



March 30, 2022

Chairman Jim McGovern
House Committee on Rules
Capitol Hill
370 Cannon House Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: March 2022 U.S. House Committee on Rules Visit in Massachusetts on Hunger and Health

On behalf of The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB), we want to thank you for the opportunity to join the Congressman and his Rules Committee members on their visit to Massachusetts in March 2022, and to submit written testimony on our role as the largest hunger-relief organization in New England and one of the largest food banks in the country and our impact on hunger and health.

Food Access Reach and Food Purchasing

GBFB's mission is to End Hunger Here in Eastern Massachusetts by distributing healthy food to approximately 75 percent of the food insecure population in Massachusetts, which is about 600,000 individuals, through our nearly 600 food distribution partners, including pantries, meal programs, shelters and mobile markets, across 190 cities and towns in the nine of fourteen counties in Massachusetts. Last year, GBFB distributed the equivalent of 96 million meals, which is 60 percent more than what we distributed pre-pandemic. Our commitment is to build healthy communities and lives by creating access to nutritious food by focusing on distributing primarily produce, protein and dairy. GBFB is also among the top two food banks who have a food purchasing program and by buying food, we are able to control the quality and nutrition of the food we acquire and distribute.

GBFB is a leader in managing USDA TEFAP and CSFP food programs. At one point during the pandemic GBFB was managing up to 7 USDA programs. In response to the Farms to Family Food Box program, we were the only organization who participated in all purchasing rounds and submitted testimony to USDA on our experience which helped to inform the Local Food Purchase Agreement program. GBFB also manages a \$30 million state contract with the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture and does all the food purchasing for the four state

food banks. The state program is called the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP), which is a national model state funding program that provides funding to the food banks for the purchase of food and there is a focus on local food purchasing with over 40 farms and local food vendors.

Nutrition Model in National Food Banking

GBFB believes food banks have a role in providing access to healthy food and networks partners are a great source of partners for healthcare and food insecurity interventions, as our partners have high volumes of nutrient quality in to provide access to patients and are welcoming, safe, trusted and community-centric organizations to seek food assistance resources. We believe if we can ensure access to quality, nutrient food at our partners, we strive to bridge the connection between food insecurity and chronic health issues including diabetes, heart problems, lupus, arthritis, and more. Partnerships between healthcare and the emergency food assistance networks support by the nation's food banks are critical partners for health care. GBFB's most notable partners who are national leaders in this space include BMC preventative Food Pantry and Community Servings. GBFB also has 8 produce-only healthcare center mobile markets (ex. Revere CHA, Gr Lawrence Family Health center, etc.)

This is why we have a strong commitment to nutrition and are one of the first food banks in the country to establish a Nutrition Policy approved by our Board of Directors which drives our food purchasing decisions and establishes our nutrition goals in our food distribution.¹

Our goal is to have lasting impact on the health of the children, families and seniors we serve and to be a leader in providing sustained access to nutritious foods. Under our [Nutrition Team](#) and alongside two Registered Dietitians, our Nutrition Policy uses the [Supporting Wellness at Pantries \(SWAP\)](#) to measure the nutrition content across our food distribution and according to those standards two-thirds or 94 percent of the food distributed met our high nutrition goals; 31 percent of the food distributed was fresh fruits and vegetables; 20 percent was protein and 7 percent was dairy. GBFB's Registered Dietitians provide nutrition education throughout the communities we serve through educational programs and resources such as [Click 'N Cook](#), an online recipe resource that provides easy and affordable recipes with whatever items you may have in your kitchen, which is a resource that could be used by any food assistance partner or client on a tight budget across the country. Click 'N Cook could be an essential and easy-to-use food insecurity intervention tool for healthcare professionals to use and we would love to see it scaled and utilized. Each month our RDNs also produce a Nutritious Bytes nutrition newsletter our network partners, and have established a 'Healthy Pantry Program', a set of nutrition education modules and programming for pantry staff and clients which is also in a current study partnered with MGHB.

It's critical for food bank to have community dietitians on staff as they aim to maintain or improve the health of an overall or targeted population. Clients served by food bank member agencies are the target population for food bank RDNs. People who are food insecure have limited resources to consistently access healthy foods, and a food bank RDN create policies and procedures that will help the organization acquire and distribute nutritious foods. They also

create educational materials, taking complex scientific data and turning it into easy-to-understand information for clients. Some food bank RDNs oversee nutrition curriculum taught in person to clients at the pantry level.

SNAP

GBFB is also one of the few food banks across the country that houses its SNAP Outreach team within its Nutrition team, and that is intentional. GBFB is a SNAP Outreach Partner with the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance and works with about 1,000 households annually to access SNAP benefits, which has doubled throughout the pandemic. We recognize the by investing in SNAP outreach and partnering on outreach with our partners we will increase access to critical nutrition for clients in our region.

