



MASSACHUSETTS CARES ACT FOOD INSECURITY INITIATIVE

A RESPONSE TO COVID IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
STATEWIDE COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

A PROGRAM OF MASSACHUSETTS CDBG-CV
@ EOHLC, 2021-2024

Funded by HUD



BACKGROUND

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted every aspect of community life. In response to the urgency of need, every level of government was activated to respond to the crisis overwhelming communities across the state, and the nation. The Community Development Block Grant CARES Act (CDBG-CV) –a federally-funded initiative – provided grants to states, insular areas, and local governments to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the spread of COVID-19.

In developing a statewide response, it became clear that food insecurity was an issue for many but was critically affecting low-to-moderate income (LMI) households, as economic and practical barriers to obtaining food deepened. A survey conducted by the Greater Boston Food Bank from October 2020 to January 2021 indicated that 30-58% of households surveyed were experiencing food insecurity¹. This represented a 55% increase from 2019.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts elected to use the third allocation of the CDBG-CV award to address food insecurity across the entire state. Beginning in 2021, funds were made available to fourteen community-based organizations to provide resources at the local and regional level. A total of \$35,139,742 in funds were awarded to communities through this initiative. Most programs concluded in 2024.

The decision to contract directly with community-based organizations was intended to deploy food insecurity resources to LMI communities in need as quickly and efficiently as possible. Although the grantees had no prior CDBG experience, our partners persevered in navigating a new funding source, known for its complex requirements, and were able to support subgrantees by directly addressing food insecurity in creative and impactful ways throughout the Commonwealth.

¹ GBFB, Gaps in Food Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Massachusetts, 2021, https://www.gbfb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/GBFB_Gaps_in_Food_Access_Report_Final_May_2021.pdf

THE GEOGRAPHY OF NEED

In March 2020, the state of Massachusetts shut down to slow the spread of COVID-19. Most would not have predicted how expansive and enduring the impact of the virus would be. Then as we watched a global pandemic unfold before us, seemingly overnight, we found ourselves in a reality where more people than ever before in our lifetime were struggling to afford food. (Project Bread SNAP Report, 2021)

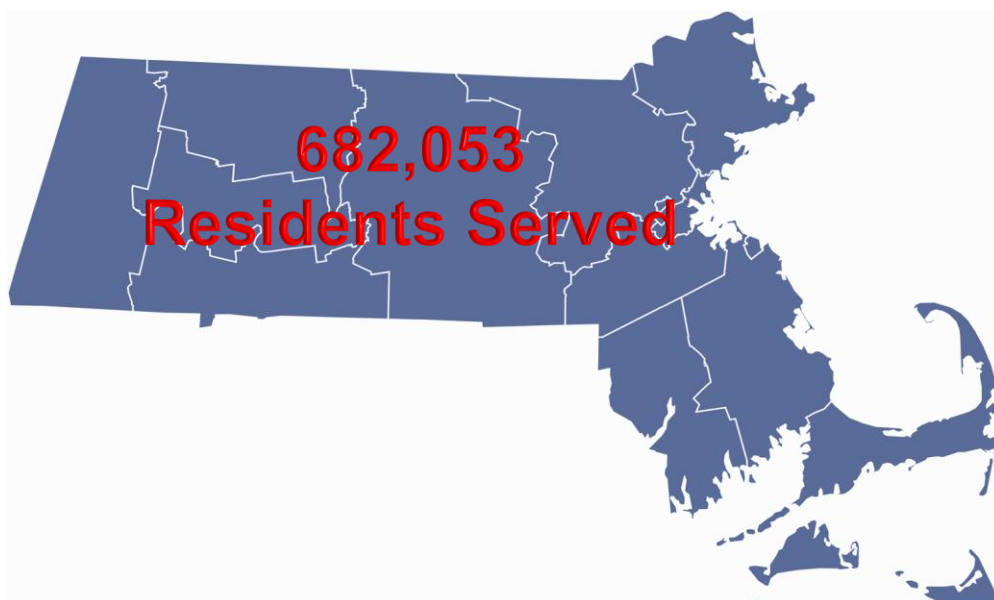
Statewide Response

The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and resulting economic uncertainties, laid bare the difficult realities that under-resourced households face during a crisis. The CDBG-CV resource funded by the federal government leveraged the long history of the CDBG program in supporting low-to-moderate income communities.

