

Minutes

MA Food Policy Council meeting (remote)

March 14, 2025, 9:30 – 11:30 AM

In attendance:

Mariah Metzger, office of Representative Donahue

Dave Dumaresq, Farmer

Mallory Sullivan, EOHED

Bruce Hopper, MassDEP

Amanda Kinchla, Food Safety

Rob Leshin, DESE

Grace May, Senator Fattman's Office

Commissioner McCue, DTA and Shelly Yarnie

Mariah Metzger, office of Representative Donahue

Margaret Moulton, Direct to Consumer

Commissioner Randle, MDAR (joined at 10 AM)

Caro Roszell, Healthy Soils

Kerry Shea, office of Representative Kane

Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, Distribution

John Waite, Food Processing

Phoebe Walker, Public Health

Ayn Yeagle, Community Health

Not in attendance: Senator Comerford, Jessica del Rosario

The meeting was called **to order** by Vice Chair Phoebe Walker at 9:35 AM.

Acceptance of minutes: A motion was made to accept the minutes by Phoebe Walker, seconded by Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, and passed via voice vote: Mariah Metzger, Dave Dumaresq, Jared Freedman, Bruce Hopper, Amanda Kinchla, Rob Leshin, Grace May, Commissioner McCue, Margaret Moulton, Jessica del Rosario, Caro Roszell, Kerry Shea, Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, Mallory Sullivan (abstain), John Waite, Phoebe Walker, Ayn Yeagle.

Focus on legislation and advocacy opportunities

MA Legislative Food System Caucus: Kerry Shea, Legislative Aide to Representative Kane. Kerry shared a legislative update, including a focus on support for increasing the HIP budget. The Governor's budget proposal of \$18M included HIP, allowing monthly benefits to be raised to \$30.

Healthy Soils: Caro Roszell. Caro provided a detailed explanation about the importance of healthy soils to mitigate climate change, a background for the healthy soils program, and federal programs impacts and the effects on conservation practices forcing scaling back of practices. Massachusetts farmers are sharing how these funding changes have directly impacted their work. Farmers are encouraged to share their stories and bring letters to the Hadley NRCS offices, 3 PM March 23. Soil is the connector of all.

Comment: Congressman McGovern encouraged organizations to frame food and agriculture programs from an economic perspective, for example cost savings, rather than from a social responsibility perspective.

MA Food System Collaborative: Becca Miller, Policy Director. About 80 people attended HIP Day at the state house, all doing amazing advocacy work. There is a lingering sense of anxiety about how devastating this cut has been. Some of farmers are on the brink with the extension of this cut and some are even facing bankruptcy. Individual stories demonstrate the devastation. The 50% cut to HIP started in December. The Collaborative will continue to advocate for the Food Safety Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) budget, MDAR admin funding, reinstating the Local Food Policy Council Grants, and other programs. Local Foods for Schools (LFS) was cut by the federal government. LFPA was also terminated.

Massachusetts has lost about \$18M so far. Nine priority bills for the Collaborative include one that's new: An Act relative to urban farmland to support the conversion of vacant land in Environmental Justice areas with a trust fund to support the work. Other bills are refiled: "An Act to promote food literacy" (ag would be included in school curriculums. Resources would go to DESE), "An Act protecting our soil and farms from PFAS contamination," "An Act fostering agricultural resilience in Massachusetts" (FARM BILL), "An Act promoting equity in agriculture," "An Act relative to an agricultural healthy incentives program" (HIP would be put into statute), "An act supporting the Commonwealth's food system" (for an advisory position for all agencies and including the MA Food Policy Council), "An Act encouraging the donation of food to persons in need" (liability protection and tax credits for farmers for the fair market value of their donated food), and a "Proposal for a legislative amendment to the constitution relative to agricultural and horticultural lands" (no minimum acreage for rural and urban farms).

There is also "An act fostering AG resilience in Massachusetts" with twenty topics in one bill such as \$3M for the next generation farmer fund, MEMA to incorporate food production capacity into its disaster programs and much more. An environmental bond bill, every five years, was introduced in May. It creates funding for the state to put into capital budgets to fund programs including MDAR grants.

Ayn Yeagle thanked the Collaborative and discussed the importance of the HIP program and support for \$5M in the supplemental budget and then full funding moving forward.

