

Communities that Care

COALITION



Food Access in Franklin County and the North Quabbin

A report on focus groups with residents, seniors, and youth



Conducted June 2016 – September 2016
by members of the Mass in Motion Steering Committee



Thanks are due to:



Photo credit: The Recorder

The design and conduct of interviews and focus groups was a collective effort, and this report presents the contributions of many individuals and organizations in Franklin County and the North Quabbin.

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Finally, thank you to all the focus group participants for sharing your experiences and insights so openly and honestly with us. This report and its recommendations are driven by and belong to you.

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Preface



Over **1 in 10** people in Franklin County are food insecure*

Source: Map the Meal Gap, Feeding America 2015



18% of children in Franklin County are food insecure*

Source: Map the Meal Gap, Feeding America 2015



Nation



Franklin County

In Franklin County **\$1 buys only 85¢** worth of food, compared with the nation

Source: American Community Survey

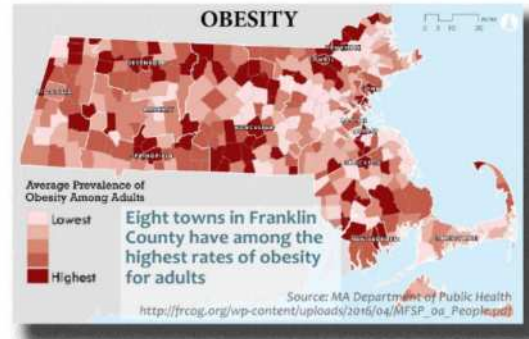
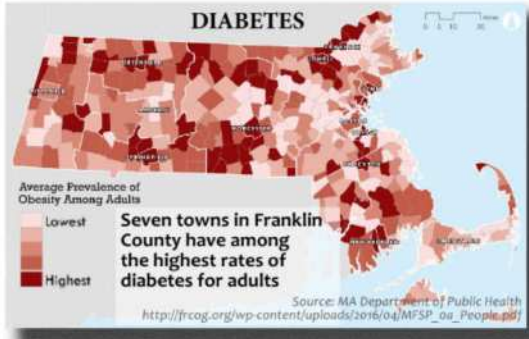
Food access in Franklin County and the North Quabbin is complex. While farm fields and food venues abound, many people struggle to get enough nutritious food to eat. In Franklin County, over 10% of people and 18% of children are food insecure. Furthermore, over two thirds of Franklin County residents eat less than the USDA recommended amount of vegetables per day, and nearly 50% of youth said they did not eat 3 or more fruits and vegetables the previous day.

The implications of food insecurity and access to healthy food are significant. Children who do not have enough food to eat have twice the chance of poor or fair health compared to those who do. Diets low in healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, can contribute to overweight and obesity. In Franklin County, 53% of residents and around 30% of children are overweight or obese.

Obesity is one of the biggest drivers of preventable chronic disease, such as type-2 diabetes and heart disease, in the United States. Adults who are obese are three times more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure or diabetes.

People with low incomes and people of color are disproportionately affected by these largely preventable chronic diseases. This is in part due to social determinants of health - the conditions into which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. These conditions are shaped by the distribution of money, power, and resources at global, national, and local levels. Such resources include, but are not limited to, employment opportunities, housing, education, health care, public safety, and food access.

Preface (cont.)



In 2015, Mass in Motion Franklin County received expanded funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to address the increasing incidence of diabetes and heart disease. Through this grant funding, FRCOG staff are implementing strategies to increase people's access to healthy food and opportunities for active living through policy, systems, and environment change.

In order to effectively implement strategies to improve Franklin County and the North Quabbin residents' access to healthy food, the Mass in Motion Steering Committee suggested that PFY staff gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of the food access landscape from the perspective of those who experience greater challenges in accessing food.

In 2013, the North Quabbin Community Coalition produced a report, *Rural Food Access in the North Quabbin*

in an effort to assess food access. Many important aspects about food access for residents of the North Quabbin were brought to light. However, the report acknowledged that low income households may have been under-represented in the survey respondents. Furthermore, it did not report specifically on food access patterns for other populations that are vulnerable to food access issues, such as seniors and youth.

Thus, beginning in June 2016, FRCOG's Partnership for Youth (PFY) staff held focus groups with people living in subsidized housing, seniors, and youth in Greenfield and Turners Falls. In addition, two focus groups were held with participants of Diabetes Prevention Program groups in Greenfield and Athol. These groups were selected due to the greater concentration of low income and minority populations, as well as the prevalence of chronic disease risk factors and outcomes.

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Methods



Focus Groups with Priority Populations

PFY staff took responsibility for conducting focus groups with three priority populations: seniors, residents of low income housing units, and youth. Staff designed the focus group protocol, with guidance provided by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the USDA “food security” framework, and input from key community stakeholders.

Focus group questions addressed community members’ knowledge about healthy and local food, factors influencing their food purchasing and consumption, and their perspectives regarding solutions to improve their access to healthy and local food.

From June 2016 to September 2016, our team completed 10 focus groups with 82 participants across Greenfield, Turners Falls, and Athol, Massachusetts.

Two or three staff members attended each focus group, with one facilitating the discussion and one or two taking detailed notes. The notes were taken on large sheets of paper and posted on the wall throughout the focus group to allow participants the ability to make additions, corrections, or redactions as they saw fit.

PFY staff reviewed and transcribed the notes, and created a coding scheme based on the focus group questions. They identified recurrent themes and sub-themes through frequency of coding within similar groups (seniors, low income housing, and youth), as well as across all focus groups.

In this report, quotations are in black italicized text, and focus group participants are identified by town and priority population category (resident, senior, or youth).

DIANA'S STORY: A Food Access Scenario

This is a scenario that ties together the most pertinent issues of food access that rose to the surface in the focus groups. While Diana is a fictional person, the experiences depicted here are illustrative of challenges many residents of Greenfield, Turners Falls, and Athol face.



