



In September 2023 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts received the 2023 President’s Award for Innovation from the Council of State Community Development Agencies (COSCD A) at it’s annual conference held in Annapolis, MD. This award recognizes innovative activities, policies or programs that have been implemented at the state level, which have demonstrated success in solving community needs. COSCD A is the premier national association advocating and enhancing the leadership role of states in community development through innovative policy development and implementation, customer-driven technical assistance, education, and collaborative efforts.

The award recognized the unique partnership between the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (State Agency & COSCD A member agency), the Greater Worcester Community Foundation (CDBG-CV Grantee & Regional Philanthropic Organization) and 2Gether We Eat (a CDBG-CV subgrantee and local CBO). Patricia Roushanaei Deputy Manager of the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities Community Development Unit and Senior CDBG Program Representative Shelly Chevalier received the award on behalf of the Commonwealth.

In response to the urgency of the pandemic, every level of government was activated to respond to the crisis impacting communities across the state, and the nation. As allowed by the CARES Act, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts elected to use the third allocation of CDBG-CV funds to address food insecurity across the **entire state**. Funds were made available to fourteen community-based organizations, to provide services at the local and regional level. The network of Community Foundations (CF) and one Community Action Agency (CAA) initially received \$27,154,515 to address food insecurity issues; and an additional \$6,404,404 was subsequently awarded to seven Foundations who had identified additional needs for a total investment of \$33,558,919.

The decision to contract directly with philanthropic and nonprofit organizations was a departure from the traditional practice of awarding CDBG funds exclusively to Units of General Local Government. This strategy was intended to deploy food insecurity resources to LMI communities in need (both entitlement and non-entitlement) as quickly and efficiently as possible. The Commonwealth faced challenges in educating our new partners about the CDBG requirements that came along with the funding. Two program representatives, fiscal staff, and the deputy manager devoted countless hours to provide technical assistance through training, TEAMS meetings, and the development of policy related to this effort. These funds became the impetus for the Community Foundations to develop a peer group to become more connected to one another and share best practices. Overall, because of the Commonwealth’s assistance, our partners persevered in navigating a new funding source and were able to support subgrantees by impacting food insecurity in a creative and impactful manner throughout the Commonwealth.

The Greater Worcester Community Foundation, one of the grantees, received \$2,531,259 and made awards to 17 subgrantees, one of which was 2Gether We Eat. 2Gether We Eat is a non-profit hydroponic program founded in 2020, that donates 100% of the fruits and vegetables grown back to the community to fight food insecurity. \$275,000 was awarded to purchase two hydroponic container farms that were sited at two schools in LMI neighborhoods in Worcester. These farms are built entirely inside a 40-foot container. The one-of-a-kind vertical freight farm system can grow up to 13,000 crops at once in just 320 square feet, providing

harvests 52 weeks a year. Freight Farms, founded in 2013, is a pioneer of container farming, and has roots at Clark University in Worcester. The founder of 2Gether We Eat, Charles Luster, is a former college basketball coach, teacher and businessman who turned his attention to the growing problem of food deserts and food insecurity in his hometown of Worcester.

2Gether We Eat offers a fresh approach to the food insecurity issue and food deserts through hydroponic farming to increase access to affordable and nutritious food, that, in turn, will positively affect local public health. With hydroponics, there's no need for soil, instead water and nutrients are used to turn seeds into vegetables in a fraction of the space that traditional farming uses. With hydroponics, the nutrients are in the water and drawn up through the roots. Eliminating the soil makes farming more compact and portable, and this technique has allowed a new approach to community farms and addresses the issue of food insecurity in low-income neighborhoods in Worcester and could be replicated in other communities.

2Gether We Eats' high-tech, high-yield, and small-footprint vertical hydroponic farm is used for food production in Worcester to fight low food security while providing educational opportunities for both youth and adult learners. It is anticipated that two to four tons' worth of crop yield annually will be donated and sold to community nonprofits, and 170 youth and adult learners will be educated annually. Revenue earned from excess crop sales is utilized to in sustaining the program food is not the only thing that has been provided through the investment of CDBG-CV funds to this Worcester nonprofit, the student engagement, collaboration with other community organizations, and educational component is immeasurable.

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 a new partner, the state-wide network of Community Foundations was able to deliver CDBG food assistance to those in need to address the insecurity and associated undernutrition and resulting detrimental health and socioeconomic development in the short and long term, for individuals across the state. The conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic compelled us all to think about things differently. The needs were urgent, and thankfully, the federal government responded with significant financial resources.



Video:

<https://2getherweeat.com/?playlist=9138be8&video=babb84b>

Press in Local Media:

<https://www.nbcoston.com/discover-black-heritage/2gether-we-eat-worcester-nonprofit-takes-innovative-approach-against-hunger/2637433/>

Photos:

[Photos](#)