

FOOD JUSTICE AGENDA FOR A RESILIENT BOSTON

Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu
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introduction

01



When I was 23...

...I opened a small, family-run tea shop. We served loose leaf teas, dumplings, panini sandwiches and cookies by day, and hosted neighborhood poetry readings and open mics at night. It was hard but rewarding work, and it reinforced for me the power of food to nourish and sustain us, to create a connection point to share our cultural heritage, and to bring community together around a common table. I brought these lessons with me to Boston City Hall, where my first focus in public service was creating a Restaurant Roadmap to streamline the permitting process for aspiring restaurateurs in Boston and helping to launch the City's food truck program.

Food touches our lives every single day, and it connects us to the broader systems that shape our world: the labor system that links farmworkers with truckers, dishwashers, and cafeteria workers; the economic system that lets some businesses thrive while shutting the door for others; the climate system that allows food crops to grow and sustains our ecosystems. These systems are global and interconnected, and they work together to deliver food – the most essential of universal human needs – to our communities here in Boston.

As the COVID-19 crisis has made all too clear, these systems are not working for everyone. During the early days of the pandemic, so many of the most visible challenges were food system issues: empty grocery store shelves, vulnerable to inflexible international supply chains; devastating racial disparities in mortality rates, exacerbated by underlying diet-related chronic conditions; hundreds of people waiting in line at food banks, desperate for help feeding their families; restaurant doors shuttered, sending thousands of laid-off food chain workers in pursuit of unemployment benefits. Though we may not always see these issues as interconnected, all can be traced back to a food system that exploits people, land, and other natural resources, shaped by a national legacy of enslavement, displacement, and abuse.

Long before the onset of the pandemic, food has been interwoven with the injustices that Boston residents experience everyday, from the parents whose unpredictable work schedules make it nearly impossible to plan, shop for, and cook healthy meals; to the children living with prediabetes whose food environments are flooded with ultra-processed food and devoid of fruits and vegetables; to the restaurant and other hospitality industry servers whose substandard wages cannot keep up with our city's housing costs; to the diverse local businesses unable to compete

with the handful of multinational corporations that have a stranglehold on our food supply chain.

But food can also be a force for justice – a common thread that binds us to one another and to our broader community. Food justice means affirming that consistent access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant food is a universal human right; and it means enshrining the right to self-determination for communities to own and manage land for their own food provisioning. Food justice means social justice, dismantling the oppressive systems that undervalue our food chain workers, commodify our food supply, and threaten the stability of our climate. Food justice means environmental justice, valuing our farming and fishing communities and building a resilient regional foodshed to accelerate climate action. Food justice means racial justice, demanding a clear-eyed understanding of how white supremacy has shaped our food systems – nationally, and right here in Boston, where Black, Latinx, Indigenous and AAPI communities have not enjoyed equal access to nutritious and culturally relevant foods, good food jobs, economically vibrant neighborhoods, and the opportunity to thrive. Food justice means economic justice, creating real opportunities for all people to start and build diverse food businesses as a means to build assets and wealth, celebrate and honor cultural traditions, and build community.

This Food Justice Agenda outlines five areas where the City of Boston can make real progress towards a food system that is equitable, resilient, sustainable, and just. We can invest in Boston's food chain workers, ensuring that all food system jobs are good food jobs. We can support our small and independent restaurants, caterers, and food businesses, turning this current moment of crisis into an opportunity to build a more robust, resilient food economy that is representative of all of Boston's diversity. We can expand Boston residents' access to fresh, nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant foods, whether they shop at farmers markets, bodegas, or traditional supermarkets. We can leverage the power of public procurement to deliver good food for Boston residents and create game-changing opportunities for diverse locally-owned and operated businesses, driving broader progressive change throughout our supply chains. And we can activate a wide coalition of advocates and community members, forming new partnerships to secure food policy reforms at the city, state and federal level.

Food systems extend beyond Boston city limits, and they are connected to global systems of economic and racial injustice that we cannot dismantle on our own. But cities like Boston have unique leverage, ready infrastructure and a pressing moral responsibility to act. Cities are close

to their people, and the COVID-19 emergency has shown that the City can mobilize quickly in response to acute crises affecting communities. Food-related injustices may be slower moving, but they also constitute a crisis that demands urgent action.

Cities like Boston can also tailor policy solutions more closely to the local context, drawing inspiration from residents and activists who did not wait for government to act before pursuing food justice in their own communities. Boston is home to activists who have turned vacant lots into flourishing urban farms that foster meaningful community engagement; talented restaurateurs committed to finding new business models that lift up all of their workers; organizers who have forced big business to the negotiating table and won strong food service union contracts. We are home to the nation's first farmers market, the first fruit and vegetable incentive program, and the first all-local indoor public market. We are home to families who speak 140 languages, imbuing Boston with the diversity of cultures, perspectives, and foodways that makes us an intercultural city. We have all of the necessary resources, the activism, and the ideas – all we need is the bold vision and urgent leadership to harness our communities' collective energies to bring food justice to Boston.

**investing in Boston's
food chain workers**

02



This year, our nation has reckoned with the question of what makes a worker “essential.” Essential workers are those deemed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to provide services or functions that are essential to “promote the public health and welfare of the Commonwealth,”¹ and workers along the food supply chain are quite literally essential to the continuing functioning of society by providing us with nourishment and energy to live. These workers – servers, cooks, dish-washers, cafeteria attendants, bartenders, grocery workers, farmers market managers, food hub coordinators, warehouse and delivery workers, food manufacturers and farmers, and more – keep our City running.

