative invited to participate, regardless of their attendance in calls. This step allowed us to reach a greater number of stakeholders, especially those who had not been able to participate in the calls, and ask for additional feedback. It gave all participants an opportunity to further clarify what we had captured, add additional items for consideration, rank items to indicate what they felt was most urgent and most relevant to the communities they serve, and comment on the process itself. These collected notes from all conversations were sorted and compiled in a document that is available for download on the Collaborative's website.

Collaborative staff then integrated all of this input into the set of challenges and opportunities reflected in this document. The list of problem statements and recommendations presented here is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather a synthesis of what we heard as most urgent from the participants in the process. In most cases the recommendations are broad, focusing more on what needs to be done rather than how to do it. This is intentional, as further collective action is needed to develop agreed upon strategies to accomplish any of these recommended actions. The recommendations reflect the fact that input ranged from targeted, actionable items, to more broad, systemic, and long-term goals, to the fact that issues larger than the food chain itself – housing, labor, transportation, the environment, and others – need to be part of any food system discussion.

As would be expected from such a broad range of participants, input we received was far from uniform – there were distinct disagreements on some issues, and a range of thoughts on how to address others. Nothing in this document should be construed as having been endorsed or as representing complete agreement of any or all of the stakeholders that participated in our conversations. Some of these items will help guide the Collaborative's work in the coming years, and all are offered as public record for other organizations, funders, policymakers, and institutions to refer to and adapt for their own purposes, as they see fit.

Summary

The majority of input received aligns with the four main goals of the 2015 Plan, which serves as a guiding document for the Collaborative as well as a touchstone for many state and local programs. Throughout the conversations, a number of themes emerged as throughlines that connect the range of issues raised by the Plan and that inform the analysis of the problems and the development of the recommendations in this report.

The most visible immediate finding was the **deep commitment** of the individuals and organizations that participated in these conversations to developing and implementing policies and practices that ensure that the local food system works for all. From farmers and fishermen, both large and small, to food pantries, researchers to policymakers, Massachusetts has a broad and engaged network of dedicated stakeholders. That network is racially and ethnically diverse, covers the entire geography of the Commonwealth, and represents business owners, nonprofit service providers, people with lived experience, policymakers, academic researchers, and others.

The murder of George Floyd, and many others since, occurred during our process of hosting conversations, prompting many participants to make connections between the **structural racial injustice** throughout society and parallel inequities in the food system. Those inequities can be traced back to the slavery upon which much of our food system is built. That same structural racism prevents the entire food system from functioning well, to the detriment of all. Whether discussing access to food, jobs, land, or the positions of power that set and enforce policy, a common thread is the need for investments of time and resources to ensure that Black and Indigenous communities are more equitably represented, included, and supported as leaders. Similar concerns were raised about other communities of color, immigrant, senior, and low-income communities' representation, particularly in the policy-setting processes that shape the food system.

Many participants expressed a desire to see the **state's public sector become a greater champion** for food system issues such as local agriculture, hunger, and nutrition, and to have that reflected in

investments, coordination, public messaging, and policy. It was acknowledged repeatedly that implementing some of the recommendations would be costly, and that progressive tax policy is needed to better support needed investments.

Throughout the conversations, the COVID-19 crisis loomed large, having dramatically changed the landscape of how food is produced and accessed. Supply chain shortages, increased food insecurity, labor issues, public health concerns, and economic turmoil brought forward some of the most significant shortcomings of the food system, but also spurred innovation on the part of producers, service providers, and policymakers. The cost of these efforts is still being measured and lessons being learned, and the response was certainly imperfect. But the experience has proven the **value of a resilient local food system**, one that is adaptable in times of crisis and able to meet changing needs without sacrificing equity or sustainability. Support for the local food system will be critical to help the Commonwealth recover from the current crisis, and in future crises, a resilient local food system will be essential.

For producers – farmers and fishermen, processors and distributors, waste managers, and all of the other links in the food chain – resiliency requires resources such as education and infrastructure to help boost efficiency and profitability, and supportive laws, regulations and grant and loan programs that work toward stability. For consumers it means greater understanding about their role in the food system and about nutrition, and it means a strong safety net that effectively reaches and serves those in need. For other sectors of our economy, particularly education, healthcare, and health insurance, it means better education and greater attention to their roles in working through the local food system to increase the health of our citizens.

At the heart of many of these discussions lies the issue of the **cost of food**. As a percentage of income, food is less expensive to the consumer in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world, but hunger and lack of access to nutritious foods continues. Low prices are supported by externalities in the global food system – particularly labor exploitation and degraded air, soil and water quality – so further reductions in cost are not the answer, as those would only exacerbate those problems. Expanding buying power of consumers through increases in wages and benefits were expressed as steps toward an answer, while at the same time ensuring local food businesses receive the support they need in order to compete in a market that is heavily weighted against them.

Advocates and practitioners alike indicated a need for **centralized tracking of food system data** to help inform efforts toward organizational goals as well as statewide efforts. From the number of households experiencing hunger, to the number of acres of protected farmland, to the amount of state resources in-

vested each year in the food system, there was general agreement that a repository of such data, updated regularly and available to all, would be a tremendous asset to demonstrate progress where it exists, and identify the need for interventions where appropriate.

Massachusetts residents have long led the nation in their awareness of how their food choices impact the local economy, the environment, and their communities. Fostered by both community-based organizations and government programs, direct-to-consumer agriculture plays a significant part in the state's local food system, while at the same time broad public support helps foster innovative public and private programs working to reduce food insecurity and increase good nutrition habits. But misconceptions and misleading marketing from the global food sector are prevalent, and participants in these discussions noted a need for the **general public to increase their role as influential actors** in the food system as a way to emphasize the need for greater investment and more supportive policies. Enhanced education and outreach was cited repeatedly as a necessary element toward that goal.

Finally, the need for **greater coordination** among food system sectors and stakeholders was expressed throughout these conversations. Local efforts often occur in isolation, without connection to other similar efforts that they could learn from and share resources with. And statewide efforts by both non-governmental institutions as well as public bodies are sometimes duplicative, in conflict with each other, or simply disconnected from each other, further hindering progress toward an effective local food system. Perhaps most importantly, many participants called for **greater collaboration** among sectoral-based interests – public health, economic development, agriculture, fishing, environment, and others – so that rather than solutions in any one of these being at the expense of others, the focus is on systemic solutions that work toward equity, sustainability, and resilience throughout our systems.

