

# Mass in Motion COVID-19 Strategies & Future Directions

## Overview

This research sought to understand how municipalities in the Commonwealth were responding to new levels of community food insecurity and physical inactivity at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focused on Mass in Motion (MiM), a program of the Massachusetts Department of Health that works with communities to increase opportunities for healthy eating and active living. In addition to documenting the strategies used by MiM coordinators during the early months of the pandemic, this work makes visible future opportunities for collaboration and suggests policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change strategies<sup>1</sup> for increasing healthy and affordable food access and physical activity. This memo first outlines the identified PSE change opportunities and then summarizes the key findings from which these opportunities were developed, namely the MiM partnerships and COVID-19 induced MiM initiatives for healthy & affordable food access and physical activity.

For more information about this research or to request access to the MiM COVID-19 Strategies Database please contact project lead Jessika Brenin, MAPC Food Policy & Planning Intern ([jessikabrenin@gmail.com](mailto:jessikabrenin@gmail.com)) or project advisor Heidi Stucker, MAPC Assistant Director of Public Health ([hstucker@mapc.org](mailto:hstucker@mapc.org)).

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<sup>1</sup> Mass in Motion definition and examples of PSE strategies: A **policy** improvement may include “a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions”. A **systems** improvement may include a “change that impacts all elements, including social norms of an organization, institution, or system.” **Environmental** improvements may include change to the physical, social, or economic environment”.

## Policy, Systems, & Environmental Change Opportunities

**Equity-focused Evaluation Practices.** Multiple MiM coordinators raised concerns and challenges regarding equity in their work (e.g., Supporting minority-owned restaurants, businesses, and farms; Ensuring shared streets were handicap accessible; Creating walk-to-school policies that did not disproportionately burden working parents or compromise the safety of their children; Most public funding opportunities were first-come first-served, and were therefore skewed towards benefiting privileged applicants; etc.). How can the questions of, "Who benefits? Who is burdened? What may be the unintended consequences?" be embedded into MiM work? One possibility that gained traction among coordinators at the June 2020 statewide MiM meeting was support for evaluation processes. Because many MiM strategies being used during the early months of the pandemic were hastily developed, program evaluation is necessary to determine which strategies to implement long-term for equitable outcomes. However, coordinators saw program evaluation as a gap in MiM and called for technical assistance support in this area. Establishing equity-focused evaluation processes as an encouraged MiM strategy would be an important systems change for the MiM program.

**Policy to Promote Community Agriculture.** The widespread use of community agriculture initiatives revealed growing public and municipal interest in and support for further PSE changes in these areas. Community agriculture PSE changes could include urban/community agriculture ordinances, zoning changes, and land acquisition efforts such as community land trusts or municipal land banks.

**Implement Food Plans.** Many coordinators believed that COVID-19 revealed or heightened pre-existing food access and food system gaps. There is a strong need to address foundational food system challenges, such as those highlighted in community food assessments, community food plans, and statewide food systems plans. Making progress on and taking ownership of these guiding documents are a necessary PSE change.

**Sustained Coordination for Anti-Hunger Efforts.** Multiple coordinators led or participated in municipal task forces to coordinate and deliver community food access initiatives. This revealed the need for a systems change, under which these task forces would be formalized or a new municipal food access coordinating role would be developed for long-term community preparedness and resilience.

**Close the Technology and Internet Gap.** Internet access has become vital for identifying resources, enabling remote economic opportunities, and maintaining social supports. Multiple coordinators were already engaged in conversations about addressing the digital divide through technology and equitably expanding internet access. PSE changes are needed in this area to achieve population-wide digital access.

# Summary of Key Findings

## Partnerships

**Mass in Motion strategies were advanced by existing and new partnerships.** MiM coordinators' strategies during COVID-19 were often powered by new and existing partnerships between various municipal sectors, local nonprofits, and small businesses.

**Mass in Motion partnerships represented various sectors.**

**Emergency Food Partners.** Many partnerships were evident between MiM coordinators and local community-based organizations or national nonprofits that are food access oriented (food provision, meal boxes, delivery, food recovery).

