

Date: June 29, 2017

To: MetroWest Health Foundation Board of Trustees

From: MetroWest Health Foundation Leaders Group

Subject: Recommendations for Improving Access to Healthy Food

Overview

The MWHF is dedicated to improving the health of MetroWest residents and reducing health inequities by supporting programs that address the social determinants of health. Social determinants of health are the advantages and disadvantages within a community that impact the patterns of health, disease, and illness specific to that area. Given that nutrition is essential to good overall health, it follows that access to healthy food is a critically important social determinant of health.

Over the last few years, the MWHF has successfully supported the efforts of organizations like Daniel's Table and Lovin' Spoonfuls to provide food to those who are in need. It is our recommendation that this effort be broadened to address other aspects of food insecurity in the region. The MetroWest Health Leaders Group is suggesting a mobile food truck that can bring affordable food to those individuals who currently reside in the two local "food deserts" found in Framingham and Milford. These strategies will address the limitations in individual mobility, community transportation, and access to affordable food sources that impact the health of MetroWest residents.

Food Access as a Social Determinant of Health

As the data demonstrates, a lack of food access and hunger negatively impact the health of a substantial portion of the population of the United States:

- *Feeding America* recently reported that 46.5 million people in the United States receive some form of food assistance (Feeding America, 2016).
- When individuals have a lack of sufficient access to food, they confront various challenges to their health and general wellbeing. Negative health outcomes, caused by lack of food access include obesity and diet-related diseases, such as high blood pressure (Ver Ploeg, 2010; Feeding America, 2016).
- Inadequate food access can be linked to poor school attendance and job performance (MAPC, 2015), and can force households to choose between purchasing food and paying for other necessary expenses such as medical care, household utilities, or transportation (Feeding America, 2016).

Presence of Food Access Inequity in MetroWest

While "food access is an issue that impacts all populations in Massachusetts," there are particular communities in MetroWest that are at a higher risk of having insufficient food access (Massachusetts Food Access Index, 15):

- The MetroWest region is made up of a diverse group of communities with varying socioeconomic, racial, and age demographics.
- The Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan explains how these disparities noticeably impact food access in particular community types;
 - Rural communities "experience significantly lower food access over set geographic distances in comparison to urban and suburban communities." (13)

- In urban and suburban communities, “low income households, single parent households, and households with a Hispanic/Latino or Black/African head of household on average experience significantly lower food access and must travel further distances to reach healthy and diverse food options.” (13)

Identification of MetroWest Communities with Inadequate Food Access

Using the interactive “Food Access Research Atlas” to identify communities that are both low-income and considered to have low-geographic access to grocery stores in MetroWest, we can identify **Milford** and **Framingham** as two communities in MetroWest suffering from inadequate food access (USDA Food Research Atlas).

Proposed Strategies

Our proposed strategy has been implemented in the city of Boston with success. An organization called Fresh Truck provides a mobile grocery store to residents of neighborhoods in need of access to healthier food items. The truck has pop up stops, and goes to local neighborhoods throughout the city of Boston. The company was started in 2013, and has sold \$150,000 dollars’ worth of groceries. Fresh Truck’s team is in the process of gathering data that will support the health benefits of the work they do. The company has been so successful that it has grown from one truck to two and is in the process of adding another. We advise that the MHF should support the expansion of Fresh Truck to Milford and Framingham, leveraging lessons learned from the recent Lovin’ Spoonfuls expansion to MetroWest.

The statistics listed show how a mobile grocery store would benefit the MetroWest area:

With Access	Without Access
A family without a grocery store within one mile of their home is almost twice as likely to have an unhealthy diet	The addition of one grocery store in a food insecure neighborhood can increase produce consumption by 32%
A multi-state study found that people living in areas without access to supermarkets have the highest obesity rates	People living in neighborhoods with grocery stores and farmers markets have the lowest rates of obesity and diet related diseases
Nationally, diet-related disease costs \$147 billion every year	According to the USDA eating healthier can save \$87 billion dollars a year in medical costs, lost lives and productivity

Sources - *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters*, **The Food Trust** Why Food. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <http://www.freshtruck.org/why-food/>

Community Partners

As is the case with any effort to address the social determinants of health, community collaboration is essential. We also recognize that there are many organizations already actively involved with the issue of food insecurity and improving access to healthier food choices.

The Foundation has recently made significant investments in two local organizations, which will be key community partners for our efforts (as it is important to avoid duplication).

- Daniel’s Table (meal delivery service, primarily Framingham-focused)
- Lovin’ Spoonfuls (food rescue service, benefiting twenty two sites within MetroWest, including many food pantries)

Other primary partners for this work will be the existing food pantries and emergency food service providers in the Milford and Framingham areas. By collaborating with food pantries, we can identify underserved areas in the community where individuals may not be able to access the food pantry's services due to transportation or mobility issues, and work actively with Daniel's Table and Lovin' Spoonfuls to cover geographic areas that are not yet fully served.

- Framingham has several food pantries including Pearl Street Cupboard & Café at Park, St. Bridget's, the Salvation Army, and Hope Worldwide.
- Milford has one primary food pantry, Our Daily Bread, and the Salvation Army also provides some food services.
- Religious organizations also provide meals in these communities, and will be key partners when it comes to publicizing our offerings.

Since we are targeting low-income individuals as well as seniors who struggle with mobility issues, additional partners may include:

- SNAP/WIC offices, local hospitals, councils on aging/senior centers, and similar health and human service organizations in both Milford and Framingham.

Measuring Project Success

The Foundation will know its efforts are successful based on the following sources:

- A decrease in reports of food insecurity by residents in Framingham and Milford areas as measured by:
 - (1) Metrowest Community Health Assessment;
 - (2) Metrowest Adolescent Health Survey
 - (3) the Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).
- Program evaluation outcomes including process measures such as who is utilizing the program and how often as well as an increase in spending on healthy foods
- Qualitative data from participants based on focus groups or key informant surveys which consider factors such as location and language capacity to facilitate active participation.

Anticipation of Challenges

As in any project, there are several possible pitfalls to consider in project implementation. The team consulted with Fresh Truck via a conference call to learn more about their model and challenges they encountered:

1. *Local Regulations:* The by-laws and regulations regarding food service delivery - including obtaining permits - may vary between towns so consultation in advance with each community is needed to ensure successful implementation.
2. *Volunteers:* There is a critical need to recruit volunteers to support initial implementation and operation, which will require ongoing efforts.
3. *Food Sourcing:* These networks and partnerships will need to be identified. The food source supply chains are complex and the operation would need to scale up before it can be sustainable.

Finally, as in any project, there will likely be unforeseen pitfalls that will require problem solving as needed to support successful outcomes.