The following sections are a closer look at each of these issues, reflecting the challenges identified by participants in the listening sessions, as well as recommendations toward solutions.

Eliminating food insecurity and addressing hunger

All Massachusetts residents should have economic and physical access to resources needed to purchase and grow nutritious, culturally relevant food. If they do not, hunger assistance resources should be distributed in a culturally appropriate, equitable, efficient, and safe manner.

Despite an abundance of food, hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts residents struggle to access adequate nutritious meals due to financial and physical limitations. Low paying jobs, high rents and housing costs, high costs of living, and lack of stable employment and job security are among the root causes of hunger, while limited nutrition education and poor public transportation exacerbate the problem. Historic inequities and structural racism in the local food system, including within food access programs and policies, have resulted in BIPOC households suffering disproportionately. These root causes of hunger were brought up repeatedly during our conversations as items that needed more attention.

The 2015 Plan identified eight goals around food access, security and health to ensure everyone can afford healthy foods and receive available public supports. To do so, the Plan recommended expanding food system education, better integrating the healthcare and food systems, increasing local foods available at pantries, and strengthening public transit. Some progress has been made on some of these goals, but more work is still needed to achieve the vision laid out in the Plan. There has been considerable progress in establishing new healthy retail via the Massachusetts Food Trust Program, the Healthy Incentives Program has enabled more than $19 million in fruits and vegetables to be bought from local farmers by low-income households, the healthcare and food systems are working closer together thanks to the MA Food is Medicine coalition, and legislation to close the SNAP Gap has been enacted. But more work is clearly needed. Many of the points in the Plan, like the need for long term, comprehensive, systemic reform, were echoed in our conversations this summer. Crucially, the necessity of prioritizing the needs of BIPOC communities that are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity was emphasized.

> *"Why is there funding for immediate disasters and crises and no one wants to address, through systemic changes, the slow moving disasters of hunger and poverty?"*
>
> ***- Listening session participant***

The range of efforts, from public benefit programs to community level initiatives, that make up the food safety net need to be better coordinated to address food insecurity holistically. At the same time, the

"The last few months have shown how inadequate and ridiculous our response to poverty is, how we put everything on one individual, how we make their lives so complicated. We still have a lot of work to do to provide services that alleviate poverty in an uplifting, fast way."

- Listening session participant

connections between the local food system and food security programs should be strengthened, as there are significant opportunities for them to be mutually supportive.

The cost of food from the industrial food system at the point of sale does not reflect the real costs to produce food, and leads to inequities in who can afford food, particularly healthy and local food. The local food system must address both the root causes of hunger and meet the needs of those for whom the food system has failed to provide access to adequate nutrition, and must apply an equity and food justice framework to this work. The state should incentivize efforts to localize supply chains, build regional resiliency, and establish mechanisms through which access to healthy foods is economically systemic, rather than reliant on charitable hunger relief efforts.

Food access infrastructure

Current challenges and opportunities

Public transportation services, healthy retail, community and shared kitchens, and food distribution and waste systems can either assist or hamper access to and consumption of healthy food. Better coordination of these types of infrastructure, and funding to support them, is needed to ensure access to and greater consumption of healthy food.

The gaps in this infrastructure are evident. Transportation is a barrier to accessing food for low-income residents who may not have their own vehicle and so rely on inconsistent or minimal public transit services. Massachusetts has fewer full-service grocery stores with fresh produce than other similar states. Significant amounts of wasted food could be diverted to feed people and animals, and the amount of waste could be reduced at the source if targeted policy and funding were available. And community kitchens could play an important role in food access by lending space for entrepreneurs, processing food for access programs, and more, but need better support to be fully utilized and successful.

Recommendations

- Fully fund the MA Food Trust program by releasing the authorized bond money quickly to build more affordable retail options statewide.
- Ensure that the infrastructure exists to reduce food waste in all areas of the Commonwealth, and at all points of the food chain.
- Enact and enforce lower thresholds for food waste bans and mandate residential, municipal, and school composting programs.
- Amplify existing campaigns and information regarding food waste.
- The state should provide support, such as financial incentives, for community kitchens, where skills can be shared and more value-added local food production could happen. Better support would mean more ingredients could be purchased from local producers in bulk, thus stimulating the local food economy.
- The state should create and maintain an inventory of processing and distribution infrastructure that is available for shared use and emergency repurposing in crises.

Springfield Food Policy Council

The Springfield Food Policy Council (SFPC) launched its Grow-a-Garden initiative in response to the increased need brought on by the COVID-19 crisis. The program was built upon the parent nutrition education project, through which SFPC partners with UMass Extension to deliver a 7-week healthy cooking course on school campuses with students who have higher levels of food-related preventable disease. This course also teaches the basics of public policy and civic engagement. The SFPC targeted specific families to receive backyard gardens. Residents were provided with raised beds, organic soil, compost, and seedlings. Support from the Community Foundation of Western Mass enabled SFPC to install 56 garden beds in residential backyards, including eight senior households, six families with senior residents, and two families with differently abled children. The SFPC is providing ongoing weekly support to families through on-site visits, weekly calls, text messages, and virtual group meetings. Unemployed Holyoke residents and small businesses were paid for garden installation and carpentry work. This local program is connecting families that need assistance not just with food to meet immediate needs, but also with tools to grow healthy food long-term, and education to empower them to engage in and shape the larger food system.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Current challenges and opportunities

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP) provides monthly cash benefits to assist low-income households in purchasing food, giving households agency over what they choose to eat. The program has been proven to be successful in helping move families out of poverty, and is also recognized as a benefit to local economies. But most SNAP benefit levels are not adequate for a household's healthy diet, and SNAP users must contend with stigma, shame, and restrictions on what can be purchased with their benefits. Online SNAP sales are limited to a few large national retailers, further limiting access to local foods for those with limited mobility and reducing the benefit of the program to local retailers.

Recommendations

- More people should be made eligible for SNAP through increased benefit levels and poverty level cut-offs, and non-citizens should not be excluded from benefits.
- The state government should expedite the rollout of the SNAP and MassHealth common application program as established in H.1173/S.678 and authorized by H.4708.
- The state should provide more transparency in benefit termination, eligibility, and other details of the program, and offer ongoing support to help SNAP users navigate the various financial and educational resources, such as nutrition education, available to them.
- Track data on the increases in SNAP applications, unemployment applications, and food pantry participation by municipality to inform targeted SNAP outreach efforts.
- USDA should expand SNAP online purchasing and delivery options to facilitate participation by a wider range of retailers, including HIP vendors and small retailers, to better serve SNAP clients with mobility issues, health concerns, or other issues that make physical access difficult.
- MassHealth should reimburse transportation costs related to food access.