**Municipal Partners.** Partnerships with other municipal departments were also common. There were three examples of MiM coordinators working with each of the following municipal departments:

- Public Health and Elder Services (re: food access)
- Transportation, Planning, and Public Works (re: shared streets/closed streets)
- Conservation and Schools (re: community agriculture)
- Recreation (re: physical activity opportunities)
- Mayor's Office and City Councilors (re: general cross-collaboration and policy)

**Farms and Food Hubs.** There were six examples of MiM coordinators forming new working relationships with local farms or food hubs to provide more healthy options for community food provision through food aid and food retail.

**Mass in Motion coordinators both led partnership coalitions and joined those led by others.** Sometimes partnerships were formalized, with MiM coordinators leading or supporting multi-sectoral food security or social services task forces. Other times the partnerships were informal, with MiM coordinators participating in weekly coalition zoom calls among community food security organizations and other municipal departments.

## MiM Healthy & Affordable Food Access COVID-19 Strategies

**Mass in Motion Coordinators spent most of their time on a range of emergency food efforts.** These included supporting food delivery programs, subsidized CSAs, safe farmers' markets, safe food pantries, and contract agreements with food service companies or local restaurants to provide meals for distribution. Some efforts focused on increasing locally grown food in emergency food distribution.

**Emergency Food Delivery and Community Agriculture strategies were implemented most frequently.** Food delivery efforts typically happened in coordination with broader coalitions. Community Agriculture efforts included expanding community gardens and encouraging home gardening; in most instances food grown went to emergency food efforts or enabled residents to grow food for their households.

Table 1. summarizes the food access strategies implemented in Massachusetts towns and cities by Mass in Motion Coordinators in the spring and summer of 2020, in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic.

Table 1. Healthy & Affordable Food Access Strategies Utilized by Mass in Motion Coordinators, Spring/Summer 2020		
Key Theme	Strategy	Municipalities Using This Strategy
Food Delivery	Managing home food delivery programs, oftentimes in collaboration with volunteer networks, youth, and local food businesses.	Everett, Salem, Taunton, Franklin, Cambridge, Medford, Springfield, Roxbury/Dorchester, Weymouth
Community Agriculture	Supporting the identification of land, surveying resident interest, advocating for, and implementing community/backyard gardening and farming initiatives.	Holyoke, Salem, Hampden, Hampshire, Malden, Springfield, Taunton
	Working with a local community garden to support the development and distribution of home gardening kits.	Medford
	Hiring coordinators to manage school gardens while schools were closed for the purpose of providing fresh fruit and vegetables to community food access organizations.	Salem
Farmers' Markets	Supporting the shift of farmers' markets to CSA pick-up programs.	Hampden

	Supporting the development of COVID-19 safety guidelines for farmers' markets.	Cambridge
Local Food	Working with food hubs and farmer organizations to bring local food into emergency food aid networks.	New Bedford, Taunton
Economic Development	Supporting the development of parklets to enable outdoor dining options for local food businesses.	Everett
	Working with and securing funding for local restaurants to provide culturally relevant prepared food for community food distribution sites.	Everett
	Supporting the creation of a community farm stand through which nearby farmers would sell culturally relevant fruits and vegetables.	Hampden
	Hiring laid-off food service employees to work for municipal food distribution networks.	Salem
Food Pantry	Supporting food pantries to stay open for longer hours.	Everett
	Supporting new pop-up and sidewalk food pantries.	Everett, Chelsea
	Supporting the integration of food pantry distribution sites with local farmers' markets.	Cambridge
Youth	Facilitating a youth snack pack program that was prepared and distributed by community youth.	Everett
Local EBT	Planning the development of a municipally funded Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card that would allow food insecure residents to use supplemental food assistance dollars with local food retail.	Chelsea
SNAP	Supporting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach to lower access barriers for residents (particularly for college students).	Cape Ann, Salem
Community Engagement	Hosting weekly virtual municipal-nonprofit food access coalition meetings.	Everett