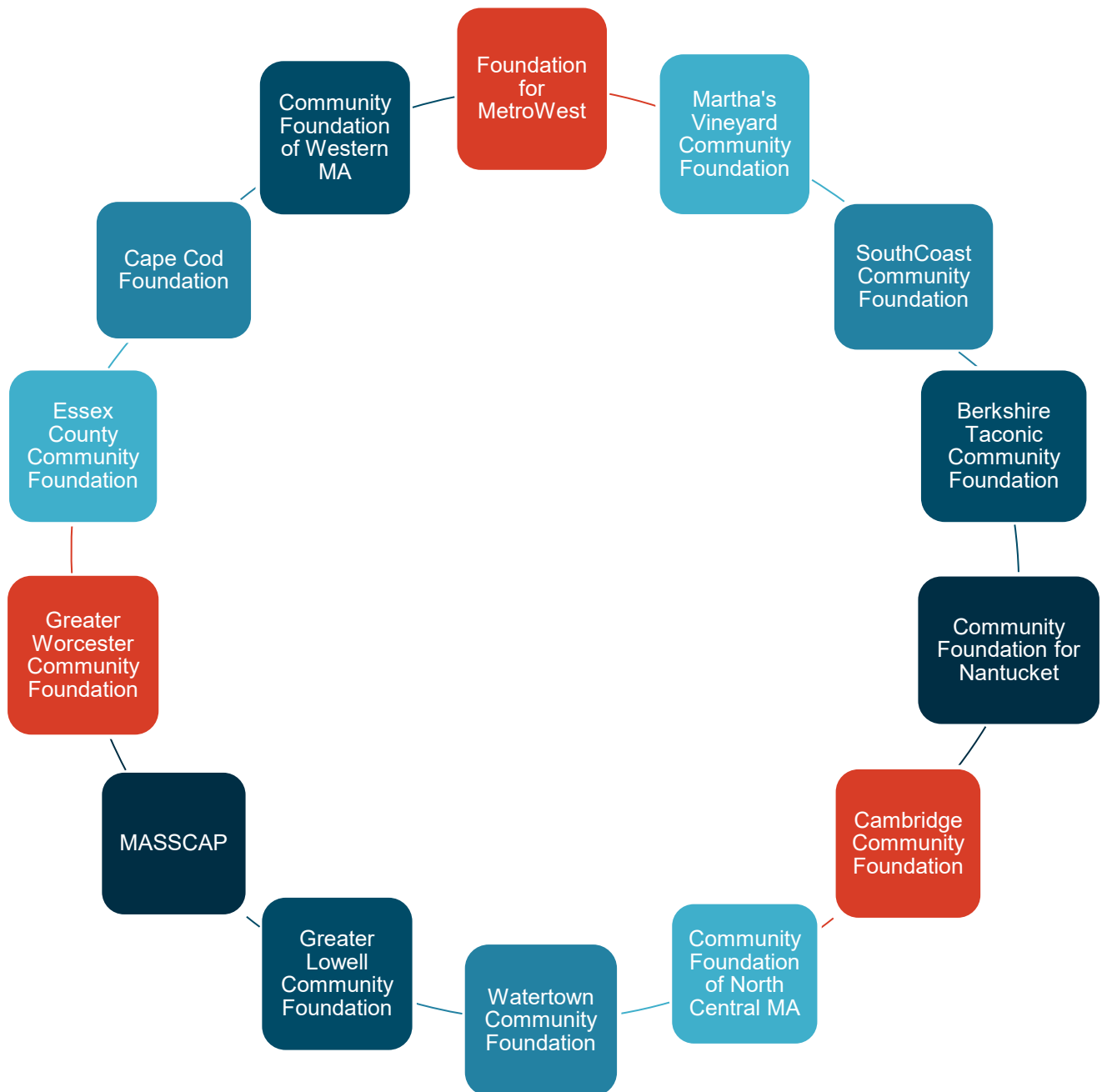
In meeting this unanticipated moment, EOHLC turned to a network of Community Foundations that are spread throughout the state. Community Foundations rely on their local and regional expertise to target resources in a manner that is responsive to community needs and will have the greatest impact. Given that they know their communities best, and have statewide reach, EOHLC partnered with thirteen Community Foundations and one Community Action Agency to implement the food insecurity program.