Chelsea Eats

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city of Chelsea has set up its own municipally-based food debit card program for residents who are struggling with food insecurity but are ineligible for federal assistance programs. Chelsea Eats is available to use at local grocery stores and bodegas, and was made to be a bridge for residents who use the city's food pantries to a program that enables more choice. The city held a lottery to assign the cards, as there were 3,500 applications and only 2,000 cards available. Expanding SNAP to cover these residents would mean that the city would not have had to implement this program.

Healthy Incentives Program

Current challenges and opportunities

The Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) demonstrates the success that can occur when programs integrate food system sectors. Begun in 2017, the program incentivizes the purchase of fresh, healthy, local food when SNAP users buy produce directly from Massachusetts farmers. To date, the program has resulted in more than $19 million in sales for farms, with more than 85,000 low-income households accessing better food for their families.

But high demand for the program means that it still faces suspensions each year due to sales outpacing budget appropriations. These suspensions, along with limited outreach, breakdowns in communications, a lack of online ordering options, and inequitable distribution of points of sale limit the program's effectiveness. The state's auto-payment HIP community supported agriculture (CSA) share program and other CSAs that have targeted lower income households have proven successful, but only began to be used widely during the COVID-19 crisis. Farmers are not supported in training their market staff on welcoming consumers with SNAP benefits in a culturally sensitive way, resulting in some not treating consumers well. And farmers are expected to bear the responsibility of communicating notices of program suspensions to consumers, creating misplaced mistrust and harming the program's effectiveness.

Recommendations

- The state should fully fund the program for year-round operation, and should add new vendors on a regular basis, to ensure equitable and increased participation by vendors and customers.
- Infrastructure should be developed to allow farmers and markets that do not have reliable access to the internet to be HIP vendors.
- The state should coordinate with community-based organizations to publicize HIP in culturally relevant ways, and fund stakeholders to do this outreach work. The state should develop a plan, in partnership with stakeholders, to target HIP client outreach and set goals and deadlines for increases in program uptake to better gauge funding and participation over time.
- The state should implement a survey to gather feedback from clients and farmers on how the program works for them to inform any potential future programmatic changes.
- DTA should communicate suspensions or other operational changes at least two months in advance to the legislature, vendors, customers, and the public.
- Food system stakeholders, in partnership with anti-racism trainers, should incentivize farmers and market managers to attend trainings on antiracism and provide a welcoming, culturally sensitive environment for all consumers.
- Training for farmers on how to market to, enroll, distribute to, and retain a low-income customer base for CSA programs should be supported.

Mass Food Delivery

Mycoterra Farm started Mass Food Delivery in partnership with several other farms in March 2020 to ensure ongoing access to farm fresh produce during the shutdowns of some retail operations such as farmers markets caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The service delivers to nine of the state's 13 counties, and offers a full range of products in partnership with other local farms and value-added food producers. They are a HIP authorized vendor, and had more than 4,000 SNAP orders from 1,150 households between March and September. This ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment helped allow several farms to remain sustainable and provided customers with uninterrupted access to fresh, healthy, local food. The increased customer base as a result of HIP played a role in allowing for that resilience.

Food is Medicine

Current challenges and opportunities

Food is medicine (FIM) programs such as medically tailored meal programs, produce prescriptions, and population-wide health interventions, are gaining attention as a critical component of a healthy food access system. As these programs are relatively new, they are not equitably distributed across the state and need funding to support interventions in communities that have the highest need. At the same time, the healthcare system as a whole needs to be better connected with community partners and the local food system.

Recommendations

Food is Medicine Coalition

A coalition of food access, public health, and agricultural stakeholders has developed a state Food is Medicine plan and advocates for its goals. The Food is Medicine MA coalition, led by the Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation at Harvard Law School and Community Servings, works to increase the prevalence of FIM programs in Massachusetts. The coalition is working to pass legislation that would require the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to establish a pilot program equipping health care systems to connect MassHealth enrollees with diet-related health conditions to one of three appropriate nutrition services, with the expectation that health outcomes will improve and cost of care will decrease.

- The state should enhance the education of hospital workers, primary care providers, dietitians, oral health professionals, and other actors in the healthcare system in food insecurity and nutrition, and in providing screenings, referrals, and interventions.
- New laws and regulations should be inclusive of medically necessary diets by supporting organizations that provide them, regulating them to ensure safety, and developing targets for measuring efficacy.
- The state should fund community health care centers to hire additional staff to coordinate health care and food systems partnerships.
- Community health care centers should carry up to date information on available food access resources for community members who may need them, including on FIM programs that can assist in preventing, managing and treating diet-related chronic conditions. This information should be stored in a centralized resource that centers should have access to, and should be maintained by the state.
- The state should protect and enhance Flexible Services for FIM interventions in the next Medicaid waiver application.
- The state should direct resources to research that evaluates the impact of FIM programming on health outcomes and health care costs.
- The state should work to protect and expand the Flexible Services Program to ensure reliable funding streams to sustain health care and nutrition services partnership.
- The state should create new funding streams that support community-based organizations providing nutrition services in partnership with health care.
- Hospital Community Benefit Programs should more fully fund healthy food consumption through partnerships with community based organizations, especially as a structural determinant of overall health.

School food

Current challenges and opportunities

Schools play a critical role in the food system, not just in that they have significant purchasing power and feed hundreds of thousands of children every day, but also in their capacity to teach children about the food system and the importance of healthy eating, lessons which can have a profound impact on the students and their families well beyond a single meal. But school feeding programs face many challenges – a limited pool of skilled workers and not enough of a budget to keep them on staff, a lack of adequate equipment to prepare from scratch meals, inadequate time for children to eat, reimbursement rates insufficient to incentivize local food purchases, and more. And while many community-based organizations have developed programming to bring food systems and nutrition education into classrooms, these important subjects are not a part of the core curriculum for students statewide.

The state should fund nutrition, cooking, and food system education in schools. This education should be framed by the structural racial inequities that shape access to food, jobs, land, and power.