Imagine “Diana”, a longtime resident of Greenfield and a single parent of three children. Diana and her children live in Oak Courts, a family public housing development located approximately 1.5 miles outside of Greenfield’s town center. Diana works 40 hours/week at a company in the Greenfield Industrial Park from 8 am to 4 pm, where she earns minimum wage, \$11.00/hour. As a caring mother, Diana does all she can to ensure her children are happy and healthy. However, with limited financial means and without access to a car, Diana experiences many barriers to accessing affordable, nutritious, and tasty food to provide for her family.

Diana’s story will weave throughout this report, setting the stage for each of the following primary factors that impact Franklin County residents’ ability to access healthy food.

Many factors impact the decisions residents make in prioritizing where to shop and what to buy. The following factors will be explored through Diana’s story and the insights of the focus group participants:



The final section of the report takes an in depth look at the crucial connection between **transportation and food access**, as the issue of transportation pervaded all focus group conversations.

Primary Factors in Accessing Healthy Food

 **Cost**

 **SNAP benefits**

 **Convenience**

 **Variety & quality**

 **Food portions**

 **Transportation**

Cost

DIANA'S STORY: Cost is an important factor for Diana in choosing where she shops. She finds the best deals, and specials on certain items at a large grocery store. Prices at a nearby smaller grocery store are reasonable, but they do not have as many specials. While she likes the idea of purchasing more fresh, local produce at the farmers' market, she is worried that it is too expensive. She finds the prices at a convenience store a block from her house are higher than at other locations, but will occasionally buy staples like milk or bread if she has run out and needs something quickly.



Franklin County has consistently had the lowest average wages of all fourteen counties in Massachusetts since 2000.



US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2011

Cost of food was a significant factor in where people decided to shop. Many participants with access to a car were willing to go further distances to access cheaper food.

"I go to Market Basket because they have the best sales. But I have to get a ride from family or friends." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"My friend takes me to Walmart in New Hampshire because they have better prices and large quantities." TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

"I'll go to different stores based on what's on sale. Hannaford, Walmart, and Price Chopper usually have the best sales. For certain items, going to New Hampshire is cheaper." ATHOL RESIDENT

"Price matters a lot. I'll spend more for food that will last longer instead of fresh food." GREENFIELD YOUTH

Many participants rely on coupons to make purchasing food more affordable.

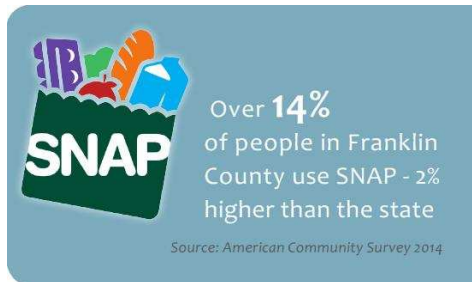
"I pay attention to coupons. But sometimes they don't cover the things I want, or they're always for stuff you don't need. Stop and Shop has better coupons." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"My family does extreme couponing!" GREENFIELD YOUTH

"I look for sales and coupons to get the best deal." TURNERS FALLS SENIOR

SNAP & WIC Benefits

DIANA'S STORY: Diana receives SNAP & WIC benefits, and prioritizes shopping at stores that accept it, including both of the grocery stores closest to her. She has heard that the Farmers' Market accepts SNAP, but has not used it there yet.



Participants in senior, subsidized housing, and youth focus groups all cited SNAP benefits as a part of their food purchasing considerations. The administration of SNAP benefits once a month results in many participants experiencing difficulty in obtaining enough food at the end of the monthly cycle.

“Food stamps impact when I shop and what I buy. When I first get [the benefits] I can buy healthier things. When I run out, I buy cheaper things which are less healthy.” GREENFIELD YOUTH

“I go to Aldi in Hadley, and also Big Y and Food City depending on the time of month and what I can afford.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“At the beginning of the month I go to BJ’s and get the things we need in bulk. I’ll walk there and come back in a taxi. Sometimes I have to wait a long time to make the trip, because the taxi isn’t reliable. At the end of the month it is especially hard for us to get food.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“I rarely get takeout, occasionally I’ll get Subway or Chinese food. The end of the month is the hardest time on a fixed income. I am not able to eat healthy.” TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

DID YOU KNOW?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly Food Stamps) is the largest domestic hunger program in the country, offering nutrition assistance to millions of eligible individuals and families. Anyone eligible for SNAP who is a MA resident, and either pregnant or with children under 5, can receive Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program benefits as well. In addition, anyone who is a foster child (regardless of foster parent income) is eligible for WIC. Anyone who enrolls in WIC receives a consultation with a nutritionist and diabetes screening.

Convenience

DIANA'S STORY: Convenience matters to Diana in considering where to shop. She can walk to one grocery store and the convenience store. The convenience store has longer hours and is open on Sundays. Diana can get to the Farmers' Market on foot, but it is difficult to walk there with her small children and carry groceries back. This is also a factor in getting to the food pantry and community meals. The grocery store Diana prefers to shop at is too far to walk comfortably, and part of the road is dangerous for pedestrians.



Stores that are close by and easy to get to are often favored by residents.

Focus group participants indicated that convenience was a significant factor in determining where they accessed food. The definition of convenience varied from proximity to their residence, or proximity to work and other daily activities to which they were already driving.

"I plan my shopping days depending on particular needs and what else I am doing that day." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"I go to Hannaford because it is convenient and they have more organic foods." ATHOL RESIDENT

"I go to Walmart because it is cheap and convenient." ATHOL RESIDENT

For Greenfield and Turners Falls participants without reliable access to a car, the ability to walk to a store was the primary reason cited for where they most frequently purchase food.

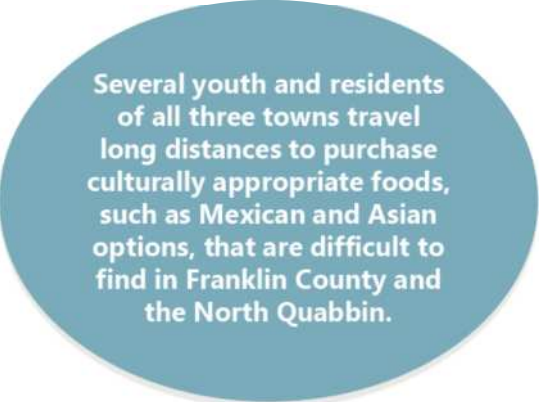
"I shop at Foster's because it's close and walkable." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"People here go to Foster's because it's walking distance." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"Food City is convenient and I can walk there." TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

Variety and Quality

DIANA'S STORY: For variety, Diana's top choice is a larger grocery store that is further away from her apartment. She can get anything she wants there, and supplies and quality are consistent. She has noticed that there are more fresh vegetables at the food pantry in the past few years, and she is curious about the fresh-from-the-farm produce at the Farmers' Market.