EOHLC based awards on a formula that considered the following indicators: (1) Poverty, (2) Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program Change, (3) Health Impact, (4) Economic Impact, and (5) Gateway Plus Score.

Awards were made in September 2021 and services began deploying in 2022 across the state.



GRANTEE NETWORK





Sarah Taylor, the nutrition coordinator of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell, peeks out of the club's new food truck, which is part of the Club Love on Wheels program. The food truck, operated by club teens and staff, will travel to neighborhoods throughout Lowell to distribute free meals to youth. (Aaron Curtis/Lowell Sun)

Programs

The grantees rapidly engaged with EOHLC to learn the parameters of the grant, understand specific eligibility and documentation requirements, and other administrative procedures. They then turned to their local communities, convened stakeholder groups to better understand the unmet food security needs facing their communities. Each grantee developed a process to educate community organizations about the CDBG-CV resource and answer early-stage questions about the requirements. The grantees then developed a process whereby community organizations could submit program proposals. Awards were made on a rolling basis, as considerable training was required to support programs in developing data collection and reporting systems that were required by the grants.

As awards were made and programs began implementing services, a diverse array of services began emerging, demonstrating how community needs can vary greatly. Regardless of the geography, the demand for food during and after the pandemic grew exponentially. The CDBG-CV program allowed communities to not only respond to the presenting crisis but also to improve local food security systems, so that resources were more coordinated and better aligned with evolving needs.

The fourteen (14) grantees contracted with 187 programs² to provide food insecurity services throughout the commonwealth.

Impact

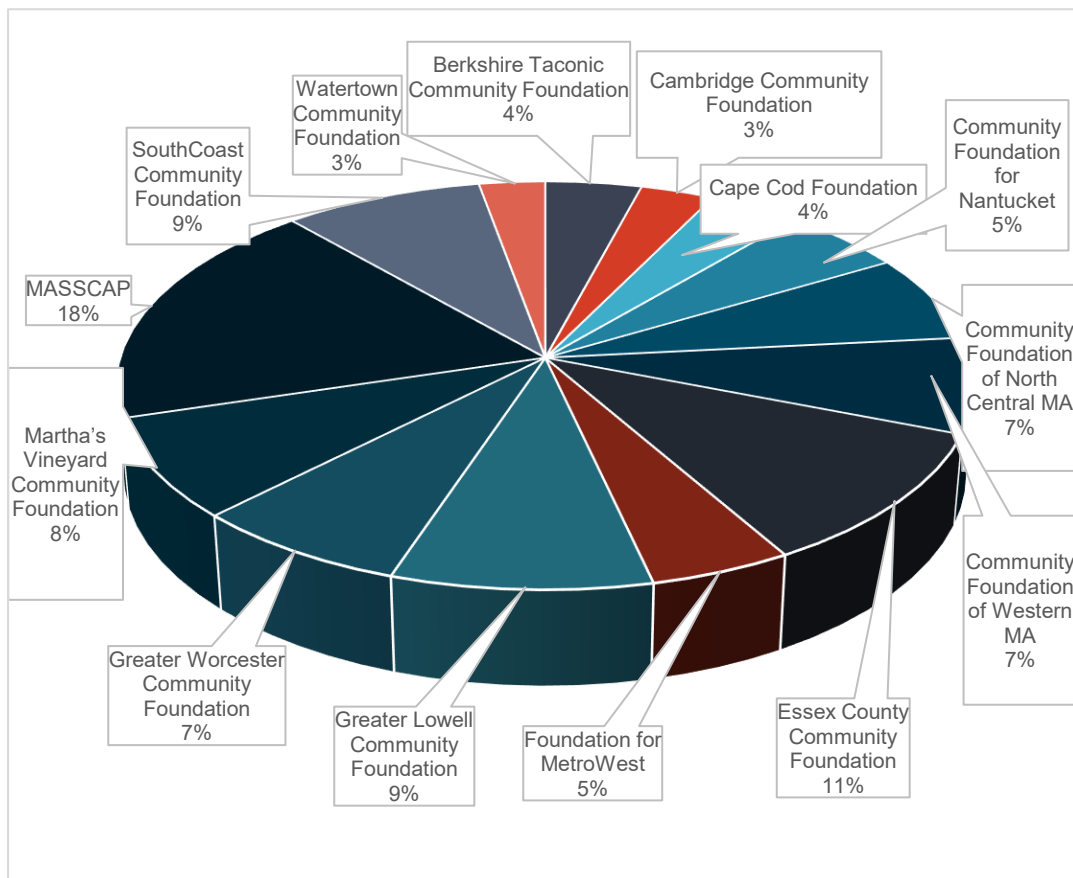
The CDBG-CV Food Insecurity program brought economic relief to hundreds of communities throughout the Commonwealth. The programs indirectly supported stakeholders such as farmers, restaurants, food-based retail, local businesses, churches, and nonprofit organizations. But the most important impact was to the **682,053** low to moderate income residents who received a direct benefit from the programs. This is a staggering level of impact—benefiting a population equivalent to Massachusetts's largest city.