GBFB has established itself as an innovative leader in increasing access to SNAP through digital awareness by establishing a Google SNAP program which could easily be adopted in a healthcare setting. Google SNAP, a digital engagement initiative that connects people looking for help with a SNAP application online to GBFB's SNAP outreach program. Google SNAP offers application assistance to those in targeted regions based on keywords used in Google searches. People wanting help complete a referral form that is submitted to GBFB's SNAP staff who follow up to assist with an application. GBFB is 1 of 45 food banks across 23 states participating in Google SNAP. In the first year the program began in 2017, GBFB received 875 referrals and submitted 245 SNAP applications through Google SNAP—an estimated 197,000 additional meals provided. Google SNAP allows GBFB's small SNAP team of 1.5 staff at the time to broaden outreach efforts to reach more people across GBFB's service area. GBFB also uses Google SNAP to target SNAP outreach to regions most in need based on GBFB's [One Meal A Day data](#). Today GBFB has a staff of three SNAP outreach team members and in March 2021, GBFB formed a partnership with Project Bread to expand the Google SNAP program.²

Research

GBFB has a [Health and Research Council](#) which advises the organization on all research conducted through our team and in partnership with other academic researchers.

GBFB is one of the founding members of the Hunger to Health Collaboratory, which has funded several research projects. First in 2018, GBFB and Children's HealthWatch released a state-wide study, [An Avoidable \\$2.4 Billion Cost](#), which reported that hunger and food insecurity is costing Massachusetts \$2.4 billion in health-related costs annually.

More recently in 2021 H2HC funded GBFB's research to conduct the first statewide study during the pandemic of the prevalence of food insecurity: [Gaps in Food Access in Massachusetts During COVID-19](#). From October 2020 to January 2021, [GBFB surveyed over 3,000 Massachusetts adults](#) to obtain data on food access during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the national effort through the [National Food Access and COVID Research Team \(NFACT\)](#). The survey found that nearly half of adults experiencing food insecurity were enrolled in SNAP during the pandemic. Eighty-nine percent of those using SNAP found it to be helpful. However, many reported that the benefits were insufficient. The report included several policy and programmatic recommendations including conducting a public awareness campaign on food assistance resources involving multiple sectors, including health care.

GBFB is currently working on our second NFACT statewide food insecurity report which will be released in May/June 2022. The survey was conducted in November 2021-January 2022.

Other notable research GBFB has conducted w/healthcare partners include [ScienceDirect-Healthcare Article on MGH-Revere pantry](#), [AJPH Feb. 2021 Article](#), AG Siren Grant research w/Cambridge Health Alliance Revere: [Journal of Ag, Food, Systems & Community Dev](#), [Journal of Nutrition and Behavioral health](#).

Public Policy/Advocacy

- GBFB leads the advocacy and lobbying for the MEFAP program which could be a national model and/or could replicate the current USDA Local Food Purchasing Program. GBFB has advocated and grown the program by \$10M during Covid and has integrated key programs like seafood partnerships to ensure clients have access to local and nutrient-rich seafood.
- GBFB co-leads the [Massachusetts Hunger Free Campus Coalition](#), which is focused on awareness and passing state legislation that would establish an office of Basic Needs within the MA Department of Higher Education to provide funding and technical assistance to public two and four year institutions to address college hunger on campus, as well as provide a roadmap for campuses to create hunger free campuses, which aim to leverage programs like SNAP with on-campus EBT grocers, and connecting financial aid offices with federal nutrition benefits and more. The HFCC also supports the two federal bills in Congress aimed at increasing access to nutrition benefits for college students: [EATS Act](#) and the [Student Opportunity Act of 2021- Warren bill](#)
- GBFB is an active member of the MA SNAP Gap Coalition and has voiced its support to USDA during a recent public hearing on the Thrifty Food Plan ([USDA comments on Thrifty Food Plan](#)).
- GBFB led a statewide coalition, [Rise and Shine Massachusetts](#), and a successful legislative campaign to pass Breakfast After the Bell legislation in 2020. The bill aimed to impact more than 400,000 low-income students.

As food banks work to forge more partnerships with healthcare, we understand that food insecurity impacts health. Nearly one million people are facing food insecurity in the Commonwealth. Mounting evidence indicates that food insecurity can have profound health consequences and is associated with higher health care cost. In addition to food insecurity, multiple studies show that low intake of fruit and vegetables is linked to increased risk of chronic disease, including cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and obesity. According to a 2015 CDC report, 86 percent of the population in Massachusetts fails to meet recommended fruit intake and 89 percent fails to meet recommended vegetable intake. Increasing food security through nutrition-based, tailored interventions that allow people to access more fruits and vegetables and other healthful foods is an important step towards more holistic healthcare in Massachusetts. The work done by GBFB and our partners represents an opportunity to foster better collaboration between healthcare institutions and our social service organizations, and ultimately improve the health and lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

We believe that healthy food can be used as disease prevention, not just treatment. Thank you for this opportunity.

Catherine D'Amato
President and CEO
The Greater Boston Food Bank

Catherine Drennan Lynn
VP, Communications and Public Affairs
The Greater Boston Food Bank

Attachments:

¹ GBFB's Nutrition Policy

² Executive Summary: GBFB and Project Bread's Google SNAP Partnership