



February 20, 2024

House Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon St.
Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chair Michlewitz, Vice-Chair Ferrante, and Members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative works with hundreds of stakeholders around the Commonwealth on issues related to the food system in Massachusetts. Our engagement with these partners over the past year have identified several state funding priorities to help further a resilient, sustainable, and equitable food system. We respectfully share these items with you for consideration as you develop your proposed budget for fiscal year 2025, including:

- Healthy Incentives Program: \$25,000,000 (as proposed in H2)
- Food Literacy: \$250,000 (level funding from FY24 for School Wellness Coaching Program)
- Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program: \$25,000,000 (as proposed in H2)
- Local Food Policy Council grants: \$250,000 (level funding from FY24)
- Department of Agricultural Resources: \$11,233,075 (as proposed in H2)

Details about each of these items follow below. .

These recommendations all support the goals of the [*Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan*](#) (the Plan), developed by the state as a “vision and plan to increase agricultural production, processing, and distribution that will serve as economic stimulus and address multiple related public health and food security issues.” The legislature has championed many of the issues raised in the Plan, and we look forward to working with you to continue that support through these priorities.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kristina Racek Pechulis, Executive Director



FY25 Local Food System Budget Priorities

February 20, 2024

Massachusetts' local food system is central to ensuring food security, to meeting the Commonwealth's climate goals, to ensuring a strong local economy, and to many other social and economic issues. Farmers and fishermen, food pantries and public health professionals, schools and community-based organizations all demonstrated their commitment to feeding their communities throughout the pandemic, and are playing key roles in ensuring a strong recovery in Massachusetts

By investing in food security programs the state will support long-term resilience of Massachusetts' local food system. Those investments will, in turn, support public health, the local economy, and our natural resources, for many years to come.

We urge the Committee to support the following programs, at the noted levels:

Healthy Incentives Program (4400-1004): \$25,000,000 (as proposed in H2)

The Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) provides a dollar-for-dollar match, up to a monthly limit depending on household size, for SNAP benefits spent on fruits and vegetables purchased at participating farmers markets, farm stands, mobile markets, and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs across the Commonwealth. Since its launch in April 2017, the program has provided more than 173,000 low-income households with more than \$58 million worth of fresh, healthy, local food; all monies spent through HIP go directly to Massachusetts farms. Increasing funding to HIP will allow the program to continue to operate year-round, grow the number of SNAP households that utilize the program, and will allow DTA to add new farmer vendors to continue to serve all areas of the state equitably.

Food insecurity remains higher than it was prior to the COVID19 pandemic¹, and as federal pandemic benefits have expired, state supports such as HIP, are more essential than ever to help families cover the rising costs of food and to further support the Commonwealth's farmers.

Food Literacy (7010-1192): \$250,000 (level from FY24)

Knowing where food comes from, how it affects our bodies, and the role it plays in our culture, our communities, and our environment is essential. To help Massachusetts children lead healthy, independent, thoughtful lives, all students in grades K-12 should have access to food system education in school,

¹<https://www.nbcoston.com/news/local/study-reveals-jarring-food-insecurity-increases-as-covid-era-benefits-expire/3230429/>

learning about agriculture, nutrition, food justice, and culinary skills. These lessons will teach critical life skills and allow students to make informed decisions about food.

To further this goal, we request the inclusion of \$250,000 in FY25 to continue to support the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's school wellness coaching program. By supporting this with funding in FY24, DESE was able to accept another cohort of 12 districts to the program, educated the coaches on food literacy and nutrition education, and made courses at Framingham State University's John Stalker Institute deeply discounted for teachers that are members of their local wellness committee.

We also support Massachusetts Farm to School's ask of \$750,000 for the FRESH grant program, which can be used to further food literacy through experiential learning, professional development for teachers, and increasing a staff member's paid time to focus on food literacy. Combined with our budget request for the school wellness coaching program, these two budget requests are level funding from last year's dedication of \$1 million to food literacy in line item 7010-1192.

Food Security Infrastructure Grants (2000-0121): \$25,000,000 (level from FY24)

In 2020 Massachusetts launched the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) program "to ensure that individuals and families throughout the Commonwealth have access to food, with a special focus on food that is produced locally and equitable access to food" and "to ensure that farmers, fisherman and other local food producers are better connected to a strong, resilient food system to help mitigate future food supply and distribution disruption." Since the start of the program, the FSIG program has awarded \$88 million in grants to 665 recipients, ranging from farms to food pantries to schools. Those investments not only support food security, they also create jobs and strengthen the local economy. Further, by supporting local farms and fisheries, investment through the FSIG program contributes to the state's climate goals by allowing grantee businesses to employ management practices that protect natural resources; this is especially important in the wake of last year's natural disasters. In spite of all its success, the program has only been able to fund 29% of the nearly \$300,000,000 in proposals submitted, demonstrating significant unmet demand.

Local food policy council grants (2511-0100): \$250,000 (level from FY24)

In 2023, Massachusetts launched the Local Food Policy Council grant, which will help "to accelerate their development, expand their capacity, and increase their connections and opportunities for peer-to-peer learning to support the Massachusetts local food system." The last two rounds of the Local Food Policy Council grants have resulted in awards to 30 local food policy councils across the Commonwealth. Local food policy councils help build connections between food access organizations and their clients, support local farmers by expanding knowledge of the Healthy Incentives Program, and create opportunities for equitable community engagement and democratic decision-making around the local food system. We respectfully ask for \$250,000 for a third round of grant funding.

Department of Agricultural Resources Administration (2511-0100): \$11,233,075

Governor Healey's proposed budget for the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) would create a new division for food security at the Department. This division would manage the FSIG and Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP) grant programs, and would enhance the Department's capacity to enhance and grow these essential programs. We support the funding proposed in H2 for MDAR.