But those along the food chain are disproportionately low-wage workers; many lack any safety net due to their undocumented status; and they are more than twice as likely as the rest of the population to experience food insecurity.² During the pandemic, they have seen higher risk of infection,³ higher risk of unemployment and financial instability, and a higher mental health burden. They continued to report to work, putting their health and the health of their loved ones at risk in order to sustain community resilience in the face of an unprecedented public health emergency. As we work toward an equitable recovery, we must invest in our food chain workers in pursuit of systemic change that brings workers to the negotiating table to shape our City’s future.

Who makes up Boston’s food workforce?

In 2015, there were 59,910 workers employed in Boston’s food and accommodations sector – nearly 8% of the City’s total workforce⁴ – including restaurant servers, cooks and food preparation workers, counter attendants, coffee shop workers, and bartenders. In addition to restaurants, huge numbers of food workers are represented at a wide array of other institutions: college dining, hospital dining, corporate cafeterias, hotels, stadiums, airport, K-12 schools, correctional facilities, museums. Though this sector is one of the city’s fastest growing, it is plagued by persistently low wages: workers in accommodations or food service earn an average of \$578 a week,⁵ lower than the living wage as defined by Boston’s Living Wage Ordinance.⁶ Across Massachusetts, 15% of restaurant workers live in poverty – 2.3 times the statewide rate.⁷ In addition to restaurant and food service workers, Boston is home to an additional 34,142 workers in the retail sector, which includes grocery store workers. In a recent survey of essential workers across the state, nearly half of retail workers earn less than \$15 per hour.⁸ Besides low wages, Boston’s food chain workers also suffer from insufficient hours, unpredictable schedules, and paltry benefits. These workplace conditions have direct impacts on the health and well-being of our community members. In a 2019 survey,

for example, more than half of retail and food service workers report that their schedules do not provide enough flexibility for them to fulfill family responsibilities, including preparing meals for family members.⁹

Boston's food system is also connected to jobs across the country in food processing, manufacturing, and distribution, which are disproportionately held by Black, Latinx and AAPI workers¹⁰ and include some of the most physically dangerous jobs in the US economy.¹¹ Food production, in turn, depends on the labor of our nation's 2.4 million farmworkers, who are too often underpaid, exploited, and exposed to the dangers of pesticides and the rising threat of heat stress.¹² Though these sectors do not directly employ a large number of Bostonians, they have an outsized impact on the continued functioning of Boston's food system. Our City's fate is intrinsically bound to the well-being of all workers along the food chain. Supporting regional farms is also critical to Boston's climate resilience: reducing food miles and limiting dependence on the industrial food system that has commodified the industry and keeps small, local, diverse suppliers from competing.

During the pandemic, one quarter of essential workers in Massachusetts have reported experiencing food insecurity.¹³ Food chain workers are also facing threats to their health and safety, with some employers failing to provide adequate personal protective equipment – sometimes with devastating consequences, such as the tragic death of a Market Basket employee near Boston.¹⁴ Even beyond the risks to physical health, the pandemic has imposed additional stressors on food chain workers, from having to clean and sanitize high-touch surfaces more frequently, to needing to act as foot traffic controllers so customers adhere to physical distancing requirements.¹⁵

Each food system sector has its own challenges requiring tailored policy solutions, but a broad-based investment in Boston's food chain workforce would strengthen our City's resilience to future economic downturns, while providing all workers with the resources and power they need to safeguard their own financial security, health and well-being.

Bring workers' voices to the negotiating table

To lay the groundwork for specific policy reform, we must first recognize that Boston's food chain workers are essential to the daily functioning of our City, and they must have real power to shape our collective future. For too long, workers' voices have been left out of policy decisions – just

recently, Massachusetts' Reopening Advisory Board failed to include a single representative of organized labor or expert in occupational health and safety to plan for a pandemic economy that protects workers' safety.¹⁶ Across the country, business leaders were permitted to write their industries' reopening plans and determine their own timelines without any significant worker input.¹⁷ To prevent Boston's post-pandemic economy from replicating established patterns of disinvestment and disenfranchisement, we must bring workers to the negotiating table – through unions, worker cooperatives, and other forms of labor-management partnerships.

Unionization rates vary widely throughout the food chain, ranging from 16.1% in transportation and warehousing to only 1.4% in the food services and drinking places sector.¹⁸ Low unionization rates in food service are, in part, a result of the franchise system, which enables corporate restaurant chains to deny their employees basic workplace benefits like paid sick leave. But labor organizing in the food service sector has been accelerating in recent years,¹⁹ due in part to the SEIU-affiliated Fight for \$15 movement of fast food workers. Meanwhile, existing food system unions have been demonstrating what worker power can achieve. In 2019, more than 31,000 Stop & Shop workers and United Food and Commercial Workers members walked off the job to insist on higher wages, continued health insurance coverage, and stronger pension benefits. The 11-day strike was the largest private sector strike in years.²⁰

Federal law affirms workers' basic right to join together and bargain collectively, but municipal governments can play a large role in building worker power.²¹ To ensure that existing labor protections are enforced, the City should partner with local workers' organizations that have day-to-day contact with low-wage workers, such as Justice at Work, MassCOSH, and the Brazilian Workers' Center. During the pandemic, 1 in 8 workers believe that their employers have taken action to retaliate against workers who raised health and safety concerns, and the rate is even higher for Black workers.²² By partnering with community organizations, the City can ensure that all workers know what reporting mechanisms are available to them, and that workers will not be penalized for blowing the whistle about unsafe conditions. Stronger enforcement of existing labor laws would particularly benefit restaurant workers, where wage theft is commonplace: a 2012 compliance sweep from the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division found that 84% of restaurants were in violation of federal wage law and recovered \$5.5 million for tip credit infractions from about 9,000 restaurants.