Recommendations

- Stakeholders should work with teacher unions and district curriculum directors to add subjects such as nutrition, cooking, gardening, and other food system topics to the core curriculum in primary and secondary schools.
- Institutionalize school gardens by integrating them into wellness plans required by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and coordinate support for school gardens with professional agricultural and horticulture associations.
- The state should increase reimbursement rates to incentivize purchasing from local farms, fishermen, and food producers and track how much local food, particularly healthy food, is purchased.
- The state should implement universal free school meals.
- Municipalities and the state should provide funding to schools in order to better leverage their physical infrastructure for community meal producers, business incubators, and other uses.
- School districts should partner with organizations that serve housing insecure families to provide wraparound services such as meal delivery for families.

NY Farm to School

New York State implemented a farm to school initiative in 2018 to increase school purchasing of local products. The program increased the reimbursement schools receive for lunches from 5.9 cents per meal to 25 cents per meal for any district that purchases at least 30% of the ingredients for their lunch program from New York farms. Within one year of the program's launch 49 of the state's school food authorities reached 30%. This includes Buffalo Public Schools, the second largest school district in the state, which serves 29,000 students daily and spent over $2.6 million on New York grown food products during the 2018-19 school year. A similar incentive in Massachusetts could help increase sales for local farms.

Emergency food system

Current challenges and opportunities

Despite efforts to alleviate hunger systemically, 16.6% of households in MA struggle to afford to feed their families and regularly rely on the emergency food system, a network of food banks, pantries, senior meal programs, veterans' programs, and other service providers that distribute food to households in need. These programs and organizations play an important role in providing a safety net for households struggling to access benefits programs, or for whom those programs are insufficient to meet their needs. The emergency food system relies on charity, the cycles of which can make longer term planning difficult and unaccountable to community needs, like increased demand for culturally appropriate foods. While these programs and organizations are a necessary component of today's food system, a more equitable food system must work to eliminate hunger by strengthening the safety net, and move toward choice and dignity for all consumers in mainstream retail channels, regardless of income level.

Recommendations

- Increase focus on local and regional distribution models for emergency food, rather than federal systems with higher distribution costs.
- Metrics to measure efficacy of emergency food systems should prioritize nutritional value rather than pounds of food distributed.
- Funding should be allocated to increase cold chain storage capacity and infrastructure in the emergency food system.
- Pantries should continue to utilize drive through, digital pantry, curbside pickup, and mobile market models to better reach consumers with mobility issues, parents, people with multiple jobs, and others for whom time and physical access are limiting factors to participation. Casework should be carefully coordinated to work with the reduced time spent at pantry locations as a result of these changes.
- The state should increase the local purchasing requirement levels for the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP), and adjust funding for the program to reflect need.
- Lower MEFAP quantity requirements so small farmers can more easily sell products to the program.
- The state should create an inventory of churches and other commercial kitchens available for community use for classes and bulk production.
- Provide state and federal subsidies for farmers to sell local products at affordable prices at farmers markets, farm stands or CSA delivery sites (including online pickup locations and door-to-door delivery sites) in low-income communities to households that do not qualify for federal benefits and are food insecure.

BRIDGE

BRIDGE (Berkshire Resources for Integration of Diverse Groups through Education) has worked on food security for at least a decade with their youth garden programming, and on racial justice and equity through a variety of programs, including a local task force. The families BRIDGE works with on food access and youth gardening reached out to BRIDGE in the spring as they were facing rising food insecurity. These families were comfortable with the organization because of their long standing relationship. In response BRIDGE started a weekly food distribution program to BIPOC households, which now serves 90 families (or around 250+ people) with food sourced from local farms.

Supporting local food production

Farmers, fishermen, and other local food businesses should be able to pay their owners and workers living wages, generate a profit, and improve the local economy, as part of a local food system that makes healthy food accessible to all residents of the Commonwealth.

Every food producer seeks economic sustainability – to command a fair price for their products that will cover the cost of production and allow for profit and growth. The USDA Census of Agriculture measures the market value of products sold by farms, as well as the cost of production. The most recent edition (2017) found that for every dollar Massachusetts farms spent on production they earned only 96 cents. This is not typical for the farming industry nationally – in fact, in only four states did farmers spend more on production than they earned in sales, and only one of those showed a greater loss than Massachusetts.

Subsidies on food production outside of Massachusetts, both direct and secondary, put Massachusetts producers at a disadvantage on both the price and cost side of the equation. Local producers must compete against low-priced food from the global food system, where producers often circumvent environmental and other external costs and avoid fair labor costs. Massachusetts farmers generally steer clear of these practices, while also paying more for energy, land, and other necessary inputs. Local producers' ability to sell direct to consumers and command a fair price for their products is important, but as farmers in Massachusetts, on average, are losing money, clearly change is needed to close the gap.

Public and private investment in local food system businesses and infrastructure in Massachusetts has declined and significant amounts of agricultural land has been lost to development. Further exacerbating the problem, state departmental and municipal autonomy has resulted in regulatory and policy development that is disjointed and outdated at best, and ineffective and detrimental at its worst. And systemic inequity continues to exclude BIPOC entrepre-

"When food is cheap the equation doesn't work. We need to be able to pay people who grow the food."

- Listening session participant

neurs and workers from equitable participation in the food system.

So it is necessary and appropriate to turn attention to addressing labor, energy, land, and other costs, as a way of leveling the playing field around external and regulatory costs. Efforts to figure out how to pay local producers for all goods and services provided, such as eco-services, and to seek other ways to alleviate the imbalance by building awareness of the challenges, accepting new ideas, and continuing to advocate for change, are also needed.

Input received during this process validates the 2015 Plan's position that greater investment in education, infrastructure, market development, and research, coupled with regulatory changes that support both producers and consumers, can help address these challenges and create far greater economic development in our food system sectors.

Farmland and water resources access and protection

Current challenges and opportunities

Access to affordable land and fishing resources is a core challenge for all farmers and fishermen. Regulations and policies for farmland and water resource protection, zoning, and sales are not protecting enough farmland and fishing resources, or creating enough access for producers who are young or who are Black, Indigenous, and or other people of color. Sub- and intertidal aquaculture development out to three miles from the shoreline is controlled by municipalities, resulting in competition for resources and often not being considered in statewide food and economic development plans.

The Plan devotes an entire chapter to farmland issues, pointing out that "the decline in the Commonwealth's agricultural land base, especially its cropland, threatens the industry's viability" and that "property taxes and land use regulations and programs play a large role in farm profitability and business viability." Recommendations offered in this process's listening sessions reflect the fact that land recommendations in the Plan remain largely unrealized, including proposed changes in tax policy, zoning policy, program funding and regulations, and changes to land protection mechanisms.