² The number does not include food banks that delivered food to multiple program sites (such church-based pantries, housing sites, other pantries food pantries, etc.) that effectively functioned as a sub-program.




BUDGET




The network of thirteen Community Foundations (CF) and one Community Action Agency (CAA) initially received \$27,154,515 to address food insecurity needs. Subsequent allocations were made available for a total of \$35,139,742 invested in this initiative.




Grantee	Award	# of Programs Funded
Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation	\$1,439,184	10
Cambridge Community Foundation	\$1,100,000	8
Cape Cod Foundation	\$1,362,895	10
Community Foundation for Nantucket	\$1,849,416	7
Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts	\$2,398,394	19
Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts	\$2,628,433	16
Essex County Community Foundation	\$3,783,843	34
Foundation for MetroWest	\$1,651,612	16
Greater Lowell Community Foundation	\$3,018,663	15
Greater Worcester Community Foundation	\$2,531,259	17
Martha's Vineyard Community Foundation	\$2,760,725	2
MASSCAP	\$6,595,665	10
SouthCoast Community Foundation	\$2,986,186	20
Watertown Community Foundation	\$1,033,467	3



PROGRAM TYPES & IMPACTS

		
Food Pantries & Food Bank Hubs	Food Programs at Community Centers	Food Rescue & Community Fridges
<p>Food pantries have historically been a community's most common grassroots response to hunger. These programs can be quickly assembled and administered, often by community volunteers. Food pantry operations were dramatically impacted by COVID due to safety considerations. Required adaptations included installing online ordering systems, drive-up delivery, and truck-based delivery to homes and organizations (food hubs). These interventions were cost prohibitive for most food pantry programs.</p> <p>The CDBG-CV grants supported 80 food pantry programs (not including hub locations) funded via all 14 grantees. This included existing and new food pantries.</p>	<p>Community centers are trusted, neighborhood-based organizations that are highly attuned to local needs. They are built around local culture and often have staff who speak the native languages of local residents. Community centers were a safe harbor during the pandemic and in many cases new food insecurity programs were launched at these locations. Programs supported or developed with grant funds focused on children, youth, families, seniors, and culturally-specific food needs. Services included emergency food, nutrition and cooking skills, and preparation/distribution of hot meals.</p>	<p>While innovative food recovery programs pre-dated the pandemic, this model further evolved as this crisis emerged. These programs facilitated the recovery and distribution of healthy, fresh food that would otherwise be discarded. Food resources were sourced from restaurants, farms, grocery stores and big retail and distributed to service organizations that made food available to community members. Smaller scale distribution was available via community fridges—a shared resource, collectively maintained by the community and for the community. This model is known to reduce the stigma of food-sharing. Community fridges have remained an important local food resource even after the pandemic ended.</p>

		
Food Production	Mobile Pantries & Markets	Home Delivered Meals
<p>Given the barriers to obtaining food, growing food locally was a natural means of producing healthy food—not just as a crisis response, but fostering local food sustainability for the long-term. The grants helped fund the supplies and infrastructure to carry out innovative programs. These included: small scale farms, community gardens, homesteading programs with farm mentors, weekly or monthly CSA shares, and hydroponic freight farm containers for year-round growing.</p>	<p>Mobile food pantries and markets (also known as food trucks and pop-ups) had many advantages during the COVID era given the mobile outdoor location. The grants addressed some of the challenges of bringing these services to low and moderate-income communities: funding farm-to-home fresh food, access to prepared meals, refrigerated trucks equipped for distribution, a means to transport food/staples from the Greater Boston Food Bank sites, and delivery from local farmers markets.</p>	<p>Home delivered meals have long been critical for those with mobility concerns, such as seniors and disabled people. Given the pervasive health issues that came with the pandemic, this need increased. The grants funded programs such as restaurant-prepared hot meals, upgrades to Meals On Wheels kitchens that supported home meal delivery, production/delivery of medically-tailored meals, and community kitchens that prepared hot meals and delivered them to community members.</p>