Boston should also affirm workers' right to organize by aggressively enforcing existing City procurement standards that give preference to union vendors. For example, the Good Food Purchasing ordinance instructs city agencies and departments to raise their labor standards in external contracts, including by protecting workers' rights to freedom of association, to organize a union, and to collectively bargain. Boston should also work to extend the right to organize to workers that are not covered by major federal labor law. During the pandemic, third-party food delivery service apps have seen business skyrocket – but because their drivers are classified as independent contractors, they are not entitled to basic protections like paid sick leave. These companies have been accused of widespread exploitation of workers, including by using tips meant for delivery couriers to pay their own service fees. Boston should proactively affirm the right of its delivery drivers and other gig workers to unionize,²³ and the City should work with our Attorney General to affirm that gig workers are entitled to minimum wage and overtime protections, access to paid sick leave, and other workplace benefits.²⁴

Beyond unions, worker power can also be amplified through worker-owned cooperatives, and the City can play a large role in supporting the creation and maintenance of co-ops. Worker cooperatives are businesses that are owned democratically by their employees, who directly share in company profits and the opportunity to build wealth. In a city where the median net worth of Black households is only \$8, compared to \$247,500 for white households, worker co-ops are also central in the fight for racial justice. Moreover, co-ops tend to be more resilient during economic downturns, less likely to lay off workers or declare bankruptcy.²⁵ The Worker Cooperative Initiative at Boston's Economic Mobility Lab has seen enormous success in establishing several co-ops throughout the food chain, including Democracy Brewing, the brewhouse and pub in Downtown Crossing, and CERO Cooperative, a Dorchester composting company providing food waste diversion for commercial clients throughout Boston.²⁶ And the trend is growing: City Fresh Foods, the Roxbury-based catering company, recently launched an employee shareholder program,²⁷ while the Dorchester Food Co-op is on track to open its retail space in 2021. The City should scale up these efforts by providing grants, loans and technical assistance to new co-ops, as well as traditional businesses seeking co-op conversion. Boston can also build a preference for worker co-ops into its procurement and licensing processes to reward businesses that empower workers.

Raise the minimum wage and establish One Fair Wage

Boston's food chain workers need a raise. The average worker in our City's accommodation and food service sector earns only \$578 per week – lower than any other sector. Even if she was fortunate enough to secure 40 hours of work a week, this average worker would still make well under what is deemed the bare minimum by Boston's Living Wage Ordinance for a family to live in our city.²⁸ In 2018, our state legislators agreed to raise the minimum wage to \$15 – but not until 2023, by which point the baseline will continue to be insufficient for workers to earn enough income to live in Boston. Our City should harness its people power to advocate for bolder state-level action, but in the meantime, Boston should lead where we can – first, by proactively enforcing all procurement standards, including the Living Wage Ordinance, which requires that municipal vendors pay all employees a living wage, and that they don't attempt to defer responsibility to subcontractors.

Earlier this year, together with Councilor Lydia Edwards and with the support of labor advocates at SEIU and the Restaurant Opportunity Center, I filed a hearing order to ensure that workers are at the forefront of any restaurant industry recovery package by prioritizing relief for restaurants that commit to paying all workers One Fair Wage of at least \$15 per hour. Tipped workers, many of whom work in restaurants, are excluded from basic minimum wage protections, a legacy of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, which capitulated to racist Southern lawmakers by excluding the largely Black agricultural and domestic workforce from minimum wage protections. Though the FLSA has been amended over time to incorporate new economic sectors, the exclusion of Black workers and other workers of color from basic labor protections is perpetuated through the subminimum wage: while people of color make up 32% of the US workforce, they make up 40% of all tipped workers.²⁹ By prioritizing financial relief to food businesses paying One Fair Wage, Boston would begin to rectify the historic disinvestment in tipped workers. But our City should also work with our representatives in state government to secure the passage of An Act Requiring One Fair Wage, which would gradually phase out the tipped minimum wage to match the state's regular minimum wage.

Boston is home to numerous examples of innovative restaurants that demonstrate that a real investment in workers is compatible with – and even beneficial for – business success. Fenway-based Mei Mei Restaurant uses an open-book management system that seeks to educate staff

members on restaurant finance, solicit real feedback on the business' profit and loss statement, and reward staff with profit sharing.³⁰ Jamaica Plain's Brassica Kitchen has appended a service fee to all pre-tax bills to directly supplement the wages of non-tipped employees to rectify the structural imbalance between front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house wages.³¹ Boston should build off of these success stories and leverage its business support organizations to offer technical and financial assistance to other restaurants seeking to progressively reform their labor policies.

Guarantee safety net protections for all food chain workers

The food chain workforce was immediately and visibly impacted by the first wave of business shutdowns, with approximately 42,000 hospitality workers in Boston laid off or furloughed soon after restaurants were closed in March.³² Despite the creation of a federal pandemic unemployment compensation program, many food sector workers were left out in the cold as the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, already plagued by understaffing and outdated technology, faced an unprecedented deluge of applicants.³³ Job losses are likely to have a disproportionate impact on certain neighborhoods: in East Boston, for example, more than 20% of residents work in the accommodation and food services sector.³⁴ And critically, the unemployment insurance system excludes undocumented workers, who make up 10% of the restaurant workforce but are deprived of this critical safety net during unprecedented layoffs.³⁵ Even immigrants with temporary protected status or work visas may be discouraged from applying for unemployment benefits for fear that the Trump administration's new "public charge" rule disqualifies those who receive unemployment benefits from obtaining a green card (even though the new rule does not apply to unemployment benefits).³⁶

These xenophobic federal restrictions underscore the need for Boston to take proactive steps to ensure that all food chain workers have access to unemployment benefits during this economic crisis, regardless of their immigration status. The State of California recently announced a \$125 million fund to support undocumented immigrants affected by the pandemic through one-time payments.³⁷ Boston should build on these efforts by using public and philanthropic resources to guarantee continuity of income to all workers who have lost their jobs, regardless of their citizenship status, and by partnering with immigrant service organizations to ensure this support reaches our City's most underserved residents.