Several youth and residents of all three towns travel long distances to purchase culturally appropriate foods, such as Mexican and Asian options, that are difficult to find in Franklin County and the North Quabbin.

In choosing where to shop, focus group participants valued both the variety and quality available at food retailers.

"I shop at Foster's because they have good fresh products, and they contribute a lot to the local economy." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"Big Y has a lot of selections and better prices." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

Many Greenfield and Turners Falls residents and seniors shop at Foster's or Food City because they are within walking distance to their home. Participants noted that larger chain grocery stores had a better selection of products at a better price, and wished for more variety at the smaller retailers or for better transportation options to reach larger grocers.

"Foster's is more convenient, but it doesn't have as much variety. You get the same stuff over and over, or they don't have everything I want." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"I go to Foster's because it's close and walkable, but I only buy certain things, like veggies and some local things. Things are cheaper at Big Y and there is more selection." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"Big Y has better quality, but it's really hard to get to." TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

"Food City is a smaller chain, so they can't provide as much variety. But it's the only store that is convenient to walk to. A weekly shopping van to Stop and Shop would let us get better variety at a better price." TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

Food Portions

DIANA'S STORY: Diana likes when there are discounts on volume purchases at larger grocery stores, which help her feed her children at a reasonable cost. She occasionally helps an elder in her community shop, and finds the smaller portions make for less waste when cooking for one person.

The ability to purchase in bulk for both cost savings and convenience was brought up as an important factor for Greenfield, Turners Falls, and Athol residents, particularly if they have children.

"I go to BJ's for bulk, especially for my kids. You can get snacks for school and juice. I also buy their meat and portion it out myself." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"If you team up with others, it can be affordable to share items you buy in bulk from BJ's." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"At BJ's I go for milk, water, and juice." TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

In contrast, seniors in Greenfield and Turners Falls brought up the challenges of cooking for one person in relation to their ability to eat healthy food.

"I buy food as I need it. It is hard to cook for one person. That's why we eat out a lot." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"I buy some hot foods at the grocery store. It helps me with better portion control, but I wish the prepared foods were a little healthier." TURNERS FALLS SENIOR

"For people who have lost a spouse, it is harder to eat healthy." TURNERS FALLS SENIOR

"At Foster's you can buy smaller amounts of things, which is better for one person. Like you can buy just one pre-packaged pork chop. This is very important!" GREENFIELD SENIOR



www.guardyourhealth.com

TRANSPORTATION & FOOD ACCESS



Photo credit:
Creative Commons

People without their own car experience challenges getting to the grocery store, including navigating public transit.

“Study after study suggests that **households with cars are much more able to adapt to the challenges of limited food access than households without access to a car.**” – **Healthy Community Design Toolkit, Vol. 2**

Food access and transportation access are closely connected. PolicyLink’s 2013 Report, *Access to Healthy Food and Why it Matters: A Review of the Research*, cites numerous studies that scientifically support the statement that, “Lack of transportation is a barrier to accessing a grocery store.”

The rural setting of Franklin County and the North Quabbin means that a majority of residents depend on cars to get food. In a 2013 Food Access Survey conducted by the North Quabbin Community Coalition, 95% of respondents stated that they used their own car to shop for food. However, for respondents with incomes under \$10,000, only half use their own vehicle while the remaining half must find alternative means of transportation, such as public transit, walking, or catching a ride.

For the segment of the population that do not have their own car, accessing healthy, local food is a tremendous challenge.

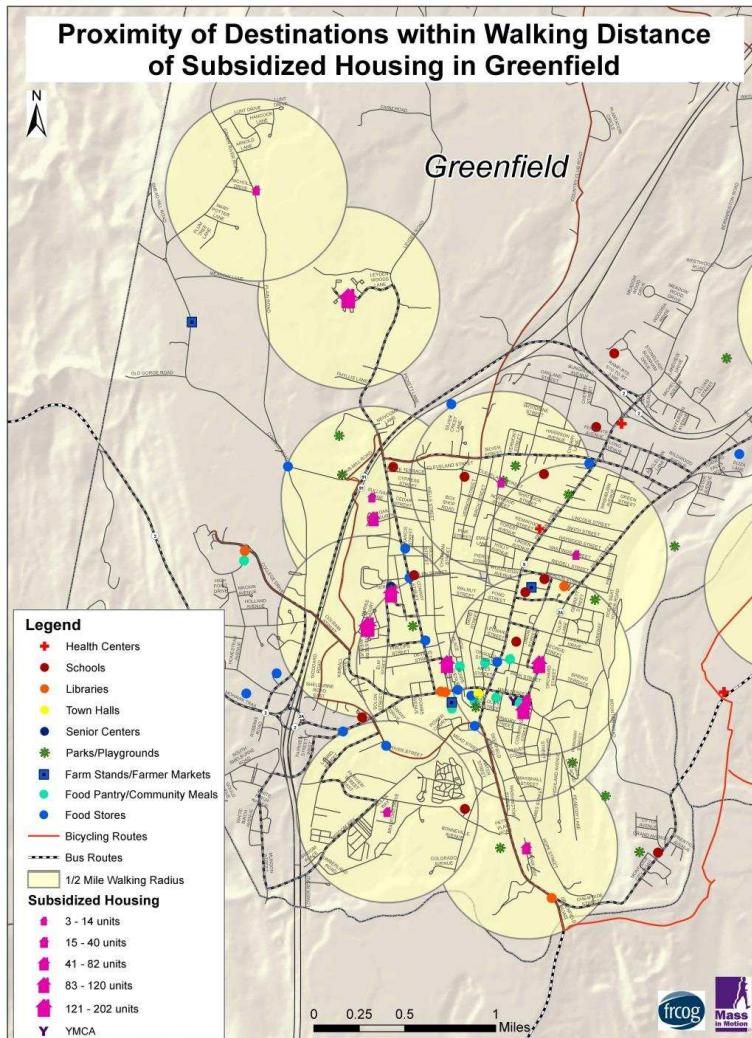
In every focus group, the issue of transportation rose to the fore. Participants spoke passionately and strongly about the barriers that lack of reliable transportation posed in their ability to access food.