The COVID-19 pandemic and increased attention on climate change shows the need for these actions and others is even more urgent than when the Plan was published five years ago. The need to address the fact that Black and Indigenous people have had their land, property, and investments stolen repeatedly via predatory lending, mortgage discrimination, and discrimination within government programs, is equally pressing.

Recommendations

- As proposed in the Plan, the state should develop a formal farmland action plan to: (1) determine the resources needed to improve State data collection around farmland trends; (2) establish a statewide baseline of land in active agricultural production, with improved data collection, and a system for tracking acres of farmland in production over time; (3) set measurable goals and benchmarks related to farmland protection, retention, and access; and (4) recommend State program spending levels to meet those goals and benchmarks.

Osamequin Farm

Osamequin Farm totals more than 350 contiguous acres in Seekonk and Rehoboth. Its mission is to preserve the farm and continue to share the land with farmers and the community for generations to come. The Farm offers favorable small acreage land leases and access to shared infrastructure to young, beginning, or marginalized farmers who are most often first-generation farmers. They have a waiting list of 20 farmers seeking to farm on small parcels and do not have adequate infrastructure such as water and storage buildings to adequately support even their existing farmers. In addition to Osamequin Farm, Lee Family Farm, Muck and Mystery Farm, Tooth and Nail Farm, Hocus Pocus Farm, and Daylover Farm are each successfully producing on well under five acres each and represent a new vision of farming in which farmers decide to be self-reliant in generating both the on-farm and off-farm income that creates farm viability in 97% of all farms in the US. This model of farming is growing rapidly in Massachusetts and requires smaller acreages with intensive production to be manageable and successful. With current laws and farm programs these farmers can not afford to purchase farmland and typically have to lease land, which discourages or prevents them from investing in their farms' infrastructure and generating wealth for long term sustainability and greater local economic development. Extending tax savings and land protection programs to smaller parcels of farmland would significantly help farm operations like these thrive and also begin to break down racial disparities in farming that are prevalent in our state.

- The state should require a municipal set-aside of coastal waterways for aquaculture business development and a consistent process and set of rules across all communities.
- The state should incentivize bylaws that preserve more farmland while maintaining property values such as open space development bylaws with cluster zoning that limits the percentage of wet and other undevelopable land that can be placed in the preservation portion.
- The state should establish a healthy soils program and promote healthy soils practices.
- State agencies, farmland access, and farming organizations should develop a plan to provide for equitable land access for BIPOC farmers. This plan should include consideration for set-asides in state land protection programs, state and municipal farm land leasing, and financial incentives for transfers of land to BIPOC farmers from white farmers.
- Small parcels of farmland should be able to benefit from state land preservation programs and benefit from reduced taxes.
- Funding for grant and purchase programs protecting agricultural land and fisheries water resources should be increased significantly.
- More state and municipally owned land and water resources, including submerged land, should be made available for creating viable agriculture and fishing and aquaculture businesses by:
    - enforcing existing laws for identifying and making available public land suitable for farming;
    - making lease terms favorable for long term investment and retail sales;
    - changing public housing regulations that prevent or restrict small farmers living in them from selling their products on site.
- The state should enforce Chapter 128 Section 7D, which requires a state inventory of vacant land and active steps to contract that land for agriculture, particularly for low-income households.
- More open land should be made usable for food production through soil remediation, particularly in urban areas.
- Agricultural Preservation Restrictions, agricultural conservation restrictions, and all state land protection mechanisms protecting land suitable for farming should include an affirmative covenant to farm.
- The option to purchase at agricultural value should be part of conservation restrictions for state-protected land that is suitable for agriculture.
- The state should invest in more research and support for the types of agriculture that can be channeled into intensive use such as container, hydroponic, vertical and rooftop growing systems.

Farm and food business viability

Current challenges and opportunities

The Plan called out the need for research, educational, and technical assistance for food producers; for a regulatory system that supports food business growth; and for financial and business planning support. While some progress has been made in these areas, current economics and uncertainties in our food system do not support long-term viability for local food system businesses. Public policy must move away from supporting artificially cheap food, create regulatory certainty, and support market certainty in order for local food producers and businesses to provide reliable access to healthy food, drive local economic development, and create sustainable food businesses and jobs.

Input received during this project echoes the needs voiced in the Plan, and provides more detailed ideas to increase the economic viability of local food producers.

Recommendations

- Subsidies should be expanded for consumers in order to increase local food purchases.
  - The State Department of Health, and the health care and health insurance industries should fund programs that incentivize the purchase of local foods for consumers.
  - The state should incentivize private institutional purchases of food from Massachusetts producers through tax credits.
- State and municipal institutional purchasing should prioritize local food.
- Farmers and fishermen should be compensated for the environmental services they provide, such as carbon sequestration, water filtration and retention, and wildlife habitat creation and protection.
- Tax policy changes, especially those related to land, climate change, and food access should ensure local farmers and fishermen do not have a net increase in tax liability.
- The state should create a public bank to support food system businesses with access to capital, using underwriting terms that racial equity in lending.
- The state should support a system of risk insurance that includes market risk and other risk management products for food system businesses.
- Farmers should be better able to benefit from solar development on less- and non-productive farmland.
- The state and municipalities should provide support for online purchasing and delivery, including: providing reliable broadband access in all communities in the Commonwealth; improving transportation infrastructure and regulations; supporting software and other producer infrastructure needs; and creating online sales and delivery capacity for local SNAP retailers.

Local food promotion

Current challenges and opportunities

The Plan notes that a strong brand and market development program for Massachusetts-grown and -produced food is needed to counteract the marketing by the institutional food system. Similarly, in 2020 we heard that large food conglomerates, retailers, and fast food franchises currently overwhelm and ultimately control the publicity and messaging about food policy and food choices. We also heard that local food businesses can not individually compete with the financial capacity of these operations and so need coordinated support.

Recommendations

- The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Department of Marine Fisheries, Office of Business Development, and other relevant agencies should fund and work with local food producers and the Buy Locals to implement an extensive and continual marketing campaign to increase the sales of locally grown, landed, and processed foods.
- The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Department of Marine Fisheries, the Office of Business Development, the Department of Transportation and other relevant agencies should capture, evaluate, and publish local food system data in order to inform the public, the administration, legislature, and local businesses about trends and needs.