Offer fair and predictable scheduling

According to a recent survey, three-quarters of retail and food service workers in Greater Boston have unpredictable schedules, with 22% working an “on-call” work shift in the last month, 10% having had a shift canceled, and 45% working back-to-back “clopening” shifts.³⁸ Overall, only 40% of workers have more than two weeks advance notice of their upcoming work schedule, making it difficult to schedule childcare, shop for groceries and prepare meals, and fulfill other personal and family responsibilities. Unpredictable scheduling is particularly prevalent in low-wage jobs, which are disproportionately occupied by women and people of color,³⁹ and they have a direct impact on workers’ health and well-being: those with unpredictable work schedules are nearly twice as likely to report having experienced hunger in the last year,⁴⁰ and experience higher levels of stress, lower quality of sleep, and poor mental health outcomes.

Last year, I filed the Fair Work Week ordinance to ensure that City agencies and all contractors and subcontractors working with the City of Boston provide their workers with schedules that are predictable, flexible, and provide enough hours for families to make ends meet. Boston’s Living Wage Ordinance has been on the books since 1994, but in today’s economy, it is increasingly clear that fair wages are not sufficient to enable Boston workers to thrive. Boston must follow the lead of peer cities⁴¹ and pass the Fair Work Week ordinance to have an immediate impact on those workers directly or employed by the City, while sending a message to all employers that fair and predictable scheduling is a central component of basic labor protections.

Ensure paid sick and family leave

The pandemic has underscored the importance of workplace policies that guarantee pay in the event of personal illness or that of a family member. Yet even before this year, too many of Boston’s food chain workers have long been forced to grapple with an impossible question: if I feel sick, do I stay home and risk losing my job? Or do I go to work and risk infecting my co-workers and customers? The risk of COVID-19 only adds to this burden, as more than 300 workers across Massachusetts have reported to the attorney general’s office that their employers were not requiring symptomatic workers to stay home.⁴²

Nationwide, fewer than half of all workers in the leisure and hospitality sector have access to paid sick days – the lowest rate of any economic sector.⁴³ Massachusetts is a national leader with regards to paid sick leave, but the state policy has significant gaps that impact Boston’s food

chain workforce. First, the state policy only guarantees five paid sick days – inadequate to recover from any serious illness, let alone to comply with the mandatory two week quarantine period after exposure to coronavirus. Moreover, Massachusetts law also only applies to businesses with more than 10 employees, and it excludes independent contractors in the “gig economy” entirely. For example, most food delivery workers have been dependent on temporary and inconsistently-applied paid leave policies newly enacted by their employers. Uber, for example, quickly announced a generous paid sick leave policy, but news reports indicate that the company has dragged its feet on following through with these commitments.⁴⁴

Paid sick leave in the food service industry is a question of public health: if our food chain workforce is threatened by weak labor protections, we all suffer. A 2013 study found that 60% of food service workers report to work while ill.⁴⁵ Since the onset of the pandemic, some large restaurant chains, including the Darden Group (the parent company of Olive Garden), McDonald’s, and Domino’s, have announced new paid sick leave policies, but most only apply to employees at corporate-owned stores, excluding the vast majority of workers who are employed at franchises.⁴⁶ Workers should not have to depend on the whims of their employer to exercise a fundamental right to protect their health and safety. The federal Families First Coronavirus response Act took small steps to extend paid sick leave nationwide, including to independent contractors, but workers at large companies are excluded from the federal guarantee.

Paid sick leave is also a question of racial justice. Fewer than 20% of Black and Latinx workers can do their jobs from home, compared to 29% of white workers.⁴⁷ The pandemic is therefore compounding existing racial inequities by compelling workers of color to report to work for fear of losing a paycheck. Undocumented workers may also be discouraged from taking advantage of even the sick leave to which they are legally entitled, for fear of retaliation from their employers.

The City of Boston has the opportunity to affirm workers’ fundamental right to recover from illness and care for sick loved ones without jeopardizing their income. Boston should pass a citywide right to recover ordinance that guarantees two weeks of minimum wage replacement to any resident, regardless of immigration status, who tests positive for COVID-19, similar to a law recently passed in San Francisco.⁴⁸ The City should also collect testimony from Boston workers impacted by weak leave policies in order to inform future statewide advocacy to extend sick leave coverage to employees at small businesses and raise the sick leave time accrual from 40 to at least 72 hours.

**supporting Boston's
restaurants and food
economy**

03



The closure of restaurants and bars in March was one of the first visible symbols of how the pandemic would soon upend nearly every aspect of city life. Initially in effect for three weeks, the emergency order ended up shuttering restaurants completely for nearly three months,⁴⁹ until outdoor dining was allowed to resume in June. During this period, as we walked past boarded-up neighborhood spots and watched nervously as the list of restaurant closures grew longer,⁵⁰ we were reminded daily of the mounting hardships for our city. By mid-summer, 70% of restaurants reported that revenue had dropped by half or more since the pandemic started,⁵¹ and by September, a reported 20% of restaurants had closed for good.⁵² As we now head into colder weather, restaurants face an uncertain future, with 85% of independent restaurants at risk of closing permanently without a bailout.⁵³