The following section highlights maps of affordable housing units in Greenfield, Turners Falls, and Orange in relation to places to access food, and comments that were made about public transit, ride sharing and taxis, and walking.

TRANSPORTATION & FOOD ACCESS

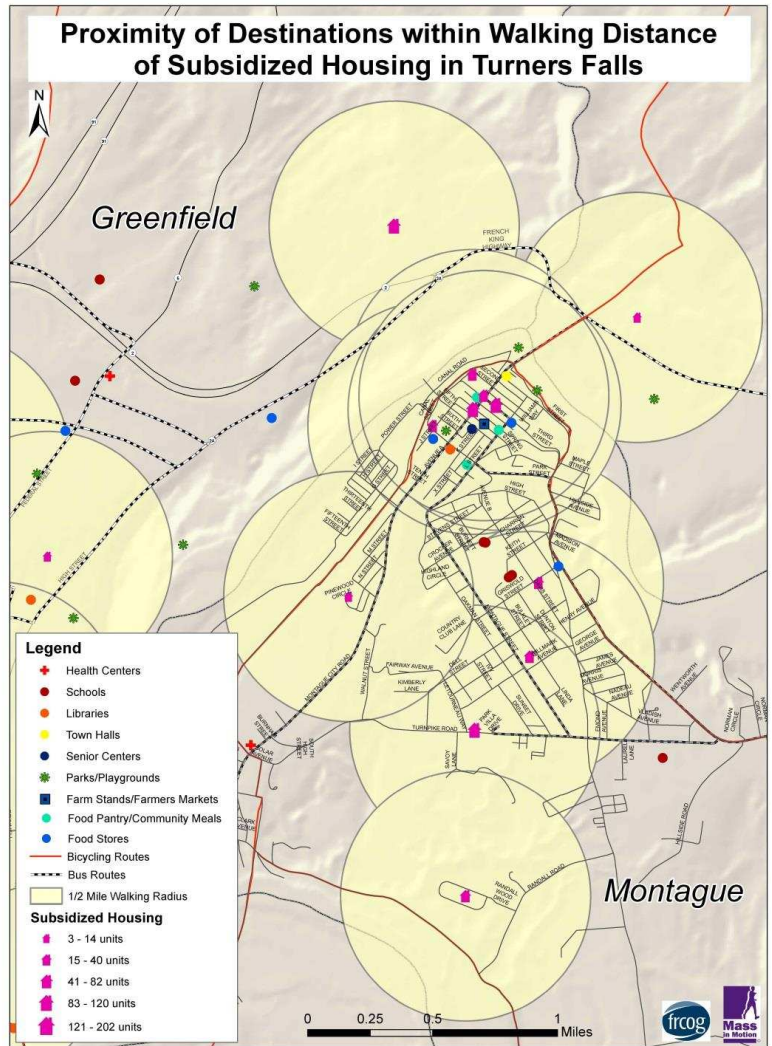
While we know that 11% of people in Franklin County are food insecure¹, we need to understand specifically where people might experience difficulty accessing food. If residents do not have a car, are they able to walk, bike, or take the bus to a grocery store? These maps show a half mile radius around subsidized housing units to indicate walkability to places to access healthy food, in addition to other community resources. Bicycling routes and bus routes are also highlighted.

In Greenfield, most subsidized housing units are within walking distance of places to find fresh food. Subsidized housing on Leyden Road and Plain Road are notable exceptions. For those within walking distance, affordability of healthy food is still an issue.



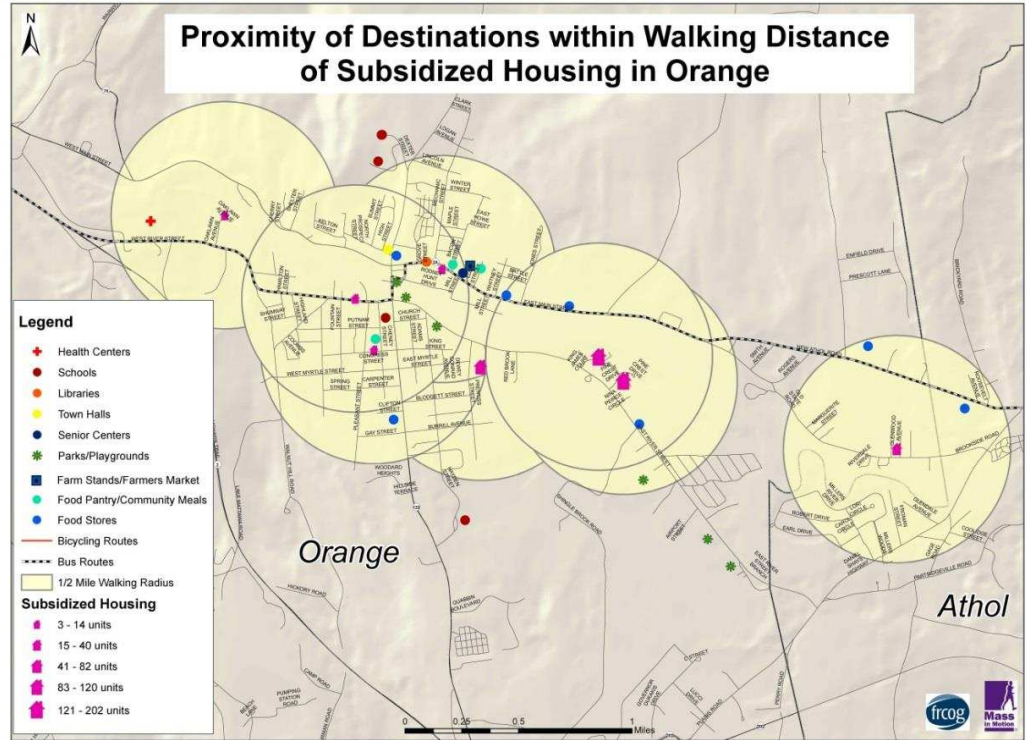
TRANSPORTATION & FOOD ACCESS

In Turners Falls, residents of subsidized housing downtown are within walking distance of places to find fresh food. Areas outside of a half mile of downtown are largely not within walking distance of healthy food options.