Public resources for producers

Current challenges and opportunities

The management of public grant and loan programs is not always responsive to the needs of the constituencies they are intended to serve, do not take steps to further racial equity, and often favor applicants who are already well-resourced. At the same time, the grant programs are not funded sufficiently to meet demand, with MDAR programs consistently over-subscribed. This results in erratic and unsustained support for producers which increases business uncertainty and risks. The need for more consistent support is shown by the recent Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program fielding more than 1,300 applications, more than any other state grant program ever.

Recommendations

- Allow flexibility in project completion dates so that funds are not required to be spent within the state's fiscal year.
- Allow grant funding to be paid in advance, rather than retroactively.
- Allow grant funding for infrastructure to be spent on used equipment.
- Reform application processes to remove obstacles for smaller businesses.
- Allow all grant programs the flexibility to support labor needs and other costs.
- Ensure that application and reporting timelines do not coincide with the busiest season for the targeted applicant pool.
- Create a forgivable loan program tied to grants, similar to the federal Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan grants.
- Set and enforce goals in grants, loan programs, and other supports related to serving underserved communities and increasing racial equity in the food system, including targeted outreach about available resources, assistance in the application process, release in multiple languages, and set-asides and benchmarks regarding the recipient pool.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of financial incentives provided by public funds by creating a system of tracking and audits, and enhanced with enforcement of program requirements as needed.
- Regular analysis of demand on grant programs should inform allocations of investments, with increased resources provided where demand is greatest.
- Less common ownership and tenure models for farms, such as cooperatives, partnerships, and farms that rely on leased land for production should be eligible to benefit from public programs that support farming, fishing, and local food production.

Food Security Infrastructure Grant

The 2020 Food Security Infrastructure Grant sought to provide resources to farms and other food system businesses to help them remain sustainable through the COVID-19 crisis, investing $36 million into much needed infrastructure throughout the food system. But the program required recipients to fully capitalize the approved project before receiving grant funds, which limited its utility to many producers and exacerbated systemic inequities. In addition, the program's exclusive focus on infrastructure prevented funding for activities where significant labor was required to improve a producer's efficiency and economic development, limiting the program's ability to meet its intended goals.

Climate change

Current challenges and opportunities

The disruption from climate change that farmers and fishermen experience was noted in the Plan and is even more evident today, with inconsistent weather patterns affecting production each year. And the situation is projected to become worse, with impacts to soil and water, length of season, invasive pests and plants, and irreversible changes to accessible fish stock. Existing policy and regulations are not fully responsive, and food system issues are not well reflected in efforts to address climate change.

Recommendations

- All state climate change legislation, planning, and supports should integrate food system needs, assets, and goals.
- Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness projects should include food system projects such as soil and water remediation, farmland planning, and local supply chain enhancements.
- The state's renewable energy goals should be addressed by increasing support for anaerobic digesters in a manner that also provides farms with less expensive and more readily available soil organic matter inputs.
- Massachusetts fishermen should receive permits to fish species now present and abundant in near and offshore waters.

Education and research

Current challenges and opportunities

Input received during this process echoes the Plan in saying there is not enough education and training for food system businesses and workers to help create stable operations, enhance business and economic development, and create pathways for success for the next generation of food producers and entrepreneurs. Primary and secondary education does not include education on key life skills around food and food production that are critical for supporting the local food system or in promoting healthy food choices. And farms and other food businesses are no longer able to rely on UMass Cooperative Extension for much-needed objective research and outreach, due to substantial budget cuts and reductions in services.

Recommendations

- The state should increase support provided to local food system businesses and residents through UMass Extension programs by significantly increasing its budget, re-instituting producer training programming, expanding producer and consumer education, and elevating Cooperative Extension's importance in the University's mandate and culture.
- Funding for Extension research should also increase, along with a recommitment to serve the needs of Massachusetts farmers and fishermen rather than needing to be responsive to the industrial food industry and other external grants.
- Expand state funding for 1:1 business assistance and ensure that funding supports expert assistance in financial, operational, production, legal, and all other elements of running a business.
- The state should invest in food system employment and skills training.
  - Develop education focused on food system careers in secondary and higher education.
  - Develop targeted food system worker training programs in the unemployment system.
  - Expand and enhance state small business training programs geared toward food system businesses.
- Expand education on food waste, including food waste calculators, guidance documents on prevention, donation, and diversion programs, including using school cafeterias to teach students food waste reduction practices from an early age.

UMass Extension

UMass Extension was once the primary source of information for farmers in Massachusetts, with agents in every county visiting farms and providing direct assistance. Services such as technical assistance related to marketing and promotion, business consulting, individualized management advice, and other critical resources have been lost due to a reduction in state financial support, which resulted in a staffing decline of more than 60% between 1988 and 2015.

Food production infrastructure

Current challenges and opportunities

Inadequate physical infrastructure is preventing expansion of the farm and fishing sectors, limiting food producers' sustainability, preventing economic growth, and limiting access to healthy foods, especially in low-income communities and BIPOC communities. There is significant need for support for equipment for scratch cooking in schools; infrastructure to help farmers be more resilient to the impacts of climate change; packaging and processing equipment and facilities that process and preserve food; transportation services and equipment that allow farmers to meet changing demands such as home delivery; refrigeration in food pantries that helps ensure access to fresh foods for low-income households; and other related equipment and services. At the same time, residential home construction should create space for gardens and include kitchens adequate for local food preparation and consumption.

Recommendations

- The food system and its infrastructure should be a core component of every state, regional and local economic development plan.
- Community master planning and programs should support transportation infrastructure and systems that provide safe, affordable, and convenient transportation for consumers to locations that provide healthy local food.
- Public support should develop more food storage, preservation and processing infrastructure.
- Comprehensive mapping and cataloging of institutional kitchens, storage, other infrastructure, and available farmland and water resources should be conducted and kept current, to refer to in times of crisis and to assist startups and small enterprises.
- Foster growth in local meat production by increasing infrastructure capacity for processing animals, particularly poultry.
- The state should upgrade and expand the sustainable transportation infrastructure to ensure effective transport of food.

Laws and regulations

Current challenges and opportunities

The 2015 Plan expressed that state and municipal laws, regulations, and polices do not adequately support and enhance the local food system, and often harm it, and findings during the 2020 process were much the same. The lack of a common definition for the term "local" as applied to food, and the lack of enforcement of existing labeling laws creates abuse and illegal and predatory marketing practices that harm Massachusetts producers. Protecting the integrity of organic and local labels with appropriate and consistent implementation of existing regulations is needed for farmers and processors to viably operate in Massachusetts.