The loss of Boston's beloved restaurants packs an emotional punch as we mourn the erosion of neighborhood character. By creating thriving streetscapes and driving foot traffic to nearby businesses, restaurants serve as anchors to their neighborhood ecosystems, and their permanent closure threatens the very fabric of Boston's civic life. Restaurant closures also pose a real threat to our city's economic stability – even apart from the ensuing job losses. Boston is home to more than 3,000 businesses with active food establishment licenses, more than three-quarters of which are outside the central business district.⁵⁴ The vast majority of these are small businesses with fewer than 50 employees and/or less than \$5 million in annual revenue. Boston's small businesses are engines of job creation, responsible for 44% of employment in the city's private, for-profit businesses.⁵⁵ And research shows that consumer spending at independent restaurants pumps more money into the local economy than spending at a chain.⁵⁶

But restaurants also serve another essential function that distinguishes them from other small businesses: they directly contribute to the food security of Boston's residents. From the small sandwich shops catering to downtown office workers, to mom-and-pop takeout joints that populate our neighborhoods, to immigrant-owned cafes exposing Boston residents to different cuisines, restaurants help us meet our basic needs affordably, efficiently, and pleasurably,⁵⁷ making up a critical piece of our city's food infrastructure. Neighborhood restaurants, bakeries, cafes, and food businesses also provide opportunities for local, diverse business ownership that work to close the racial wealth gap. For nearly a decade, Americans have spent more money on food away from home than on groceries. These trends hold true for all socioeconomic groups – households below the federal poverty line eat food away from home an average of 4.2 times per week.⁵⁷

Despite the popular conception of restaurants as a luxury service, restaurants also play a central role during economic downturns. During the 2008 recession, spending at full-service restaurants decreased, but spending at quick-service restaurants remained steady, demonstrating that it is these businesses' convenience, rather than their connotations of status or luxury, that attracts consumers. In economic downturns, the decision to patronize Boston's restaurants can be a rational response to financial constraints (although the calculus is different during the current crisis, when indoor restaurant dining poses a serious risk of coronavirus transmission⁵⁸). This is particularly true for low-income working parents who lack the time required to prepare healthy meals for their children.⁵⁹ Federal nutrition policy has increasingly recognized the time-cost of healthy eating and the potential for prepared meals to fill these gaps.⁶⁰ Boston must follow suit and incorporate support for our independent restaurant industry into the citywide fight to eliminate hunger and food insecurity.

Stabilize restaurant jobs and support home-grown food businesses

In April, Dorchester-based food business incubator CommonWealth Kitchen launched the CommonTable initiative to pay more than 30 of its member restaurants, food trucks, and product companies to prepare and serve meals to their neighbors impacted by the pandemic, thereby connecting the dots between high unemployment and rising rates of hunger, and filling a key gap in the emergency food system: the inclusion of diverse food traditions. Under the program, food businesses owned by people of color and immigrants were paid \$10 per meal to prepare and distribute delicious, culturally diverse meals, working with partners at Boston Centers for Youth and Family, Boston Housing Authority, community health centers, and other local organizations to identify Bostonians in need of food assistance. With public support, this program could be dramatically scaled up. Together with my colleagues on the City Council, I have urged the Administration to apply for FEMA funding to launch the 1 Million Meals Program and meet the immense need of the moment while providing a lifeline to independent, minority-owned restaurants at risk of permanent closure. Joshua Fidalgo, co-owner of Roxbury's Nos Casa restaurant, points out how such a program would benefit our communities: "This is an opportunity for the city to say, 'Hey, let's support small businesses and maybe make meal kits and tap into the restaurants.' Allow us to provide food for those families... to make sure that no one goes hungry."⁶¹

Beyond the pandemic, the City should support local food businesses, as business ownership is one of the most effective pathways to building wealth in historically excluded neighborhoods.

For example, a proposal under consideration by the City Council would issue residential kitchen permits, lowering the barriers to entry for aspiring food entrepreneurs to test the market for a product or service and build a following before having to invest in a physical production space.⁶² The City should also overhaul its food truck program in consultation with food truck owners to identify through the pandemic, leveraging the expanded need for food delivery in order to grow local businesses. For example, the City can engage food truck operators in efforts to streamline and simplify the permitting process and expand the low-cost public space available for vending, including along transit lines and in neighborhood parks for safe outdoor dining. Finally, the City should also complement and amplify the impact of food business incubators like CommonWealth Kitchen by streamlining the business certification and inspection processes for home-grown businesses, while stimulating demand for their products by committing to incorporate their products into City food procurement. The City should also prioritize opportunities for Boston-based food businesses in all City-sponsored events and for vending on City Hall plaza.

Build opportunity for Black-owned and other minority-owned restaurants

Black-owned and other minority-owned restaurants contribute to wealth-building in communities of color, but without concerted action, these businesses are at risk of permanent closure. Across the country, 70.5% of businesses in the accommodation and food service sector reported being severely negatively impacted by the pandemic – the highest rate of any economic sector – and Massachusetts businesses were particularly hard hit.⁶³ The federal government launched the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to support affected businesses, but these loans were not well-designed to meet the unique needs of restaurants, which were unable to safely and fully reopen within the timeframe required by the program.⁶⁴ Moreover, structural inequities built into the administration, application process, and fee structure of the program made PPP loans inaccessible to many Black-owned businesses, which have historically been deprived of access to credit. On average, minority business enterprises (MBEs) have fewer employees and less revenue than white-owned businesses, making them less likely to qualify for larger PPP loans that would make them a priority for lending institutions.⁶⁵ Business owners who have past involvement with the legal system – including those who have been charged with a crime but never tried or convicted – are excluded from accessing PPP loans altogether,⁶⁶ replicating and compounding the structural racism embedded within the criminal justice system. Accordingly, while 52% of all business owners were approved for a PPP loan, only 40% of Black business owners received assistance.⁶⁷

In the early stages of the pandemic, Boston's Office of Economic Development (OED) launched the Small Business Relief Fund to help businesses most impacted by COVID-19. These grants were limited to businesses with 35 or fewer employees, and 45% of grants were awarded to minority-owned businesses.⁶⁸ However, restaurant recipients were disproportionately concentrated in Jamaica Plain, Back Bay, Beacon Hill, and Downtown Crossing, with fewer grants awarded to restaurants in predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods. The community impact of these grants is limited when they are concentrated in Boston's predominantly white commercial districts.