TRANSPORTATION & FOOD ACCESS

In Orange*, residents of subsidized housing downtown are within walking distance of places to find fresh food. Areas outside of a half mile of downtown do not have safe walking routes to get to healthy food options.



*Due to data limitations, subsidized housing information was only available within Franklin County, which does not include the town of Athol.

TRANSPORTATION & FOOD ACCESS



When asked what would make a difference in their ability to access healthy food, residents cited the need for better transportation options, including a shuttle service to major grocery stores.

“I wish we had more community scheduled trips to shopping places, like some senior communities have.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“A weekly shopping van to Stop & Shop would let us get better variety at a better price. It would help us get more fresh produce.” TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

“A transportation service that goes at the right time of the month when people have more funds to stock up, like the beginning of the second week of the month.” TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

“It would be good to have a carpooling service/collaborative group.” GREENFIELD SENIOR

Participants also expressed the strong desire for improved public transit.

“I hope they add Saturday hours on public transit, otherwise your life just stops on Friday.” GREENFIELD SENIOR

“Better public transportation! Taking the bus is very tiring and making multiple stops takes time. Plus you can't buy frozen food, especially in the summer.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“There is an effort to ask the FRTA to provide one bus per month for a group to go to Walmart.” GREENFIELD SENIOR

TRANSPORTATION: Public Transit



Photo credit: Creative Commons, Almonroth, author

The FRTA website states that “your carry on bags are limited to the number of items/bags you can carry onto the vehicle in one trip without disrupting normal entrance onto the vehicle.” In practice, this has sometimes been enforced as a “two-bag limit,” as referenced by many focus group participants.

Seniors, young people, and folks with low incomes find it difficult to go shopping for food by bus. It is a time-intensive and tiring process. Many people are deterred from using the bus for grocery shopping, due to limits on the amount of items they may carry onto the bus.

“Taking the bus is a job in and of itself. You have to wait a long time, and it takes too long when you have groceries. Every two weeks I’ll do a shop where I leave my house at 8:30 and don’t get back until 11:30 or 12:30. Plus you’re not allowed to bring more than 2 bags of food per person on the bus, and you can’t bring your pull cart. When I get home, I have to lie down and rest because of my medical conditions”. GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“With the bus service, you are at their mercy. Round trip to Stop & Shop is almost a full day project”. TURNERSFALLS RESIDENT

“When I take the bus to Stop & Shop or Big Y, I have to limit the stuff I buy because of the 2 bag limit on the bus”. GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“I would take public transportation, but it’s hard without refrigeration with how long it takes. You can’t wait for public transportation with food”. GREENFIELD YOUTH

“To get from the bus to the apartment you have to walk 7 minutes with bags, which is prohibitive for some people.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“There was on demand transport services for 15 years, but then the federal government cut funding. Then the state cut our budget, and now there is a fixed route system with two buses that run. But the 2 bag limit is a big problem.” ATHOL RESIDENT

TRANSPORTATION: Ride Sharing & Taxis



Some Franklin County residents rely on family and friends to provide rides in order to access the food they want to buy.

"I go to Market Basket because they have the best sales. But I have to get a ride from family or friends." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"Friends take each other shopping. The bus is too hard for people with certain limitations." TURNERS FALLS SENIOR

For some, taxis are another means to access food. However, grocery shopping by taxi is costly and unreliable.

"I'll walk to BJ's and come back in a taxi. But sometimes I have to wait a long time to make the trip, because the taxi isn't reliable. It is especially hard to get food at the end of the month." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"The only taxi service in Greenfield has a monopoly. It's \$10 each way, and sometimes you call and they won't come pick you up." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"The Athol Council on Aging established a contract with a bus company in Athol only for seniors with a set number of slots. There are no cabs in town." ATHOL RESIDENT

TRANSPORTATION: Walking



Mass in Motion hosted a walkability workshop in Northfield, training Franklin County residents about ways to improve walkability in their towns.

Many people without access to a vehicle walk to buy their food.

“We can walk to most things more easily than other people. I’ll walk everywhere. Sometimes walking is faster than waiting for the bus, and it’s cheaper.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“Sometimes I walk to Fosters. It’s a little less than a mile each way, and I just carry the groceries.” GREENFIELD YOUTH

“I sometimes walk to downtown stores like CVS or the Co-op. But it can be tiring, I need places to take a rest.” GREENFIELD SENIOR

Several participants expressed the desire to purchase food elsewhere, but were limited by their lack of access to reliable transportation.

“Food City has high prices, but it’s the most convenient without transportation, so I go there.” TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

“Big Y has better quality, but it’s hard to get to.” TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

“If I didn’t have to walk, I would go other places. Foster’s is more expensive and doesn’t have as good of sales. But their meat is reasonably priced and good quality.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“It’s too far to walk to the Center for Self Reliance. I go occasionally, but I don’t take everything because it’s too hard to carry those huge boxes and walk back.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

Venues to Access Food

Given the primary factors that influence the focus group participants in their food decisions, we now turn to the particular locations people get food. As part of our Mass in Motion funding, we are working on promoting healthy food choices in large grocery stores, convenience stores, and food pantries. Community meals and the Meals on Wheels program were frequently cited as important means to access food, and are included in our analysis as well. Finally, the issue of access to local food was explored.