Many existing state and municipal health regulations do not fully reflect new understandings, current science, and epidemiological evidence. At the local level, regulations are not uniformly interpreted and enforced, staff are underfunded and under trained, and the court system is inappropriately relied upon to provide checks and balances. Though Massachusetts' food regulations are more burdensome than other New England states', a 2017 CDC report on foodborne illness showed that the Commonwealth had the highest level of outbreaks in New England, suggesting current regulation and increased producer burden is not providing greater benefit in comparison to other states' regulations.

Outdated laws and regulations, zoning and local policies that are more burdensome than state and federal rules, damage economic development and prevent progress, innovation, and competitiveness in the food system. They also hamper work to respond to climate change, food system resilience, and other broad societal concerns, and do not support sustainable communities. The solution is not greater regulation or tightened standards, but systemic and coordinated action that offers more education, better guidance based on current science, and better support to help food enterprises meet standards.

Recommendations

- Enact stronger right to farm laws and allow agriculture in all zoning districts.
- Regularly assess when municipal home rule is appropriate and effective. When it is not, such as when it prevents or restricts agricultural operations to the detriment of economic development and the environment, limit its authority through state action.
- Consider regional planning and agreements through entities such as county governments to address issues that cross municipal boundaries.
- Create a state definition for the term "local" as applied to food to be used for all policies and programs and enforce its use with existing truth in advertising laws and labeling requirements.
- Enforce current source, organic, and other labeling laws, regulations, and policies.
- Create state and local regulations that allow fishermen and aquaculturists to more easily sell seafood directly to consumers.
- Evaluate and reconsider regulations regarding slaughter and meat processing, in order to foster growth in local meat production.

Aquaculture limitations

Although aquaculture is the fastest growing form of food production, its development has been severely limited in MA. Just under 1,300 acres are currently licensed, compared to about 1,000 acres over 25 years ago. This slow growth is due to restrictive local rules including limits on the ability of shellfish growers to transfer their farms, and those that prohibit farm development.

Municipal restrictions

A multi-generational dairy farm in Worcester County had a piece of property not suitable for crop production that was relatively remote from neighbors. To sustain the farm, the family planned to expand their productive land base by first installing a solar operation for 20 years, with the added benefit of helping meet the state's renewable energy goals. Instead, the town rejected the solar siting. A few months later the farmers sold their dairy herd.

- Increase the capacity of Agricultural Commissions with funding and training resources, and ensure that the Commissions are representative of the farmers they are intended to support.
- The state building code should incorporate modern materials and construction methods in a manner that supports efficient and cost effective food system infrastructure growth.
- The public health benefits of greater consumption of healthy local foods should be considered when creating health regulations.
- Every local and state health agent should receive training on local food production and processing systems and methods.
- Municipalities should pass urban agriculture ordinances, and provide funding to support household and community food production, especially in immigrant and BIPOC communities.
- Health regulations and standards for farmers markets, roadside stands, and CSAs should be based upon clear and verified epidemiological evidence, and should not be more restrictive than those for other food retailers.
- Pass pending legislation allowing Agricultural Commission input into municipal Board of Health regulation of agriculture.
- Enact legislation and create infrastructure that safely re-purposes unused foods as much as possible instead of sending it to the waste stream.
- Municipalities should not add sewer fees to water used for irrigation of food crops.

Coordinating food system policy and supports

The policies and programs that support an equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system should be well-coordinated, with a responsive and supportive public sector and an educated and engaged network of non-governmental stakeholders.

The local food system is composed of a wide range of players with missions and goals that often intersect and sometimes conflict. The state government's role in the local food system is a patchwork of laws, regulations, agencies, supportive services, and funding that frequently do not coordinate with each other to create and implement an integrated set of goals and objectives. In some cases non-governmental stakeholders, such as institutions and nonprofit organizations, don't communicate with each other, or aren't even aware of each other, despite having mutual interests and potentially complementary resources that could help support each other's goals. And none of these systems fully prioritize ensuring that their work helps dismantle systemic racial injustice that has resulted in communities of color having limited access to healthy food, land, and jobs in the food system, or the power structures that shape the food system.

Public sector

Current challenges and opportunities

Massachusetts' local food system is largely a function of the private sector, shaped by market forces that extend well beyond the state's borders. But state laws, regulations, investments, and programs play a significant role in determining how the businesses that produce and distribute our food operate; in how the local economy responds to local, regional, national, and global market forces; and in who has access to food. In some cases those efforts take steps toward leveling the playing field, but in others they make it harder for Massachusetts producers to compete or for all residents to benefit. In part this is because laws are developed and programs implemented through narrow contexts, rather than with full consideration of the implications of these efforts throughout the food system.

Many state agencies play roles in supporting and regulating the food system, but because of limited communication between them some of these efforts are duplicative or worse, contradictory. The state's Food Policy Council, established in 2010, facilitates some conversation among some agencies, but does not offer coordinated support nor further real harmonizing of public sector efforts.

In the legislature, too, the process for deliberating food issues is inconsistently coordinated, with bills that touch on food issues deliberated by a range of disconnected committees. The Food System Caucus has brought together legislators from both chambers to learn about and consider issues in a broader context, but major legislative efforts around issues such as public health, transportation, and the environment still often fail to consider the value and resources the food system has to offer, or the potential implications the proposed legislation might have on the food system.

And at the municipal level, more towns and cities are recognizing the role they play in helping to ensure that farm and food businesses remain sustainable and households have equitable access to food. But with insufficient resources and no coordinated effort to educate local leaders and regulators about their role in the food system the results of these efforts have been limited, with cities of greater means often developing solutions that are needed more in communities with no resources to implement such efforts.

Overall, governmental efforts to coordinate agencies' work toward the goals of the 2015 Plan have been limited. Setting benchmarks and tracking metrics to measure progress toward the goals of that Plan remain a missed opportunity, efforts to engage stakeholders – particularly from underserved communities – have been limited, and a tangible commitment to addressing racial inequities has not been established. The COVID-19 crisis prompted the

development of an inter-agency food security task force which engaged non-governmental stakeholders as well, underscoring the fact that such collaboration is necessary, but there has been no indication that such efforts will continue.