The inequities built into pandemic relief only exacerbate the historic disinvestment in Boston's small business community, in which Black-owned businesses are grossly underrepresented. Although Boston's population is majority-minority, only 32% of Boston's businesses are considered minority owned. Black-owned businesses, in particular, face systemic exclusion from access to capital, technical assistance, government contracts, and other resources that allow businesses to thrive. These disparities are even more extreme within the restaurant industry. Pre-pandemic, there were only eight Black-owned restaurants with liquor licenses in the City of Boston; since the onset of the pandemic, some of these restaurants and bars have lost more than 90% of their revenue.⁶⁹

In May, local restaurateurs Nia Grace and Royal C. Smith launched the Boston Black Hospitality Coalition to preserve restaurants and bars that serve as essential and historic gathering spaces for the city's Black residents. Though the Coalition has successfully raised funds for its member restaurants, a broader strategic response is critical. OED has compiled a list of restaurants that remain open during the COVID-19 crisis, distinguishing local restaurants from franchises to promote consumer spending at independent restaurants.⁷⁰ OED should specifically highlight Black-owned, immigrant-owned, and other minority-owned restaurants, caterers, and other food businesses, and long-term, OED should work with the Office of Tourism, Sports and Entertainment to promote these businesses to conventions and visitors in a post-pandemic economy.

The City should also invest in Black and other minority entrepreneurs to ensure they have the resources they need to start successful businesses. The City's 2016 Small Business Plan identifies support for minority-, women-, and immigrant-owned businesses as a primary gap in the small business ecosystem, but without firm-level and precise demographic data on Boston's MBEs, it is difficult to examine rates of revenue and employment growth among Black-owned restaurants in particular. Restaurants have unique needs, given the sector's atypically high failure rate, that

are compounded by the systemic disinvestment in Black and Latinx communities; the City should conduct a restaurant and food business census to identify and lower these barriers to the success of Black-owned and other minority-owned restaurants, food trucks, catering companies, bakers, and other food businesses.

Access to capital is one of the primary barriers for entrepreneurs of color. In Boston, small business lending has never fully recovered from the 2008 recession; the financial downturn caused by the pandemic threatens to erode what little progress has been made over the last decade. Extensive research has documented higher rates of loan rejection in minority-owned businesses, even after controlling for factors such as business size and creditworthiness.⁷¹ In Boston, lending rates vary widely by neighborhood, with small businesses in Mattapan, Mission Hill, Hyde Park, Dorchester, and Roxbury receiving at least 20% fewer loans than would be expected based on the number of businesses in these neighborhoods.⁷² And given the immense racial wealth disparities in Boston, Black entrepreneurs are less likely than their white counterparts to have personal savings to draw on in order to invest in their business.⁷³ The City should convene major lending institutions to define and address these unjust market gaps, but we should not limit our efforts to traditional financial institutions. The City should support alternative capital programs like Acción, Boston Ujima Project, and Boston Impact Initiative through loan guarantees or operational grants to finance small businesses in Boston's Black communities and communities of color, and make the work of the Boston Local Development Corporation more open and transparent.

Connect Boston's independent restaurants with city, state and federal resources

The Small Business Relief Fund was a critical stop-gap measure to get cash into the hands of restaurant owners quickly, but these grants were a drop in the bucket compared to the scale of the industry's need. To sustain Boston's independent restaurants over the long term, the City must work with our representatives in state and federal government to build a substantive relief package that prioritizes restaurant workers, Black and other minority-owned restaurants, and independently-owned restaurants. Since the landscape is quickly changing, and future state or federal funds may soon become available for independent restaurants and food retailers, the City should also coordinate its network of business support organizations to help independent restaurant owners navigate their options, and it should allocate a portion of existing federal funding provided through the Community Development Block Grant program for this purpose now.

In August, the Massachusetts House of Representatives passed an economic development bill that legalizes sports gaming, with 30% of state proceeds – about \$15 million a year – directed to a Distressed Restaurant Trust Fund that will fund one-time grants to about 1,000 restaurants.⁷⁴ Boston should work with its representatives in the State House to identify other funding sources, including federal assistance, to provide consistent support to restaurants on the long road to financial recovery. Though grants from this Fund can be used on rent, mounting rent obligations threaten to derail restaurants' progress, particularly after the eviction moratorium expires. In the meantime, Boston should proactively work with commercial landlords to negotiate rent abatement for restaurants, prioritizing MBEs and restaurants in predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods.

On the federal level, Congress is in a position to take urgent action to ensure independent restaurants are able to reopen their doors and reunite with their communities. The RESTAURANTS Act would establish a \$120 billion Independent Restaurant Revitalization Fund that would target financial assistance to independent restaurants, food trucks, and other small-scale food businesses. However, as currently written, the bill would disburse grants to applicants in the order in which applications were received,⁷⁵ threatening to replicate the same inequities perpetuated by the PPP. By contrast, the Saving Our Street (SOS) Act would establish a \$124.5 billion Microbusiness Assistance Fund to offer financial assistance directly to microbusinesses that serve low-income communities, with 75% of the funding reserved for historically underrepresented businesses.⁷⁶ Boston should amplify the voice of its restaurant community to ensure the passage of a strong restaurant relief package through Congress, and proactively offer grant application assistance to Black- and minority-owned and under-resourced independent restaurants.

