



Friday, March 20, 2020

## Local Food System Policy Recommendations in Response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak and the responses implemented to mitigate its further spread have disrupted every part of Massachusetts' local food system. Farms, fishermen, retailers, processors, restaurants, schools, emergency food agencies, and other businesses and institutions have had to transform the way they operate, in many cases shutting down altogether. Many are losing revenue and opportunities that will prevent them from recovering. Food system workers have lost jobs in record numbers, and a large number of those jobs will not be available when the crisis lifts. And every household has had to adapt as well, as access to food has become limited and inconsistent, particularly for those already struggling with food insecurity.

The MA Food System Collaborative works with organizations, individuals, businesses, and institutions in all sectors of the food system. This document is a compilation of the issues, concerns, and recommended solutions generated from engagement with these stakeholders. It is by no means exhaustive nor exclusive. We recognize that the duration of this crisis is uncertain and that other issues will undoubtedly arise that will require additional action beyond those considered thus far. The food chain is critically connected with all economic sectors and industries, and the health of every resident of the Commonwealth. Broader relief efforts that may not name the food system explicitly will certainly have an impact on it. We urge policymakers to consider the implications on the food system of all response and relief actions.

Every action taken to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, feed people during this crisis, and support and rebuild food system businesses and institutions must include a commitment to ensuring racial and economic equity. Communities of color, indigenous, and immigrant communities were disproportionately excluded from equitable access to food, jobs in the food system, public benefits, and decision-making power long before this crisis began. Responses to the crisis must commit to eliminating these inequities.

Immediate action is needed, but now is also the time to begin longer-term thinking about what the recovery will look like for the local food system. We have an opportunity to build upon the strong and resilient elements of our food system that are emerging as our farmers, small businesses, and other local institutions continue to feed our Commonwealth through this crisis. We look forward to working with the administration and legislature toward a resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system.

### Supporting Individuals in Accessing Food

As unemployment increases dramatically, particularly among hourly workers, food assistance is critical to ensure that people are able to stay healthy. Support for the emergency food system of food banks, pantries, and other agencies that provide food at no cost, must be coupled with cash assistance and benefits that allow for the purchase of food, which in turn supports the local economy. Ensuring ongoing, equitable access to **fresh and healthy** food for all must be a component of all of these efforts, given the importance of public health and individuals' personal responsibility to stay healthy for the sake of protecting all of our communities.

As federal programs such as SNAP and WIC are expanded to meet growing demand and the programs are adapted to meet changing needs, **the Department of Transitional Assistance and the Department of Public Health must receive additional funding** for staffing and technology resources needed to meet increased demand and adapt to changes in these programs.

Schools have stepped up to provide meals for students even as the buildings are closed, with some providing distribution to make the food more accessible. A USDA waiver granted to the state means that schools with 50% or more of students who receive free or reduced-price meals will be reimbursed by the federal government. Massachusetts **should secure federal funding or make state money available** to support all schools in doing this, since all schools have some students who need this assistance. Funding should cover the costs of ensuring accessibility through delivery and other means, and should include support for meals for weekend days, to be made available for pickup on Fridays.

The state should work closely with federal agencies to **adapt SNAP to meet changing demand and accessibility issues**. Online SNAP transactions, allowing SNAP to be used to purchase prepared meals, and other changes should be considered.

Any **direct cash benefits** offered to the public should first prioritize supporting the most vulnerable individuals and families. Increases to existing benefits programs are crucial, but efforts must be made to ensure that support also reaches those who are eligible for these programs but are not enrolled in them, including homeless individuals and families. Any benefits should be made available regardless of immigration status or criminal history. As many low-income households do not have bank accounts, provisions should be made to allow recipients to cash checks with no fees so that they may retain the full amount of the benefit.

The state should commit to a **moratorium on termination of public benefits** at least through calendar 2020.

The state should **immediately enact H1475**, An Act encouraging the donation of food to persons in need, which reduces liability concerns for food donors and provides additional tax incentives for farmers to donate excess food. This measure will help bring more food into the emergency food system and will also help reduce food waste.

The **Healthy Incentive Program (HIP) must be stabilized** with adequate funding to meet increased demand, with a commitment that suspensions to the program will not occur, and with an increase in the number of vendors participating in the program, particularly in communities of color which are currently underserved by the program. Priority should be given to farmers of color when adding new vendors. The state should further demonstrate its commitment to this program by passing S2426/H4232, An Act relative to an agricultural healthy incentives program.

## **Supporting Farms, Small Food Businesses, and Support Organizations**

Support should be provided to **farms with excess food** as a result of the loss of restaurant, school, farmers market, and institutional sales. This surplus should be purchased by the state through additional resources invested in MEFAP and provided to the emergency food system through the food banks to be distributed to households in need.

The state must issue a determination that **farmers markets, farmstands, CSA pickup/drop-off sites, and community gardens are considered as essential as grocery stores and are not subject to the limits on crowd size**. Farmers markets are often the only source for fresh, healthy food in areas where

grocery stores or public transportation to grocery stores are lacking. Closing them will exacerbate these problems.

State agencies providing grants to or contracting with farms, small food businesses, and support organizations must offer **administrative flexibility** in relation to contract and grant requirements and deadlines.

Emergency relief for farms, processors, restaurants, and other small businesses negatively impacted by the disruptions to the food chain brought about by the response to COVID-19 must be in the form of **grants and cash supports, rather than loans** that place these vulnerable businesses in further debt at a time when they have no income. Suspension of meal taxes, payroll taxes, local taxes, licensing fees, and other public fees should also be considered.

Support to these businesses should be enough to allow them to provide **compensation for all displaced workers**.

Eligibility for **unemployment benefits must be expanded** to include entrepreneurs, small business owners, and others who are typically excluded from eligibility.

Small food business owners and food system workers whose income has been disrupted must be **protected from evictions, foreclosures, and delinquency penalties on personal and business loans**.

**Partnerships between state agencies and non-governmental organizations** that provide support to farms and other food system businesses must be strengthened, and grants made available to those organizations that are working with the private sector to adapt to disruptions brought about by COVID-19 and the response. For example, farms are struggling with the loss of H-2A and migrant workers whose labor they depend upon during the upcoming growing season but who will be unable to travel to the US. Organizations that work to train displaced restaurant workers and help them secure employment in agriculture should receive public support for doing so. Similarly, organizations that provide technical assistance to small businesses as they adapt to the crisis and recovery should receive public support.