

THE ARC OF ADVOCACY AT THE FOOD BANK

■ Laura Sylvester, Public Policy Manager

To meet our mission, The Food Bank's advocacy team works in partnership with other community leaders and coalitions to advocate for legislation that addresses hunger's underlying causes. As Congressman Jim McGovern says, "no one should go hungry in the wealthiest country in the history of the world. Hunger is a political problem, and it requires a political solution."

Our advocacy efforts began in 1995 when the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP) was established thanks to the vision and leadership of the late First Hampshire State Representative Peter Kocot. MEFAP ensures a steady supply of high-quality food for Massachusetts residents facing food insecurity distributed by the Commonwealth's four regional food banks. It is funded through the state budget and overseen by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources. Over the years, we have worked collaboratively with our Western Massachusetts legislative delegation to secure increased funding so MEFAP can continue to meet our region's need for emergency food. The entire delegation has consistently supported this important program.

Back in 1995, we didn't have an advocacy team or

even a single employee dedicated to advocacy. Advocacy efforts were undertaken by a few staff members in addition to their regular responsibilities. Despite our limited advocacy capacity, in 2008, we advocated successfully for improvements to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and increased funding for TEFAP, the federal version of MEFAP. By 2012, we again successfully advocated for the establishment and funding of the Massachusetts Food Trust to support food producers in low-income census tracts. In 2014, we hired a part-time advocacy coordinator and, in 2016, we finally hired a full-time employee dedicated to advocacy.

During this period, we worked closely with then Holyoke State Representative Aaron Vega to draft Breakfast After the Bell legislation, which was passed in 2019. Beginning next year, the law will ensure that every child in high-need schools will receive breakfast after the school day begins, ensuring that all children experiencing food insecurity can eat breakfast with their peers, free from stigma.

With increased staff capacity, we have expanded our advocacy during the past five years to include many underlying causes of hunger — housing,

transportation, healthcare, and more. Since 2017, we've worked closely with the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative to develop and expand the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) — a benefit for which all SNAP recipients are automatically enrolled. HIP allows people to use their SNAP-EBT cards to purchase an additional \$40-\$80 worth of fresh healthy produce each month from farm stands, farmer's markets, and CSAs, which has the added effect of supporting local farmers. We've successfully increased HIP funding from \$4M in fiscal year 2017 to \$18M (proposed) for fiscal year 2023.

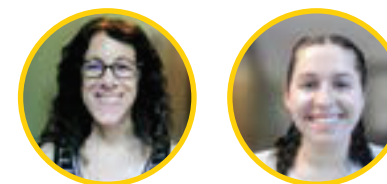
Currently, we co-lead two statewide coalitions that advocate for legislative bills that would address college hunger and the "cliff effect," which occurs when low-income workers lose public benefits due even to a slight wage increase, leaving them economically worse off than they were before. We also created and

lead the Western Massachusetts Transportation Advocacy Network — a regional coalition of advocates, transit authorities, municipal planners, legislators, and others — that leverages the collective voice of Western Massachusetts to increase transportation funding in our region.

During the past two election cycles, we held multiple candidates' forums, voter education and registration drives, advocacy 101 trainings for community partners and college classes, and orientations for recently elected officials.

We recently hired a second full-time advocacy team member, doubling our capacity. Moving forward, we are excited to continue working at the local, state, and national levels to dismantle systemic inequities to create a Western Massachusetts where no one faces food insecurity, and everyone has access to nutritious food.

IN PARTNERSHIP,



Laura Sylvester Emily Reardon

Advocacy Team

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura Sylvester".

To support The Food Bank's Advocacy efforts, sign up for Advocacy Alerts (www.foodbankwma.org/advocate), and contact LauraS@foodbankwma.org if you would like to take part in anti-hunger policy campaigns.