Advocacy	Building community and municipal support for action on Community Food Assessment and Food Plan objectives.	Everett, Melrose/Wakefield
Infrastructure	Helping food aid organizations find physical space for food packing and distribution.	Everett, Hampshire, Holyoke
	Hosting a calendar to more evenly distribute food access activities throughout the week and across different neighborhood locations.	Everett
	Facilitating a food donation hub to route incoming food aid to where it was most needed.	Everett
	Re-negotiating public contracts with food service companies (e.g., Sodexo) to provide prepared food offerings at school grab and go meal site locations.	Springfield
	Raising funds or coordinating emergency municipal funding for various food access initiatives and youth food programming activities.	Hampshire, Salem
	Leading or participating in municipal emergency social services or food access task forces.	Holyoke, Lynn, Salem, Chelsea
Public Resources	Managing food access resource lists or websites that centralized information about food delivery hotlines, school food distribution sites, food pantries, meal sites, etc. These lists were circulated for resident use via local organizations, clinics, and municipal agencies.	Cambridge, Salem
	Coordinating a centralized food access hotline for residents to call-in and receive information.	Salem, Cambridge, Chelsea
Technology	Supporting the shift to virtual services, including virtual food pantry vegetable gardening classes and digital food access communications.	Springfield, Cape Ann

## MiM Physical Activity COVID-19 Strategies

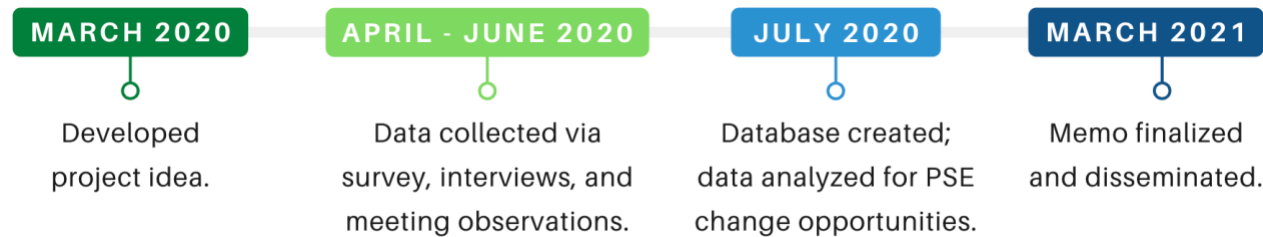
**MiM work on physical activity initiatives were largely paused** to prioritize food aid and healthy & affordable emergency food access work.

**Limited physical activity work supported opportunities for outdoor and socially distant recreation** through expanded sidewalks and shared streets initiatives, as well as virtual community fitness classes.

Table 2. summarizes the physical activity strategies implemented in Massachusetts towns and cities by Mass in Motion Coordinators in the spring and summer of 2020, in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic.

Table 2. Physical Activity Strategies Utilized by Mass in Motion Coordinators, Spring/Summer 2020		
Key Theme	Strategy	Municipalities Using This Strategy
Physical Activity Outdoors	Working alongside municipal staff to support shared streets and closed streets to provide more space for socially distanced physical activity.	Holyoke, Melrose/Wakefield, Hampden
	Supporting outdoor fitness classes in public spaces.	Malden, Melrose/Wakefield
	Posting signs to show safe walking routes to grocery stores and health clinics.	Salem
Physical Activity at Home	Supporting at-home physical activity through low-resource fitness ideas and virtual classes.	New Bedford, Everett, Cape Ann
School Based Physical Activity	Supporting the design and implementation of walk to school policies.	Hampden
Open Space Visibility	Coordinating socially distanced community events to showcase public parks and open spaces.	Everett
Food Delivery	Utilizing food delivery needs to encourage physical activity opportunities (e.g., delivery via bike).	Springfield
Youth	Supporting a summer youth program for bike education.	Springfield

## Project Timeline



## Survey Methods

A survey was used to collect responses from MiM coordinators about their new and continued efforts to increase healthy & affordable food access and physical activity in their communities during COVID-19. These questions are listed below. Response rates were high with 22 out of 27 coordinators providing information. Survey data collection was supplemented with three in-depth coordinator interviews and observation of coordinators' responses during MiM and MFSC meetings. An excel database was created to track responses. Data were analyzed and PSE change opportunities were identified by MAPC.

1. What new activities have you or your coalition engaged in as part of COVID-19 response?
2. In which ways may these activities support your priority populations? In which ways ham these activities have unintended consequences for priority populations?
3. In what ways have your partnerships changed? (e.g. new partner, working more/less closely with an existing partner, etc.)
4. What changes to the physical environment supported your MIM work? (e.g. expanded sidewalks, more land for food productions, use of kitchen space for food preparation, etc.)
5. What COVID-19 responses could be sustained through a PSE change?