 **Grocery Stores**

 **Convenience Stores**

 **Food Pantries**

 **Community Meals & Meals on Wheels**

 **Farmers' Markets, Farm Stands & CSAs**

 **Gardens & Co-ops**

Venues to Access Food: Grocery Stores



Photo credit: CC0 Public Domain

The most frequently cited reasons for shopping at larger grocery stores were sales and coupons.

Based on cost, variety and quality, and SNAP benefits, many residents prefer to go to larger grocery stores, such as Big Y, Stop & Shop, Market Basket, and Walmart. The most frequently cited reasons for shopping at larger grocery stores were sales and coupons.

Participants were willing to travel farther distances for these reasons, if they were able to access appropriate transportation.

“I will go to Market Basket in Swanzey or Athol because of the prices.”
GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“I go to Aldi in Hadley, also Big Y and Food City depending on the time of month and when I can catch a ride.” TURNERS FALLS RESIDENT

While seniors liked the sales available at large grocery stores, deals such as “buy 1 get 1 free” are not always reasonable for cooking for one person.

“I go to Big Y for their sales. They often have buy 1 get 1 free. But sometimes you don't need that much, so you just give the extra to your friends or family.”
GREENFIELD SENIOR

Venues to Access Food: Grocery Stores (cont.)



Photo credit: Fosters

Convenience, quality, and the desire to support the local economy are reasons people shop at smaller grocery stores.

Many residents frequented smaller grocery stores as well. The most cited reasons for going to grocery stores such as Foster's and Food City, were convenience, quality, and the desire to support the local economy.

"I go to Foster's! They have good fresh products, and they contribute a lot to the local economy. And I can walk there." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"I go to Foster's because it's close and walkable, but I only buy certain things, like veggies and some local things." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"I go to Food City because it's closest. I go to Foster's for good fish." TURNERSFALLS SENIOR

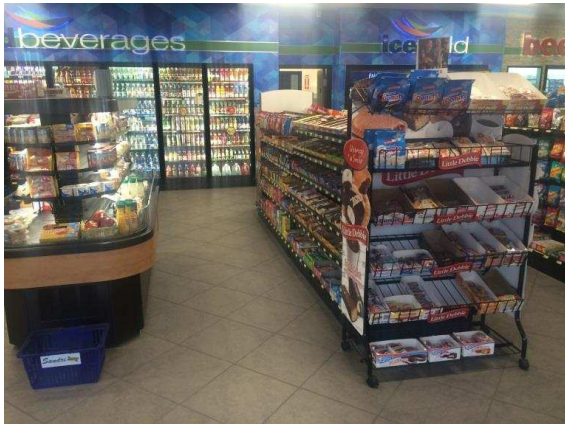
For seniors, the ability to buy smaller portions was an important factor in prioritizing where to shop.

"At Foster's you can buy smaller amounts of things, which is better for one person. Like you can buy just one pre-packaged pork chop. This is very important!" GREENFIELD SENIOR

While many participants liked the convenience and quality available at these smaller stores, the lack of variety and sales meant people would travel to other stores to access desired products and cheaper prices.

"Foster's is more convenient, but it doesn't have as much variety. You get the same stuff over and over, or they don't have everything I want." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

Venues to Access Food: Convenience Stores



While often easy to get to, convenience stores tend to be expensive, compared with supermarkets.

Some residents of low income housing and seniors viewed convenience stores as a last resort, largely due to prices and products offered.

“I don’t buy alcohol, cigarettes, scratch tickets, or junk food. So I would only go to a convenience store in an emergency.” GREENFIELD SENIOR

“I can send my kids down the street to pick things up. They have the necessities but they are expensive. If I run out of something or am in a pinch, I will get it there.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

Several participants went to convenience stores specifically to buy milk.

“I go to Cumberland Farms for milk.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“Convenience stores are really expensive, but they always have good deals on milk. Once you go in, it’s hard to resist other things.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

Youth from Greenfield cited convenience stores as locations to obtain snacks and beverages with more regularity.

“At convenience stores, I look for something to raise my sugar level quickly – I’m not looking for healthy things.” GREENFIELD YOUTH

“I usually get snacks at convenience stores, like jerky and Ramen.” GREENFIELD YOUTH

“I’ll get a drink from Cumbby’s every day. It’s sad when soda is cheaper than water though.” GREENFIELD YOUTH

Venues to Access Food: Food Pantries



DID YOU KNOW?

The Center for Self Reliance allows participants to split their monthly pick up into two trips, to help accommodate getting the food back home. They also allow participants with physical or logistical barriers to fill out a form authorizing designated people (friends, family, and caregivers) to pick up on their behalf.

The food pantry in Greenfield is well utilized by many focus group participants. Greenfield residents appreciate the fresh produce selection available at the Center for Self Reliance, but experience difficulty in finding a reliable means of transportation to handle bringing home the amount of food they receive.

“I go occasionally to the Center for Self Reliance, but I don’t take everything because it’s too hard to carry those huge boxes and walk back.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“The Center for Self Reliance is good. I can get some fresh vegetables and frozen meat, and you can choose what you want. But it can be hard to get to. You need a ride.” GREENFIELD SENIOR

Participants that used other pantries in Franklin County cited the inability to choose the food they receive as a barrier to eating healthy foods.

“I go a few times a year to the food pantry. They have fresh veggies, but a lot of processed food, low quality foods.” SENIOR

“The food pantry lines form at 9 am. But the food is not stuff I can eat. You can’t pick what you want. It creates waste. They give us government surplus foods that are not healthy.” YOUTH

Venues to Access Food: Community Meals & Meals on Wheels

DID YOU KNOW?

Over the past 20 years, federal funding for Older Americans Act (OAA) programs, such as Meals on Wheels, has decreased by 18% while the senior population has grown by 34%. The Meals on Wheels program allows seniors to remain living at home, improves their health, and saves billions in Medicare and Medicaid costs.

Learn more at: goo.gl/8mZ89m

Community meals play an important role in many participants' ability to access food in all three towns.

At Stone Soup, boy do they put on a good meal. It's a pay what you can meal and everyone can come. You can also take home leftovers." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"A lot of people here go to community meals, like at Our Lady of Peace Church, but you'd better like pasta!" GREENFIELD RESIDENT

Seniors with limited mobility use LifePath's Meals on Wheels program or "brown bags" provided by their town Council on Aging as a food access point. However, many expressed disappointment with the healthfulness and quality of the food.

