



Friday, April 10, 2020

The Honorable William Keating
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Keating,

The measures taken to mitigate the public health crisis brought on by the CORONA-19 virus have had a profound impact on the nation's local food system. As distribution chains have been disrupted, mobility has been restricted, and businesses and institutions have been closed, local food producers, processors, and distributors are facing tremendous challenges, and are also demonstrating their critical role in feeding communities and supporting local economies.

At the same time, the changes to daily lives of individuals have amplified inequities in the food system, exacerbating challenges of employment and food access in low-income communities. The number of households relying on public food benefits programs has soared and is expected to continue to climb.

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative appreciates the steps taken thus far by Congress and the administration to alleviate some of the pressures brought on by this crisis. But more is needed. The situation is still very much in flux, but through numerous conversations with key Massachusetts food system stakeholders the following recommendations have emerged as critical.

General Issues

Ensure racial and economic equity through all responses. The Farm Bill, which guides most local food system programs, explicitly cites the needs of “socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource, and veteran farmers and ranchers (“historically underserved producers”),” further defining “socially disadvantaged” as “a group whose members have been subject to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual quality.” Oversight of any investments made through stimulus spending must ensure that resources are targeted to these communities to address these inequities.

Provide direct payments to support farmers, fishers, and small food businesses. Food system businesses are largely low-margin enterprises, with limited capacity to carry debt and remain sustainable, even in times of economic growth and certainty. Since states are best positioned to identify need and distribute funds efficiently and equitably, USDA and NOAA should provide block grants to states, with a requirement that states use the funds to provide direct payments to these businesses. USDA should also increase federal food purchases to help stabilize the market while directing those purchases to people and places most in need.

Farms, Fisheries, and Small Food Businesses

Provide states with flexibility in using stimulus funding to meet local food system needs. The stimulus bill appropriated \$9.5 billion to the USDA and \$300 million to NOAA to support local farms,

fisheries, and food systems. These funds should be block granted to the states to allow state governments to best apply those resources to the farmers, fishers, and food system businesses and institutions that need them most.

Support innovative food distribution models at all scales. With ‘stay at home’ orders and other dramatic shifts in public travel and access, new models are needed to ensure that all households have access to healthy food, and all food producers have access to markets. USDA has been piloting online transactions for SNAP users, but only in a handful of states and for a few national retailers. This model should be expanded nationally and should include small farms and retailers. This would allow farmers to deliver food to seniors, who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and would benefit from the limited exposure, and to households in low-income communities, many of which have no local retailers with fresh produce and limited or no public transportation to provide access to more distant stores. At the same time, grants should be made available to farmers, fishing communities, food hubs, and co-ops to build the infrastructure required for fulfillment and distribution.

Invest in processing and distribution infrastructure needed to get surplus food to people who need it. At a time when food insecurity is increasing at an unprecedented rate, it is unconscionable that milk, seafood, and produce is being ‘dumped’ or not harvested because of shifts in demand away from restaurant and institutional sales. While the emergency food system is stretched beyond capacity, with donations to food banks and pantries declining due to panic buying and other market shifts, the need for healthy food for families has never been greater. Expanding federal food purchasing and building new or repurposing and accessing existing processing infrastructure meant to preserve and safely store and distribute these products should be top priorities.

Include farms of all sizes in all economic stimulus programs. Farms play a critical role in communities’ and states’ economic systems, creating jobs and purchasing goods and services. In small business grant and support programs, farms should be explicitly considered eligible for these resources, including Economic Injury Disaster Loans.

Increase funding for agricultural and fisheries research. As farmers and fishers are forced to rethink everything from management practices to distribution models in order to adapt to inconsistent markets, access to objective, timely information to inform their work is critical. Additional funding to support research, such as that conducted by the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture and by NOAA’s Sea Grant, is needed, as is additional support for land grant university extension programs that provide local technical support to many sectors of the food system.

Food System Workers

Support safety for all food system workers. The crisis has brought to the fore the essential nature of workers at every step of the food chain, including farming, retail, restaurant, and emergency food provision. To avoid further disruption of the food production and distribution system, priority should be given to ensuring that all food system workers have access to free testing for COVID-19, and providing paid sick leave for all who are infected or need to leave work to care for an infected family member. Funding for personal protective equipment for all food system workers, as well as for training in safe food distribution practices, should also be prioritized and federally funded.

Ensure workforce needs are met. Farmers and fishers depend upon a reliable, consistent workforce to produce their products. With immigration curbs and other measures in place, much of that workforce is unavailable. Support for programs to train new employees is needed.

Feeding Families

Increase SNAP benefits. Research found that during the last recession SNAP was an economic engine for recovery, not just for the families who relied on its benefits, but also for the local economies where those resources were spent. We support the proposal to increase the maximum benefit to all households by 15%, increase the minimum benefit from \$16 to \$30, and suspend administrative actions that would eliminate or weaken SNAP benefits. We also support a moratorium on termination of federal benefits.

Incentivize healthy, local eating for SNAP households. Dozens of local programs, funded through the USDA's FINI/GusNIP program over the last several years, have demonstrated that incentivizing the purchase of local produce when purchased by SNAP users from direct-to-consumer farmer vendors not only has a positive public health benefit, but also helps sustain farms. Establishing a national incentives program, whereby every SNAP recipient is provided an additional \$40 per month to be spent only at farm vendors, would have a lasting impact on the health of some of the nation's most vulnerable communities. It would also inject billions of dollars of sales into the local farming community, helping those farms purchase more local goods and services, hire more local workers, and protect farmland and natural resources, at a time when local economies will be recovering from this crisis.

Expand existing successful programs that connect healthy eating and local farms. The number of households that rely on programs such as the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, and other similar incentives is likely to grow. The Summer EBT program should be expanded to cover the entire country to supplement the food budgets for low-income families who rely on school meals for their children. These programs must be funded at a rate that keeps pace with demand, and should be expanded to allow flexibility as states implement them.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this input on these critical issues. The Collaborative is available as a resource for more information on any of these topics, or for assistance with connecting with practitioners who can offer more insights into the practical realities of the challenges they are facing.

Thank you for your support for a resilient food system during this challenging time. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Winton Pitcoff', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Winton Pitcoff, Director