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COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

A collaborative response to equitable food access during COVID-19: Building from Mass in Motion practices

**JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic**



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Submitted October 2, 2020 / Published online January 22, 2021

Citation: Etingoff, K., & del Rosario, J. (2021). A collaborative response to equitable food access during COVID-19: Building from Mass in Motion practices. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 10(2), 251–253. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.005>

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Abstract

The Mass in Motion Municipal Wellness and Leadership initiative at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health provides local capacity to implement proven policies and practices creating environments supportive of healthy living, including food access efforts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Mass in Motion has offered a crucial approach and infrastructure to address local food access needs exacerbated by the pandemic. The core components of Mass in Motion and its resulting impacts demonstrate a best practice approach to responding to immediate food access needs while leveraging long-term sustainable solutions.

Keywords

Mass in Motion, Food Access, Local Policy, Systems Change, Equity, Chronic Disease, Multisector Partnership, COVID-19, Pandemic

The Mass in Motion Municipal Wellness and Leadership initiative at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) has provided local capacity to rapidly respond to food access needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the multiple years MDPH and local grantees have invested in building partnerships, along with the initiative's focuses on healthy food access, health and racial equity, and policy and systems change, Mass in Motion communities have been able to respond quickly and

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effectively to local food security needs and create momentum for sustained, long-term change related to improving food access.

Mass in Motion is a movement to lower the risk of chronic disease by supporting equitable food access and active living opportunities in cities and towns throughout Massachusetts. Working with a diverse network of partners, local Mass in Motion communities implement proven policies and practices to create environments that support healthy living. MDPH provides the grant framework for local communities, while local coordinators manage the grants in their communities. As of 2020, Mass in Motion covers almost 70 rural, urban, and suburban cities, towns, and neighborhoods in Massachusetts.

Before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, each grantee community worked in a multisector partnership to identify and implement local policy and systems strategies related to food access. Examples include community food assessments, the creation of food policy councils, and urban agriculture ordinances. Strategy selection and implementation involved engaging priority populations and building an understanding of root causes of inequitable chronic disease outcomes, particularly structural racism. As the pandemic expanded in Massachusetts in March 2020, many local Mass in Motion coordinators shifted their work to emergency food response. Because of Mass in Motion's scope, coordinators were well positioned in their municipalities and regions to step into this role. As one coordinator said, "It feels like the networks we have set up over the years are tremendously helpful. We are used to collaborating and things are going well, all things considered."

MDPH identified at least 60 food access strategies in which local Mass in Motion initiatives were involved. Existing multisector partnerships allowed Mass in Motion to connect with community-based organizations, local businesses, and municipal departments to support, coordinate, and sometimes lead food response efforts such as meal boxes, food delivery, and food recovery. Mass in Motion coordinators have also promoted efforts around equity, such as ensuring that outreach and programs are reaching populations that speak languages other than English, and examining first-come, first-served opportunities that may leave out people of color or other priority populations.

Additionally, local coordinators have drawn on Mass in Motion's focus on policy and systems change and understanding of the root causes of inequitable opportunities for health. COVID-19 has revealed underlying inequities and systemic barriers to food access for people of color, people with low incomes, people with disabilities, and others. Coordinators are leveraging the current momentum in addressing emergency needs also to create new understanding of what is driving need and to design lasting solutions that address the root causes of inequitable food access.

As just one local example, Cambridge Mass in Motion has had a robust food access response to COVID-19. Local staff members have relied on their knowledge of local food access challenges and policy solutions, along with existing relationships with municipal departments, a local health care provider, schools, and community-based organizations. Using this base, Cambridge Mass in Motion worked with the Cambridge Public Health Department to develop food guidelines for the city's bid process for restaurants to provide meals to homeless shelter populations; they also created operational guidelines for food pantries, safe food shopping, and take-out food. Cambridge Mass in Motion also worked with farmers markets to create guidelines for safe operations, connecting the markets to municipal resources such as water access for new hand-washing stations.

Additionally, Cambridge Mass in Motion has served as a communications and outreach channel to residents. Mass in Motion crafted social media posts and other educational outreach about food access and healthy meals at home and worked in partnership with the city's community engagement team and literacy ambassadors to create key educational messaging for immigrant families. Mass in Motion supported partners' outreach efforts as well, maintaining and distributing an updated list of emergency food resources including a food delivery hotline, school food distribution, food pantries, and meal sites.

While continuing to work on short-term emergency food responses, Cambridge Mass in Motion is using the current momentum for food access work to pursue policy solutions creating sustained access to healthy foods for residents who are facing the most challenges during COVID-19. Cambridge Mass in Motion has been pursuing an urban agriculture ordinance for several years and is now seeing even more interest in farming and gardening in response to the pandemic, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods of color. They are able to connect resident-led interest and movement around urban farming with the city's Community Development and Public Health departments. Working together, the goal is to pass an urban agriculture ordinance allowing the growing and selling of produce across the city.

Cambridge Mass in Motion is only one example of local Mass in Motion response to COVID-19. In other communities, local coordinators have crafted guidelines for safe community garden use to avoid their closure (Medford), served as cofacilitator on the Mayor's COVID-19 Response Team (Lynn), negotiated with the school food vendor to maintain a meal program for students (Springfield), and supported key partners' emergency food response efforts at pantries, schools, and farmers markets (Berkshires, Chelsea, Everett, Hampden, Holyoke, New Bedford, Salem, and Taunton).

Mass in Motion has offered a crucial approach and infrastructure to address local food access needs exacerbated by COVID-19. This is one effective initiative in a broader state strategy to address food insecurity during the pandemic. The Baker-Polito Administration convened a food security task force that identified four key actionable categories to respond to the increased demand for food assistance: (1) develop and implement an emergency food program, (2) fortify the food bank system, (3) maximize federal resources for food and nutrition, and (4) reinforce and redeploy food system infrastructure. The administration committed US\$56 million to combat urgent food insecurity. This included increasing support for the Healthy Incentives Program and shoring up the emergency food system and the local food supply chain through efforts like the Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program. MDPH and local Mass in Motion coordinators have recognized that returning to the status quo once the pandemic is over is unacceptable. The ability to respond to immediate needs while leveraging long-term, sustainable solutions offers a way forward for local communities in Massachusetts.