"We use Meals on Wheels and the brown bag program. The Meals on Wheels food isn't always good quality. But it's good if you can't get out, and helps check on people too." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"In the brown bag there's so much peanut butter. I won't always use what I get. A lot of times people will leave what they don't want from their brown bag out so others can come take things." GREENFIELD SENIOR

"The brown bags sometimes have too much processed food, low quality foods. It does come with recipes which can help." TURNERS FALLS SENIOR

Venues to Access Food: Farmers' Markets, Farm Stands, and CSAs



Participants did not cite farmers' markets as common sites to access food. Cost, timing, and transportation presented barriers for many people.

"I went this weekend, but I didn't see anything I wanted, and it was very expensive."
GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"Saturdays are hard for many folks to go because they have to work." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

"I know about the farmers' market in Orange in the summer, but it is hard to get to."
ATHOL RESIDENT

Several participants mentioned farm stands as a better option to get fresh, local produce for better prices.

"The summer and fall is great for farm stands, because there are so many nearby. I go early to get cucumbers." TURNERS FALLS SENIOR

"I go to Butynski's farm stand, if I can get a ride. It's so fresh!" GREENFIELD SENIOR

"It's cheaper to get vegetables at farm stands, like the one in Deerfield." GREENFIELD RESIDENT

Some seniors had CSAs at discounted price. Others were interested, but deterred by the travel required to pick up the CSA.

"You can use a farm share to get local food, but only if you have transportation!" TURNERS FALLS SENIOR

"I use the CSA here through the senior center. I prioritize local and organic food when possible. The cost is worth it." GREENFIELD SENIOR

Venues to Access Food: Gardens & Co-ops



Photo credit:
Flickr, nomanack, author

Some participants say their home gardens are a source of fresh produce.

Several participants used their own gardens as sources of fresh produce. Many shared the excess with their friends and family. No participants used community gardens.

“Many residents have their own gardens here. We grow veggies, like lettuce, zucchini, basil, parsley, peas, tomatoes, and peppers. We share the things we grow.”
GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“I have my own garden, and supplement what I don’t grow with shopping at the co-op or farmers’ market.” TURNERSFALLS SENIOR

“My family has a garden and our own chickens for eggs.” GREENFIELD YOUTH

Co-ops were another venue participants used to access healthy food, but with less frequency due to cost.

“I eat out at the co-op and eat locally what I can.” GREENFIELD SENIOR

“I go to Green Field’s Market because I can walk, and I get a discount from my family working there.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

“I have been to Quabbin Harvest, but the organic foods are so expensive.” GREENFIELD RESIDENT

RECOMMENDATIONS



A Note on Recommendations

- ☒ The insights gained from the focus groups point us toward many possible areas of improvement that will increase Franklin County and the North Quabbin residents' ability to access healthy food.
- ☒ There is not a heavy focus on healthy food education – through the focus groups it was clear that participants are largely aware of what it means to eat a healthy diet. The recommendations thus center around removing barriers and supporting the systems that promote people's ability to access healthy food in the first place.
- ☒ Many of our recommendations reflect those in the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan.²
- ☒ Additionally, The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts' Task Force to End Hunger's Action Plan³ aligns well with many of our recommendations.



DIANA'S STORY: The Recommendations section features a return to Diana's food access scenario, but with the recommended improvements in place. In this improved scenario, we see how much easier we can make it for Diana, and others like her in the region, to access healthy food.

Recommendations: Cost

Based on our findings related to cost, Mass in Motion will engage willing partners in efforts to make healthy food more accessible by:

1. sharing the results of this report with grocery stores and partnering to make improvements in stores to promote healthy food options.
2. working with communities living within walking distance of grocery stores to conduct “healthy food audits” of the stores. Lessons learned from these audits can inform specific recommendations made to the stores to improve their healthy food options and cost.

There are a number of current policies that support the ability to pay fair prices for healthy food.⁴ Mass in Motion wants to ensure that producers are paid fairly for their work, and recognize that reducing cost of healthy food is not a long term viable solution for a just food system. We therefore recommend supporting efforts that:

1. ensure fair working conditions for producers of food.
2. raise the minimum wage, so that more people are able to pay fair prices for healthy food.

DIANA'S STORY: Cost is an important factor for Diana in choosing where she shops. Now that the grocery store closest to her has started doing weekly specials on produce, Diana is able to walk there to purchase more of her groceries.

Recommendations: Food Assistance Programs

SNAP benefits are an absolutely critical component of people's ability to access healthy food in Franklin County. In order to ensure SNAP benefits are funded and utilized, we recommend:

1. Work with community based organizations to increase awareness about SNAP benefits in farmers' markets.
2. Promote enrollment in and usage of the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP)⁵ in Franklin County.
3. Map gaps in HIP-participating points of sale to ensure access to healthy food for rural populations.

DIANA'S STORY: Diana now uses her SNAP benefits at the Farmers' Market on Saturdays when she can get a ride with a neighbor. By utilizing the Healthy Incentives Program, she is able to buy more fresh produce for her family and feels good about supporting local farmers.

Recommendations: Food Assistance Programs (cont.)

1. Support statewide efforts to close the SNAP gap through administrative policies at the Executive Office of Health and Human Services.⁶
2. Encourage convenience stores and small markets in Franklin County to accept SNAP.
3. Encourage community based organizations to distribute Good and Cheap by Leanne Brown cookbooks and do more demonstrations on healthy and delicious cooking with SNAP benefits.
4. Clinical providers as well as social service providers can increase referrals to WIC.⁷
5. Advocate for continued funding for WIC.
6. Advocate for increased funding to OAA Title III C through the appropriations bill to improve Meals on Wheels program ability to provide healthy, tasty food.
7. Work with LifePath Meals on Wheels program to implement focus groups' recommended changes to meals.