Dave Dumaresq shared that from a farmer perspective, HIP sales have decreased by 50%. It's challenging to figure out how to have a viable business considering the cuts and uncertainty.

Phoebe Walker: Advocacy Committee. Non-appointees of the administration wanted to be more active in supporting legislation, leading to the formation of this subcommittee, previously called the letters of support committee. At the last Council meeting, there was a vote to restore funding for HIP. Agency members abstained and the vote passed. Moving forward, the process to provide letters of support is being explored. The focus is three pieces of legislation: HIP, the Omnibus Farm bill and PFAS. She thanked both the MA Legislative Food System Caucus and the Collaborative for their work.

Commissioner Randle arrived and thanked Phoebe for chairing the meeting, as well as her work for the Advocacy Committee, focusing on legislative priorities.

Officer and Committee Reports

Acceptance of annual report. A motion was made by Bruce Hopper and second by Torry Katsiroubas Stamm to accept the annual report which was unanimously approved by voice vote: Mariah Metzger, Dave Dumaresq, Mallory Sullivan, Bruce Hopper, Amanda Kinchla, Rob Leshin, Grace May, Commissioner McCue, Margaret Moulton, Commissioner Randle, Caro Roszell, Kerry Shea, Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, John Waite, Phoebe Walker, Ayn Yeagle.

Program: Meals for patients with diet sensitive conditions save health care costs: Community Servings, Jean Terranova. Sr. Director of Policy & Research.

Jean thanked all the long-time Community Servings supporters. Ample Institute, a new program, provides access to medical nutrition through policy and research, to continue to strengthen our support of local foods. There are 16 medically tailored meal tracts, based on scratch cooking, designed by a registered dietitian. There is a focus on the best medical outcomes. Over 1.2 M meals were served to over 7,000 people last year.

There are three NIH research programs which are nearly finished, but current federal changes may put future research at risk. Community Servings is the largest provider of nutrition services to the Mass Health Section Waiver section 1115. Work is in progress with partners to evaluate the impact of Community Servings meals including Tufts Friedman School and UMASS Medical school. Results are expected to be published this spring. The Food is Medicine study for families, funded by American Heart Association, will evaluate if meals to individuals versus to individuals with families, and in-person delivery versus shipped, address dietary challenges and loneliness.

Partnerships with Growing Places and UMASS medical are important and working with Community Servings' coalition to be sure that the medical waiver goes through to become a regular offering of care. Hopefully a federal bill with bipartisan support for this work. A new program for veterans is being introduced. The Rockefeller Foundation has funded a case study program for how this work supports the local economy and climate change. Community Servings is also working with partners including growers to develop a comprehensive case study report for other organizations to be able to develop local food resources to provide Food as Medicine meals. Community Servings "View of the Field" report is available: <https://www.servings.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/AMPL-Report-CommunityServings-FINAL3-1.pdf>

Jean shared that this work would not be possible without funding from the Commonwealth including DPH, ARPA, Commonwealth Core, HIV Care Formula Plan, FSIG from EEA, Bureau of Substance Addition, MA Attorney General's office, and others. THANK YOU VERY MUCH. Community Serving's lifestyle coaching was developed by a dietitian at Massachusetts General hospital. The western Massachusetts referral partners include accountable care programs.

Torry Katsiroubas Stamm's companies, Katsiroubas Bros. and Morrissy Market provide aggregation for Food is Medicine and appreciates being a part of this program.

Margaret Moulton: At Berkshire Grown Food is Medicine to support our farms is an area we're building to replace the LFPA program funding. There's already a history of working with local hospitals and other organizations.

Dave Dumaresq shared that his farm has been happy to provide food to this organization now and for the past ten years, including a CSA for Community Servings employees. This program helps farmers to think more about storage, season extension, and other crops to grow.

Council member updates:

Local Food for Schools: Ayn Yeagle. The federal government has slashed a few important programs that added millions of dollars in income for our farmers and mid-tier organizations. Northeast Food for Schools had a lot of momentum, and MDAR worked hard to showcase these programs. The LFPA is also being cut – purchased local foods with boxes given out to community organizations and partner and vulnerable community members. The program had been also used to introduce consumers to new produce.