Recommendations

- The state should analyze how government and private institutions that receive public funding and other benefits, such as tax breaks, reinforce and exacerbate racial inequities within the food system, and develop and implement plans to reverse those outcomes.
- All state agencies that provide resources for or regulate food production, food access, and related needs should be funded adequately to meet demand.
- Funding for food system programs and investments recommended in this report should be generated through progressive tax policy.
- The state should add a cabinet-level position to coordinate food system planning and development, connect the work of multiple agencies, ensure that interventions are effective and efficient, and support agencies in taking a systemic approach to food by considering the economic, environmental, and cultural impacts of their decisions related to food system programs, regulations, and funding.
- Climate and environmental legislation, healthcare reform, transportation planning, economic development, and other major initiatives should integrate local food system issues into their agendas.
- The legislative process should be more transparent and flexible, with more opportunities for bills and budget items with broad support to be discussed openly and considered for passage.
- The Massachusetts Food Policy Council should be expanded and charged with playing a meaningful role in developing and proposing policy, as called for in its enabling language.
- Government should work to build stronger relationships with non-governmental stakeholders to inform and support their work. These efforts should be coordinated, should compensate the time commitment required of the stakeholders, and should engage them early in the process of developing policy.
- Municipalities should be supported in their efforts to address food system challenges, with coordinative networks, funding, and education to ensure that regulations are enacted and investments made with consideration for the broad impact on the food system and on the community.
- The state should develop a set of metrics to track progress toward the goals of the 2015 Food Plan, and establish benchmarks and goals to help guide investments and regulations.
- The state should invest in educating the public on the role of the local food system, including highlighting how food choices impact health and the environment.

Nonprofit sector

Current challenges and opportunities

Massachusetts has a rich set of nonprofit organizations that provide services to food system businesses and to individual consumers, including education and advocacy for policy changes that better support the food system. From farmland access to nutrition, marketing to waste diversion, these stakeholder organizations have stepped up with innovative programs and models to identify and fill gaps in the food system and help make it operate more sustainably and equitably.

Underlying systemic racism has resulted in these organizations being led almost exclusively by white individuals and to struggle to represent communities of color despite those constituencies being where the need is often greatest. As a result, the programs and services these groups offer miss the mark in their efforts address the systemic racial inequities throughout the food system.

And whether funded through memberships or by private philanthropy, these organizations are dependent upon revenue streams that are not reliable enough to plan and develop long-term efforts, and that often hinder their ability to be nimble in responding to changing needs. Grantmakers' focus on metrics, programmatic deliverables, and behavioral change, rather than on policy change and building community power, often has the effect of perpetuating the need for charitable services, rather than empowering communities to establish systemic change.

Recommendations

- Stakeholder organizations should commit to prioritizing racial equity in staffing, leadership, and community engagement so that communities of color and other systemically marginalized people have a strong voice in developing and implementing programs and policy.
- Funders should prioritize efforts toward systemic change such as organizing, education, and advocacy efforts.
- Funders should support grantees' engagement in networks, communities of practice, and other coordinating and educational bodies.

Conclusion

Just as the food system is dynamic, so too are the perspectives of stakeholders. Identifying needs for programmatic and advocacy work is an iterative process, with constantly shifting circumstances, demands, and relationships among stakeholders informing those needs. This document represents the conversations held in 2020 with those who participated in this process, and ongoing communication and collective action will inform how focused action needs to shift over time.

This process revealed a tremendous range of ideas for how to address discrete problems as well as systemic challenges in the food system. Throughout the process of gathering input for this document we were struck by the number of thoughtful, dedicated people and organizations who had similar visions of what a healthy local food system should look like, but very different thoughts on how to get there.

We believe that elevating this range of ideas, along with the competing interests that occur in any complex system, can stimulate collective action that will benefit all food system stakeholders. And we believe that illuminating the challenges in the local food system along with the importance of that system to the Commonwealth's economy, environment, and social equity, will encourage policymakers to consider investments and policies more thoughtfully. The more that stakeholders build shared understanding and power together, and build leadership among those historically marginalized from the policy arena, the more positive change we can affect together. The Collaborative looks forward to continued work with all food system stakeholders in doing so.

Appendix: Listening sessions

The following is a list of the conversations the Collaborative helped facilitate to inform this document. In some cases the meetings were co-facilitated by an existing network which invited their membership and allied groups in their regions or sectors. In others the Collaborative invited organizations representative of a sector or constituency. This list is not intended to suggest endorsement by any of these groups, but simply to illustrate the range of participants.

- Berkshire Food Security Network
- Buy Local organizations (Massachusetts Coalition for Local Food and Farms)
- Cambridge Food and Fitness Policy Council
- Center For Health Law and Policy Innovation, Harvard Law School
- Franklin County Food Council
- Greater Quabbin Food Alliance
- Healthy Chelsea
- Healthy Eating Community of Practice
- Homes for Families Consumer Advocacy Team
- Lynn Food And Fitness Alliance
- Mass in Motion coordinators
- Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations
- Massachusetts Councils on Aging network
- Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
- Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition
- Medford Food Security Task Force
- Needham Food Advisory Board
- Rural Policy Advisory Commission/Regional Planning Agencies
- Salem Food Policy Council
- SNAP Coalition
- Somerville Food Security Coalition
- Southcoast Food Policy Council
- Springfield Food Policy Council
- Uprooted and Rising Boston chapter
- Worcester Food Policy Council
- Massachusetts Food System Collaborative organized:
  - Agricultural and commodity groups
  - Environmental coalitions
  - Food processors
  - Food producer service providers
  - Food rescue organizations
  - HIP campaign participants
  - HIP consumers
  - Massachusetts urban agriculture coalition
  - New and beginning farmer organizations
  - School food stakeholder organizations

Photo credits

Cover (clockwise, from top right): Mill City Grows, Lowell; Commonwealth Kitchen, Boston; Roots Rising, Pittsfield; Lilac Hedge Farm, Holden; Roots Rising, Pittsfield

Page 3: Just Roots, Greenfield

Page 5: Justamere Tree Farm, Worthington

Page 6: Commonwealth Kitchen, Boston

Page 7: Dan Ward, Ward Aquafarms, Pocasset, MA

Page 8: Elliot Farm, Lakeville

Page 10: REC, Worcester

Page 12: Alisa Iskakova, Belmont Farmers Market, Belmont

Page 17: Elliot Farm, Lakeville

Page 18: Worcester Regional Food Hub, Worcester

Page 19: Four Star Farms, Northfield

Page 21: Lilac Hedge Farm, Holden

Page 22: REC, Worcester

Page 24: World Farmers, Lancaster

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Page 28: Belmont Farmers Market, Belmont

Page 32: Lilac Hedge Farm, Holden

Page 33: Alisa Iskakova, Belmont Farmers Market, Belmont

Page 35: Urban Farming Institute, Mattapan