Protect independent restaurants and their workers from corporate predation

Though the pandemic has presented acute challenges for independent restaurants, these businesses have long been facing strong headwinds as large corporate restaurant chains have gobbled up a growing share of the market. These trends are no accident; they are the result of skewed public policy, including tax incentives and other development subsidies, that advantage large corporations. The pandemic threatens to accelerate these trends by disadvantaging smaller independent restaurants that cannot afford to invest in contactless ordering systems, automation, digital marketing, and other technology needed to adapt to the unprecedented public health constraints.

For example, during the pandemic, third-party delivery apps have become foundational to restaurant operations. Four firms – Grubhub, DoorDash, Uber Eats, and Postmates – together control 99% of the delivery service market, granting these corporations excess market power that facilitates predatory behavior. None of these companies are profitable: the end game is monopoly, an outcome that will become all too near if Uber’s bid to acquire Postmates is approved by federal regulators.⁷⁷ During the pandemic, delivery apps have exploited restaurants’ reliance on delivery orders by charging them up to 25-30% commissions on every order.⁷⁸ In April, my colleagues on the Council held a public hearing to explore capping delivery fees for the duration of the pandemic, to protect restaurants without in-house delivery drivers which have recently turned to third-party apps. But Boston could go farther and ensure that third-party food delivery companies help sustain our local food economy beyond the pandemic by implementing a permanent cap on delivery fees. Boston restaurateurs and business organizations like the Massachusetts Restaurant Association and the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce have publicly supported a permanent 15% cap, which peer cities have already implemented.⁷⁹ Boston should be a leader in driving toward a statewide policy that prevents corporate predators from eating away at independent restaurants’ revenue.

Reform Boston’s planning and development process to sustain a diverse array of restaurants and food retailers

Our city’s planning and development process must prioritize residents’ needs, including the need for a diverse array of restaurants and food retailers. The Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) – or the more accountable planning department that replaces it⁸⁰ – should incorporate measurable targets for building food system infrastructure in a new comprehensive master plan for Boston.⁸¹ In the interim, Boston should adopt a Community Benefits Ordinance to outline a formal process for private developers to work with community coalitions to ensure development projects meet community needs, including providing space for independent restaurants, commercial kitchen space, and diverse food retailers.

The planning and development process can also be leveraged to discourage the proliferation of “formula” (or chain) retailers, including fast food restaurants, which have a history of predatory marketing tactics that target children of color.⁸² Mirroring national trends, Boston’s fast food restaurants are concentrated in low-income neighborhoods that are home to predominately Black and Latinx residents, creating dangerous food environments that increase the risk of chronic diet-related diseases.⁸³ A Hyde Park parent, for example, found that the average distance from schools

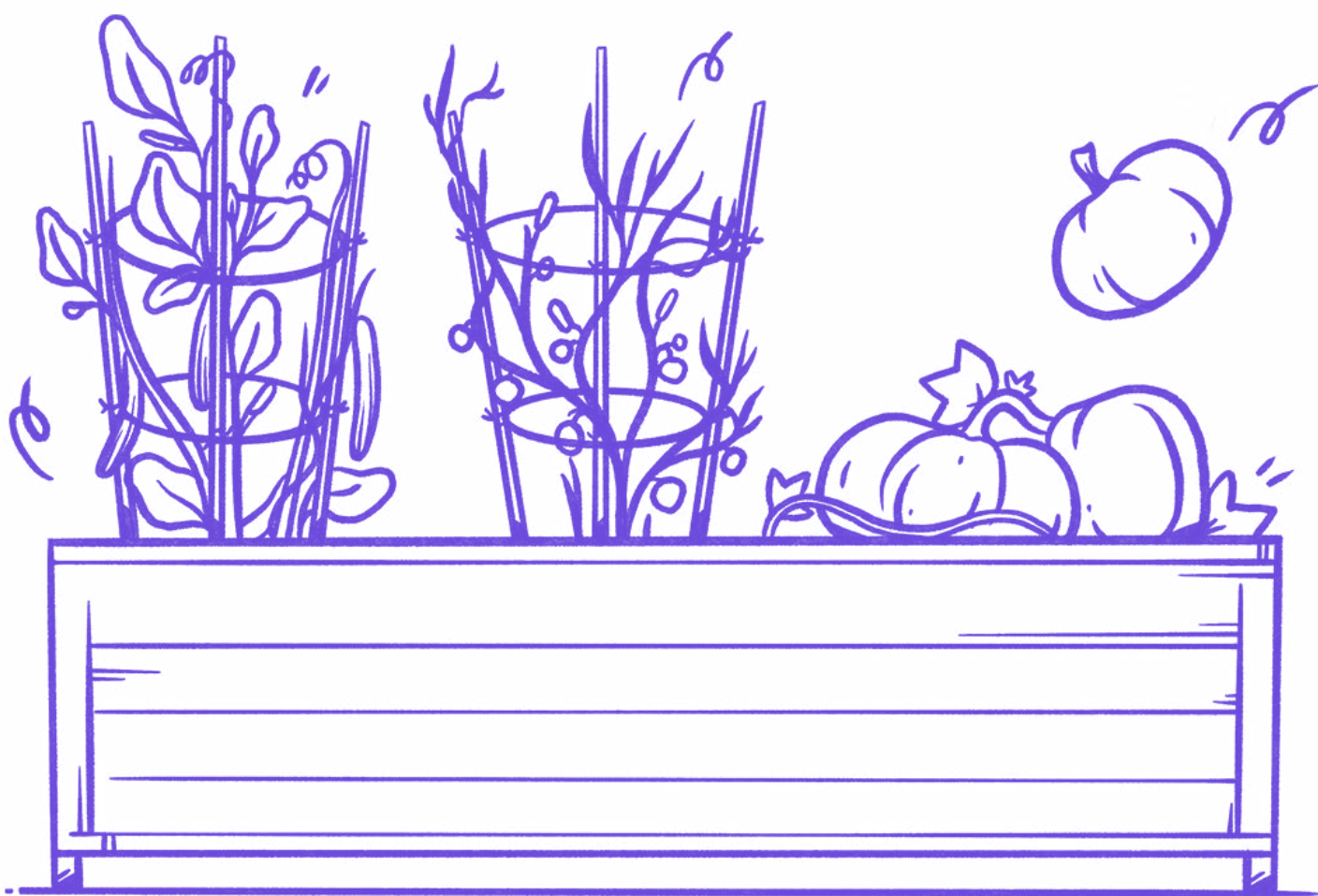
to the nearest McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's restaurants was far shorter inside Boston city limits than in nearby wealthier and whiter communities.⁸⁴ Currently, Boston's Licensing Board has the discretion to approve new fast food restaurant construction on a case-by-case basis. But the city could proactively limit the expansion of fast food chains by adopting a formula business restriction, modeled after a 2004 San Francisco ordinance that limits the approval of formula businesses when similar goods and services are already available in the neighborhood, or when the proposed business is incompatible with the neighborhood's character.⁸⁵