Rob Leshin: The Local food for schools and children was expected to be funded for \$12 M with \$3 M for childcare centers, a first-time grant in a while. LFS grants being cut really guts this program. The termination letters were sent out late after work on Friday, March 7. It's politically motivated and arbitrary since the program supports the core mission of USDA. It doesn't add up and it's unsettling. In recent interview Secretary Rollins said the door is slightly open. The advocacy push has been instantaneous for which we're grateful. When this broke out, DESE was already in DC. No matter what happens, DESE will work to support Northeast Food for Schools.

Rob shared another program experiencing significant reduction in funds. The Federal house budget includes a massive cut to the community eligibility provision. It would increase the benchmark for school eligibility for universal school meals from 25% to 60%. Massachusetts has universal free school meals, per MGL. DESE and school districts maximize revenues so no state funds need to be used. This change would cost at least \$30M for the state. DESE will be meeting with other states that have universal school free meals regarding impacts of this proposed change. Another proposal would require 100% income verification of every application. DESE is leading advocacy efforts. In the meantime, LFS is DESE's priority. There is strong data to show results, and it's been effective with MA Farm to School as a partner. Over half of the \$3.5 M went to state food hubs. The original grant helped to create an important infrastructure.

Becca Miller mentioned that the School Nutrition National Assn may coordinate national outreach and promote the local food incentive. <https://mafoodformakids.org/policy-priorities>

<https://schoolnutrition.org/sna-news/proposed-school-meal-cuts-prompt-nationwide-advocacy/>

Announcements

2025 MA Food Policy Council meetings 9:30 – 11:30 AM: Fri, May 9; Fri, July 11; Fri, Sept 12; Wed, Dec 3rd: 11-1:30

Public Comment

Liz Willis-O’Gilvie commented that paper applications for school meals will be devastating and add to the stigma of being poor.

Comment: The Franklin County Community Development Corporation has an emergency loan fund along with Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA).

Commissioner Randle shared an update. MDAR learned that the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPA) 2025 was being terminated, a blow since \$6.4M in funding was anticipated for Massachusetts. Awards totaled some \$14M total in the first two rounds. The impacts of the program were quantified and transformative. At the NASDA mid-winter policy meeting, a unanimous recommendation to fund this program was advanced to USDA. Commissioner Randle presented at the Ag Outlook Forum on this topic, along with a representative from the agriculture program from New Mexico. There is strong advocacy for the program. Hopefully there will be a potential future iteration from the new administration, since there is such strong advocacy for the program. It’s a win across the board. NASDA has been having calls about these programs. There will be impacts for farmer services as well. Last Friday Commissioner Randle sent a letter to Secretary Rollins to lift the pause on grants and reimbursement and to reassess staffing levels. In meeting with Berkshire farmers, she learned that many are waiting for significant reimbursement checks.

For the LFPA and LFS, the Northeast region is developing a joint letter to USDA. MDAR’s RFR is out for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, though there is no funding confirmation yet. The RFSI program has been paused. MDAR is communicating that reimbursements and contracts will be honored. She shared her gratitude for this team, staff, partners and collaborative communication to share how that Massachusetts has policies, programs and communities to uplift the good work that is happening. She shared her commitment to the values and mission at MDAR, and three north stars: community, communications, compassion. This environment is very reactionary, so compassion is an important attribute.

Commissioner McCue noted his appreciation to engage with HIP retailers and with MDAR’s David Webber for his support through this process with funding challenges. The SNAP program is under siege. DTA’s messaging will be sharp and crisp and will highlight our relevance to economic support in the farming community. SNAP brings in over \$2.7 B to the commonwealth annually, important for economic viability.

Announcements:

March 18, Ag Day at the State house

Upcoming Council meetings: Friday, May 9

Adjournment

A motion to adjourn was made at 11:45 by John Waite, seconded by Dave Dumaresq, and passed by voice vote: Mariah Metzger, Dave Dumaresq, Bruce Hopper, Rob Leshin, Grace May, Commissioner McCue, Margaret Moulton, Commissioner Randle, Mallory Sullivan, Kerry Shea, Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, John Waite, Phoebe Walker, Ayn Yeagle.

56 in attendance