Recommendations: Convenience

Making it more convenient for people to access healthy food by supporting transportation initiatives (see following Transportation Recommendations section), developing innovative ideas to bring healthy food directly to people, and making it easier for people to pick up food from food banks:

1. Support the Franklin County Community Development Corporation's USDA/NIFA/Community Food Project⁸, if funded.
2. Ensure that mobile markets enroll in HIP as a point of sale.
3. Consider making shopping carts available at reduced cost to help residents when walking to pick up food at the Center for Self Reliance and other food pantries.

DIANA'S STORY: Due to improved bus schedules, Diana is able to go grocery shopping on her day off and purchase the food she and her family need. With the new mobile farmers' market, she can purchase affordable produce right in her neighborhood once a month too.

Recommendations: Public Transit and Ride Sharing

1. Encourage continued collaborations to seek community-based transportation solutions.⁹
2. Support efforts for a pilot project to create “Mobility on Demand” in Franklin County. Mobility on Demand refers to demand-responsive transit services that make use of tools such as smart phone apps.
3. Advocate for increased funding to provide subsidized transportation for FRTA.
4. Advocate for funding for Saturday fixed route services for the FRTA.
5. Further develop partnership between FRTA and Big Y and Stop and Shop to improve bus service from particular communities.

DIANA'S SCENARIO: With improved bus schedules, the new mobility on demand service, and community shuttles, Diana is able to go to access food when it works best for her schedule. She can spend less time and energy traveling, and more time with her kids and taking care of her self.

Recommendations: Walking and Community Design

1. Work with towns to deepen commitment to Complete Streets improvements that address issues of food access and equity. Ensure that meaningful public participation and input is prioritized in this process.
2. Promote updated walking map routes that highlight places to access healthy food.
3. Integrate access to healthy food into walkability workshops in municipalities with urban centers.
4. Encourage towns to consider food access in developing municipal policy. One source of guidance is the Healthy Community Design Toolkit: Municipal Strategies to Increase Food Access available at <http://www.pvpc.org/projects/food-access>.

References:

¹ The Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings cites healthy food environment as a factor that contributes to making communities healthier places to live. Having limited access to healthy foods is correlated with a high prevalence of overweight, obesity, and premature death. Limited access to healthy foods estimates the percentage of the population who are low income and do not live close to a grocery store. Living close to a grocery store is defined differently in rural and nonrural areas; in rural areas it means living less than 10 miles from a grocery store whereas in nonrural areas, it means less than a mile. Low income is defined as having an annual family income of less than or equal to 200% of the federal poverty threshold for the family size.

² The Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan: This plan sets specific goals and provides detailed recommendations on a variety of state food policy priorities. While our report focuses on reflecting and responding to our focus groups, the MA Food Plan gives a much broader view of what can be done statewide to improve the food access environment. Learn more at <http://mafoodsystem.org/static/plan/pdfs/MLFSPFull.pdf>.

³ The three identified priority areas – to erase the stigma associated with hunger, develop a mechanism to provide integrated services for those who need them, and address issues related to public policy – align well with many of our recommendations as well. The Action Plan may be accessed here: <https://www.foodbankwma.org/special-initiatives/task-force-to-end-hunger/>.

⁴ There are a number of current policies and initiatives that support the ability to pay fair prices for healthy food. They include:

- The **Franklin County Farm and Food System Project** contains a comprehensive Action Plan that details ways to increase the fair production of and access to healthy, local food.
- The **Massachusetts Food Trust** will provide loans, grants, and technical assistance to support food retailers that locate in low- and moderate-income communities. While the Food Trust has been signed into law, \$6 million in appropriation must be released in addition to \$100,000 for operating funds in the state budget.
- **HD2719** (filed by Rep. Dan Donahue) and **SD984** (filed by Sen. Ken Donnelly), would raise the state's minimum wage by \$1 each year over four years until it is \$15 an hour in 2021. The minimum wage would then be adjusted each year to rise along with increases in the cost of living.

References (cont.):

⁵ HIP is a program available to all Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) beneficiaries. For each SNAP dollar spent on targeted fruits and vegetables purchased at farmers' markets, farm stands, mobile markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, SNAP recipients will receive a one-to-one match, applied directly to their EBT card, and information about the benefit will be on the receipt they receive from the vendor. HIP is designed to reduce barriers to healthy food access, increase availability of locally grown produce for SNAP clients, and assess the impact of the incentive program on participants' purchasing of produce in order to inform future expansion of the program.

⁶In Berkshire, Hampden, Franklin, and Hampden Counties, there are 46,352 people receiving MassHealth and only 17,872 people receiving SNAP (Jan 2016 DTA Facts and Figures). By creating a "common application portal" for MassHealth and SNAP benefits, Massachusetts can help ensure SNAP is provided to as many eligible Massachusetts households as possible. Statewide, this can bring \$841 million in potential federal SNAP funds annually, and generate \$1.5 billion in likely economic benefits to the State (Massachusetts Law Reform Institute). The Massachusetts Public Health Association is a lead advocate for supporting statewide SNAP Gap efforts.

⁷You are eligible for WIC benefits presumptive pregnancy – as soon as you believe you are pregnant. It may take a while to see a doctor for confirmation, but it is important for parents to start a nutritional program as soon as possible. Additionally, unlike SNAP, you do not need to be a Green Card holder in order to receive WIC benefits.

⁸The Franklin County Community Development Corporation is applying for a USDA/NIFA/Community Food Project. They expect to hear about the grant in August/September 2017. The project will focus on getting healthy foods to low-income people in Greenfield through the Affordable Housing units – Leyden Woods, Oak Courts, Greenfield Gardens, etc. They plan to do a year round mobile market with produce during the season, then frozen veggies and soup along with Coop Basics (healthy foods that are not expensive). They also plan to get more local foods into the schools by creating a space in existing K-12 supply chains and distribution channels for frozen soup, vegetables and snacks that extend beyond just Greenfield Public.

⁹FRCOG transportation planners are working to bring together organizations and groups that are involved in/need/are interested in community-based transportation solutions. The purpose is to identify ways to capitalize on existing structures and resources where possible, and seek out others, to address transportation gaps in our region. We encourage continued collaboration on this front.