		
Food Programs at Health Centers	School-Based & Afterschool Programs	Population-Focused Food Programs
<p>The strong relationship between food and health is well-established, resulting in common food-based interventions. Health care responses during the pandemic included installing food pantries at health centers and mobile sites, providing patients with information related to WIC and SNAP food resources, and nutritional education on preparing low-cost, healthy meals.</p>	<p>School nutrition programs have historically been an opportunity to ensure that students across the income spectrum receive a healthy, daily meal. The grants created opportunities to provide other innovative programs, such as afterschool pantries, weekend back pack programs, and hydroponic growing containers located on school grounds.</p>	<p>There are no one-size-fits-all food programs. Communities have a broad range of needs. Grant awards helped bring resources to the full community. The populations served included: older adults; disabled people; residents of subsidized housing communities, unhoused individuals & families; groups with culturally relevant food needs; veterans; and persons escaping abuse, violence & exploitation.</p>

SUMMARY/ LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

When crisis hits a community, it's every hand on deck. When COVID-19 came to Watertown, the economic consequences brought non-profits and businesses together to meet a fundamental need: keeping families fed.

Watertown Community Foundation

The real-life impacts of these grants are best described by grantees, nonprofits, and through their local media voices. Here are a few of their stories:

Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation

BTCF Awards \$1.09 Million in CARES Act Funding for Food Security in Berkshire County

<https://berkshiretaconic.org/news/btcf-awards-over-1-09-million-in-cares-act-funding-for-food-security-in-berkshire-county>

Greater Lowell Community Foundation

Boys & Girls Club Works to Drive Away Food Insecurity

https://www.lowellsun.com/2023/10/29/boys-girls-club-works-to-drive-away-food-insecurity/?utm_email=759334E864C5D4BCE25E04C350&lctg=%A0759334E864C5D4BCE25E04C350&utm_source=listrak&utm_medium=email&utm_term=https%3a%2f%2fwww.lowellsun.com%2f2023%2f10%2f29%2fboys-girls-club-works-to-drive-away-food-insecurity%2f&utm_campaign=The-Daily-Sunrise&utm_content=automated

Watertown Community Foundation

GRANT IMPACT - Supporting Partnerships

<https://www.watertownfoundation.org/grant-impact-supporting-partnerships>

System Change

As grants began to come to a close in 2024, EOHLC convened grantees to reflect on the lessons learned from their experience administering these grants. Organizations described how the grants prompted structural changes within their organizations but also pushed communities to develop more coordinated food insecurity responses.

- Nonprofits developed new or improved data collection systems within organizations to track benefits to recipients
- Gave nonprofit organizations more confidence that they could develop the infrastructure to administer state and federal grants

- Access to a funding source that was flexible enough to support improving food infrastructure systems. The investment in capital equipment dramatically increases capacity and will support community responses in the years to come.
- Strengthened the role of Community Foundations and the Community Action Agency as a community convener, funder, technical assistance provider, and funding intermediary.

The coalition of the 14 grantees evolved significantly during the grant period. The crisis required them to scale up quickly and become familiar with complex state and federal regulations and grant management practices. The grantees utilized one another as learning partners and a source of support. This coalition eventually evolved into **The Massachusetts Community Foundations Partnership**, a collaborative made up of 15 community foundations in Massachusetts. Established in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the collaborative will continue to partner with nonprofit organizations to strengthen their programs and capacities as they work to address the critical issues facing communities across Massachusetts.

National Award

The Massachusetts CDBG-CV Food Insecurity Grant Program received the *Council of State Community Development Agencies (COSCDA) 2023 President's Award for Innovation*

This award recognizes innovative activities, policies or programs that have been implemented at the state level, which have demonstrated success in solving community needs. The award recognized the unique partnership between the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Greater Worcester Community Foundation and 2Gether We Eat.

This partnership highlights the innovative approaches of community-based organizations, delivers measurable results that will continue to grow well into the future, is a model that is transferable to other states, and illustrates the important role of state leadership. As a result of the Commonwealth's collaboration with new partners, the state-wide network of Community Foundations was able to deliver CDBG food assistance to those in need.