



The Food Bank
of Western Massachusetts

word of mouth

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Building Community for a Common Purpose

The holiday season and the new year are always times for reflection on the meaning of life, relationships, and so much more.

Top of mind for me were all the people whom I've had the honor of getting to know better last year in conversations about our capital campaign to build our future, larger, and greener food distribution center and headquarters in Chicopee. During the past two years, many of you have made generous multi-year pledges to realize this dream come true that will catapult our mission more boldly into the future.

I've had some very deep, personal conversations about why and how so many people live with food insecurity, what motivates you to make a significant investment in our future home, and the impact it will have across our region for decades to come. Some of these conversations have spawned stories of growing up poor or with privilege, and even tears of joy for the gift of giving or of sorrow for giving in memory of a loved one.

These enriching conversations have opened hearts and minds to learn from and become more personally connected with each other. I'm truly humbled to have had this opportunity in the pursuit of achieving food security for all. Together, we are building community for a common purpose. This is what makes our hard work successful... connecting you and many other stakeholders to our mission. This is community building. This is creating positive and sustainable change slowly, but surely. As always, thank you for your support of households struggling with food insecurity while in pursuit of economic stability.

“This is what makes our hard work successful... connecting you and many other stakeholders to our mission. This is community building and community organizing. This is creating positive and sustainable change slowly, but surely.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Morehouse". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning.

Andrew Morehouse
Executive Director
The Food Bank of Western
Massachusetts

Finding A Taste of Home

The Importance of Providing Culturally Appropriate Foods to Our Neighbors in Need

Shirley Del Rio, Director of Food Operations at The Food Bank, is finally accomplishing her long-time goal of having the Puerto Rican fruits and vegetables she grew up with in The Food Bank's warehouse for food pantries and meal sites across Western Massachusetts. Thanks to a series of recently acquired grants, The Food Bank has been able to purchase plantains, avocados, mangoes, and malanga and yautia (tuberous root vegetables) for Food Bank member pantries and meal sites or directly to community members at our Mobile Food Bank and Brown Bag sites.

For years The Food Bank has made steps towards being responsive to community needs with the type and variety of food it makes available. Del

Rio, who has been with The Food Bank for 21 years, knew she could do more with the right funding opportunity. "The challenge we had was that it was so expensive, much more expensive than the avenues we are used to purchasing from, and not everyone is carrying these foods," said Del Rio. "When you're looking at a box of apples that you can get 30 pounds for \$8.50 - \$10.50 a box, and you're looking at a box of plantains that costs almost \$40 a box, it's much more expensive."

Del Rio expressed the effort is well worth any organizational headaches, describing the significance food has in her own life. "This is so much a part of me, when I think about the food that I grew up on. It's community— this is how we connect. It just reminds me of





Director of Food Operations, Shirley Del Rio

growing up, and my family and all the aunts in the kitchen and my mother and me... it's so much more than just a plantain, it's so much deeper than that. It connects you back to home."

Shirley also discussed the wider community impact of the initiative by relaying a story told to her from the Northampton Survival Center. "When the food got there, there was this shift.

They [visitors] started to share stories and recipes with one another and began to tell folks who weren't familiar with this food this is how you prepare it, and it tastes like this, and so on." The importance of sharing cultural foods resonated with Shirley when she recently shared her favorite Puerto Rican food with her fellow employees at The Food Bank, "It's like saying – I want to share a part of my world with you, come in!"

Up until now, most of the focus of this initiative has been on providing food for Caribbean and Slavic communities, but Shirley hopes The Food Bank will be able to expand its selection soon. This will depend on securing more funding to purchase culturally appropriate food and after The Food Bank moves to Chicopee when it will have adequate space to store it. "Even if it's one item—even if we start there— I think it would go a long way. This is a shift in food banking, it's a whole other level, and I am so happy I am able to see it through."

- ◀ Mangoes waiting for pickup at a Mobile Food Bank site in Chicopee.
- ▼ A bag filled with a Caribbean variety of sweet potato (called boniato or bata-ta depending on the region) is unloaded by a volunteer at the same site.





When Food is Far Away: The Link Between Transportation and Food Insecurity

Transportation is often not at the forefront of people's minds when they think of food insecurity. For many in Western Massachusetts, the challenge of getting to a grocery store is the major barrier to accessing adequate healthy food. A 2019 USDA study found that about 46% of low-income Americans without cars live more than a half mile from a grocery store, making a simple stop for food a time- and energy-consuming trek.

In some areas, when public transportation is unavailable or inaccessible, people must walk, bike, or navigate with a mobility aid such as a wheelchair to and from the store. These modes of transportation become exponentially more difficult with distance, household size, and the yearly

deluge of snow and ice Massachusetts experiences in the winter months. Ride-share and taxi services may be available in more populated areas, but their cost rapidly eats away at the amount a person can spend on the food they are traveling to buy.

Solutions for better transportation to access affordable healthy food year-round are dependent on adequate government funding for public transportation. In Western Massachusetts, we have three Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) that manage public transportation— Pioneer Valley Transit Authority, Franklin Regional Transit Authority, and the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority— all of which are critically underfunded.

