

MEDIA ADVISORY



For Immediate Release

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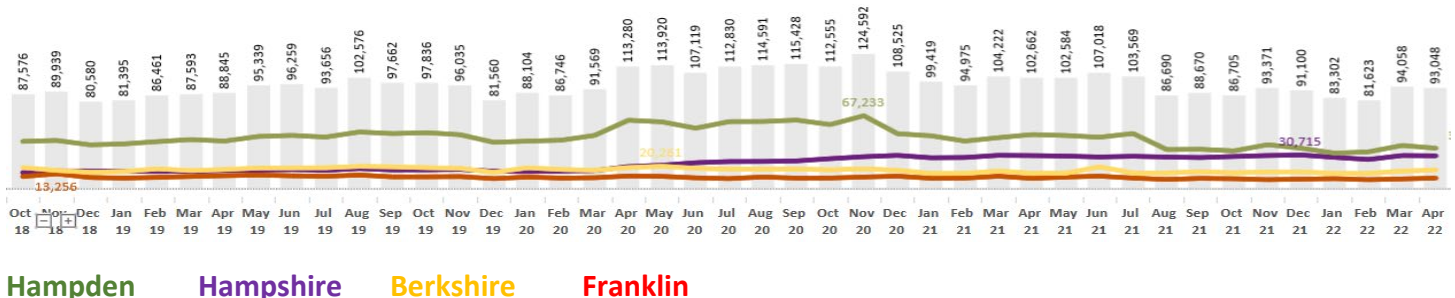
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Moving Target in Food Assistance Across Western Massachusetts

Local food pantries and meal sites that form the region’s emergency food network are reporting greater numbers of residents visiting their sites for food assistance. Since March across all four counties of Western Massachusetts from Berkshire to Franklin to Hampden Counties, food insecurity has begun to rise again due to sustained inflation especially of food and gasoline, coupled with the expiration of special government assistance during the pandemic. According to The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, which serves as the region’s clearinghouse of emergency food assistance to its 173 local members, this trend is going in the wrong direction after a gradual decline to pre-pandemic levels.

“In the first two months of 2022, food insecurity had returned to pre-pandemic levels thanks to astounding community and government response to the pandemic,” said Andrew Morehouse, The Food Bank’s executive director.

Average Monthly Individuals Served by County



Source: The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, Inc., www.foodbankwma.org

81,623 individuals continued to seek food assistance in February down from its peak of 124,592 individuals in November 2020. “We can’t be satisfied with the old normal. We must do more to solve food insecurity once

and for all. And, with food insecurity on the rise again, The Food Bank will continue to be there for our neighbors in need of food assistance,” said Morehouse.

Food supplies are always a moving target for The Food Bank and three other regional food banks that supply food to local food pantries and meal sites throughout the entire Commonwealth. Supplies respond to the state of the economy and its impact on food insecurity. “When the economy goes south, supplies of food increase from state and federal governments,” said Shirley Del Rio, Director of Food Distribution. “In 2021, the federal Community Food Assistance Program (CFAP) and unprecedented private grants to purchase food were the direct response to the pandemic.”

Over the last nine months, however, The Food Bank provided the equivalent of two million fewer meals given the declining number of individuals seeking food assistance. The twenty percent decline was attributed mainly to the termination of CFAP “food boxes” that sourced fresh vegetables from local farmers. The other major decline in The Food Bank’s inventory was food it purchased with restricted grants, principally the now-closed Massachusetts COVID-19 Relief Fund spearheaded by First Lady of Massachusetts Lauren Baker.

Now that food insecurity is increasing again, The Food Bank is ramping up food purchases with support from the community (foodbankwma.org). Supplies of local vegetables are also on the rise given the start of the local growing season. Every year, The Food Bank purchases about half a million pounds of fresh vegetables from dozens of local farmers with support from the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP). Many more, collectively, donate about the same amount every year.

MEFAP and federal funds from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture account for more than half of our entire inventory. The remainder comes from local supermarkets, farmers, and other sources. Over the last several years, another challenge has been insufficient storage space at our facility in Hatfield. Del Rio added, “We’ve had to turn away the equivalent of more than one million meals because we didn’t have a place to store it.”

In June, The Food Bank broke ground on its future food distribution center and headquarters in Chicopee, which will be twice the size of its Hatfield location. It will sell its current building and move into its new distribution center next summer.

Much like households and other businesses –non-profit like The Food Bank and for-profit – The Food Bank is facing rising operating, transportation, and food costs. “We’ve been paying 24% more for fresh vegetables from local and national suppliers,” Del Rio explained. “We expect increases of 20% moving forward for shelf stable dry goods. Freight charges alone are up 42%.”

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The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts believes that everyone has a right to healthy food regardless of their circumstances. Serving Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire counties, The Food Bank leads the region’s emergency food network, distributing nutritious food to households with lower incomes. Since 1982, they have been providing individuals facing hunger with the food they need to survive and leading communities towards long-term solutions to food insecurity by addressing its underlying causes. They are committed to creating a Western Massachusetts where no one faces food insecurity, and everyone has access to nutritious food. For more information, visit foodbankwma.org.