

New Funding for Wrap-Around Services

For decades, the healthcare industry has accepted the concept of Social Determinants of Health referring to “upstream” causes like food insecurity. Understanding this connection, several years ago the Food Bank started the Food Insecurity Screening & Referral Initiative (FISRI) in partnership with the Holyoke Health Center (HHC). Thanks to a three-year innovation grant from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts, care providers at the health center screened their patients, and those who were found to be food insecure were referred to a Food Bank employee who worked out of HHC. Through conversations with the patient, Damaris Arroyo, Food Assistance Resource Coordinator, was able to refer them to food resources such as food pantries in their neighborhood, the Food Bank’s SNAP outreach team, and the Mobile Food Bank and Brown Bag food distribution sites. In addition, partnerships with several other community organizations allowed her to make referrals for services including housing and childcare assistance, Meals on Wheels, employment training, and more.

In January 2020, MassHealth launched a “Flexible Services Program” as part of a demonstration project funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. This demonstration project established Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs), groups of health providers who are financially accountable for their members’ costs and quality of care. The intent of ACOs is to increase quality (i.e., patient health) while decreasing costs and reducing the “silos” of health care services. The Flexible Services Program is designed to address the Social Determinants of Health by

providing certain ACO-enrolled patients with access to nutrition and housing.

In 2020, the Food Bank began to partner with ACOs and by 2022 we had contracts with three of them: Mass General Brigham, which includes Cooley Dickinson Hospital; Community Care Cooperative (C3), which includes Holyoke Health Center, Community Health Center of Franklin County, Hilltown Community Health Center, and Friends of the Homeless; and Boston Medical Center, which includes Mercy Medical Center in Springfield.

This new ACO structure has allowed the Food Bank to receive funding to offer additional wrap-around services by passing funds through to our partners, such as Greater Springfield Senior Services, West-Mass ElderCare, Highland Valley Elder Services, and LifePath. Depending on the needs of each patient, these organizations provide home-delivered, medically tailored meals. Other partners, Just Roots in Greenfield and Agrics Organics Farm in Wilbraham, provide boxes of fresh local vegetables. We can also offer grocery store vouchers to give people a boost while they get connected with other available food assistance. More recently, the now four-member FISRI team assists patients who come to us from outside the ACOs through generous grants provided by Health New England, Baystate Health (Better Together), and Mass General Brigham.

Recently, MassHealth’s ACO demonstration project was expanded and extended through 2027. This is excellent news as continued funding will allow us to assist more patients to access healthy food and improve their health and quality of life.



Cultivating For Community at Food Bank Farms, April 2023