During the last Commonwealth legislative session, The Food Bank, its partners in the Western Mass Transportation Advocacy Network, and the statewide coalition, Transportation for MA (T4MA), advocated at the State House for increased funding for the regional RTAs outside of Boston whose MBTA receives over 90% of state transportation funding. Sponsored by Sen. Harriette Chandler and Rep. Natalie Blais (1st Franklin), the RTA Advancement Bill would increase funding for all RTAs and build pathways for riders to contribute to future RTA planning.

Though the session ended before it came up for a vote, The Food Bank and

its partners will continue advocating for the bill next session with the hope that it will be given more priority by lawmakers. In the meantime, The Food Bank is working on the ground to mitigate food insecurity created by a lack of adequate public transportation through its continued partnership with local member food pantries and its Mobile Food Bank partners to make healthy food accessible for those who need it.

For more information on the work of the advocacy team at The Food Bank, visit <https://www.foodbankwma.org/getinvolved/advocate>



A LOOK BACK

The brass section of the band Soul Magnets Performing for those attending Gather in the Garden, a fundraising event in Berkshire County last summer. ▶



▶ Farm fresh apples, ready for sorting in the warehouse. last summer.



Farm volunteers alongside, Food Bank staff member and Food Processing Coordinator Allison Callahan (center) at a small appreciation event at The Food Bank's second farm. ▶



SUMMER/FALL 2022



“Will Bike 4 Food” on September 25th raised \$252,640.65!

“Monte’s March 13: Making Moves,” took place on November 21st and 22nd. The event raised over \$538,000. Donations will provide the equivalent of over 2,152,000 meals for families in need in Western Massachusetts!



Early morning marchers for “Monte’s March 13: Making Moves,” cross the Calvin Coolidge Bridge in Northampton, MA on day two.



(left to right) Margot Seefeld, Betteann Rodzwell, and Karen Rafferty.

The Power of Partnerships

How The Food Bank and Rachel's Table are Making a Difference in Western Massachusetts.

The Food Bank and Rachel's Table, a local food rescue organization, were both founded on the belief that food is a fundamental human right, and that hunger is an injustice in a world that produces more than enough food to go around. Each organization has its own approach to our shared mission. In recent years, we have formed an important partnership to make the local emergency food network stronger and more efficient.

In 1992, Rachel's Table was founded by the Jewish Federation of Western Massachusetts. The Springfield-based nonprofit utilizes its large network of volunteers to collect food that would otherwise go to waste from restaurants, businesses, and farms and deliver it to local food pantries and meal sites whether they are members of The Food Bank or not.

Rachel's Table's guiding principle is the concept of tikkun olam – a Hebrew phrase that means “repair of the world.” Rachel's Table serves three counties through food rescue and purchasing programs, gleaning, known as the Bea's Harvest initiative, and Growing Gardens, a program that trains and supports a network of agency-gardeners to establish and maintain gardens in partnership with those they serve. Rachel's Table programs additionally foster youth engagement and leadership, food justice education, and interfaith collaboration.

With the recognition that The Food Bank and Rachel's Table could more efficiently serve our overlapping communities by working in tandem, we formed a partnership in 2019 to maximize our respective strengths. We both have strong connections with stores such as Big Y and Stop & Shop that regularly donate large quantities of food to both of us. Rachel's Table has a large volunteer base that is willing to pick up food and distribute it directly through both volunteer cars and Rachel's Table's refrigerated van. With careful coordination across all involved, Rachel's Table volunteers pick up this donated food from stores and bring it immediately to food pantries and meal sites. The beauty of this partnership is that it both eliminates member wait times and additional processing at The Food Bank warehouse and frees up The Food Bank's trucks to extend delivery service to more members.

Resource sharing is another important advantage to a collaborative approach to hunger relief. When the Rachel's Table Teen Board expressed interest in getting more involved in advocacy work, they reached out to The Food Bank's Public Policy Manager, Laura Sylvester, to learn how to get involved in local and statewide public policy education and advocacy on food insecurity.



Each organization has also taken separate but parallel paths to increase access to healthy food. Fresh produce can be hard to come by due to its short shelf life; getting it from the farm to the tables of those who need it must be done quickly and carefully to ensure the food is still fresh when it arrives. Both The Food Bank and Rachel's Table have developed partnerships with local farmers to expedite this process. For The Food Bank, this involves taking large-scale donations, growing food on its own farms, and purchasing food directly from farmers with state funding.

Rachel's Table takes a different approach by activating its volunteer network to 'glean' food leftover after initial harvesting through its Bea's Harvest Initiative. Both organizations are also launching programs aimed at teaching community members to grow their own food – helpful tools to drive education, community collaboration, and resiliency.

In the nonprofit space, where ongoing operations require community support, the urge to compete for resources too often gets in the way of forming meaningful partnerships. Our partnership understands there is no one-size-fits-all solution to hunger. Hunger is the result of a wide range of underlying causes, requiring an equally wide range of problem solvers and solutions. Through collaborative problem-solving, The Food Bank and Rachel's Table create an abundance of ideas and resources to strengthen the emergency food network in Western Massachusetts.

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Learn more: www.foodbankwma.org/donate/planned-giving