Support small-scale food retail

Bodegas, corner stores, and neighborhood markets make up an integral component of our food economy, but like any small business, these local retailers must compete with name brand chain stores and online food platforms. These large competitors are quicker to benefit from federal programs like the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which supports the creation of food retail in neighborhoods defined as food deserts,⁸⁶ and the recent extension of SNAP to online retailers.⁸⁷ Boston's small-scale food retailers provide essential goods, services, and jobs to their communities while anchoring their neighborhoods, and the City must be proactive in protecting small food businesses from the pressures of corporate competition and gentrification.⁸⁸ New York City has launched several initiatives to help bodegas stay in business. The Commercial Corridor Challenge, for example, funds retail infrastructure improvements and marketing campaigns, while the Food Business Pathways Program provides business training and subsidizes permits and licenses to public housing residents looking to start a new food business.⁸⁹ These programs may also be designed to incentivize small retailers to increase their nutritious food offerings. New York City's Food Retail Expansion Program to Support Health (FRESH) initiative, for example, offers property and sales tax benefits and zoning incentives for small-scale food retailers that meet nutritious food requirements. Boston should employ a variety of business development tools paired with technical assistance services to ensure small-scale food retailers can survive and continue to provide nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant food to their communities.

**expanding Boston
residents' access to
fresh, nutritious,
affordable, and local
food**

04



Food is among the most basic of human needs, and the pandemic has revealed the tenuousness of Boston residents' consistent access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food. The cruel irony is that as the financial wreckage of the pandemic makes it harder for families to afford groceries, we are also learning how conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular disease – driven in part by diets with an excess of low-cost, ultraprocessed foods and inadequate nutrient-dense foods like fruits and vegetables – are associated with worse health outcomes from COVID-19.⁹⁰ But food access issues long predate the pandemic, with food insecurity rates up to 3 times higher for Massachusetts residents who are Black and/or Latinx.⁹¹ The need for bold, progressive nutrition policy has never been more clear. And with mechanisms that connect Boston residents with food produced in our own region, our City's food agenda can also bolster New England's agricultural industry, preserving farmland that will provide ecosystem services for generations to come while reducing transportation emissions along our food supply chains.

Although the major public policies and programs that improve food access are primarily administered at the federal and state levels, Boston must find creative solutions to meet our residents' basic needs. The City should use its organizing power to effectively advocate for changes to SNAP, WIC, and other programs that increase benefits and broaden eligibility, but we need not be constrained by the structure of existing federal policies. There are numerous ways that Boston can leverage the talent and creativity of our residents to connect communities with good food at prices they can afford.

Food produced within the City of Boston and throughout New England can and should play a role in these efforts. But our efforts to expand food access cannot be limited to local or regional food. An estimated 90% of food consumed in New England is produced outside the region.⁹² With large urban populations, cold winters, and limited farmland, absolute food sovereignty may not be a realistic vision.⁹³ Bolstering local food production is a critical policy priority, but Boston must also look to food produced outside our region to ensure the food security of our communities. By fostering urban agriculture, strengthening food system infrastructure, and increasing Boston residents' purchasing power in all types of food retail outlets, the City can expand our residents' access to fresh, nutritious, culturally appropriate, affordable, and – wherever possible – locally produced food.

Foster urban agriculture

Urban farming has always been about more than just producing food. As the founders of Boston Urban Gardeners – residents of the South End and Lower Roxbury – famously noted, “because urban gardening is so empowering, it is inherently political.”⁹⁴ In Boston, agriculture has functioned as a response to systemic disinvestment in Black and Latinx neighborhoods, dating back to the community-led effort in the 1970s to reimagine the Southwest Corridor following the successful fight to block the construction of an eight lane highway cutting through Roxbury, Mission Hill, and Jamaica Plain.⁹⁵ A decade later, fed up with absentee landlords threatening public health by illegally dumping toxic waste in vacant lots in their neighborhood, Roxbury residents organized the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), now one of the major players in Boston’s urban agriculture landscape. DSNI established a community land trust (CLT) to re-assert community control over the neighborhood development process, and today, DSNI works in partnership with The Food Project to operate two farms and a community greenhouse alongside 225 units of affordable housing. Several other farms in Boston have adopted the CLT model or other cooperative management structures.⁹⁶

Urban farms and community gardens are particularly important in Black, Latinx, and low-income communities like Roxbury, where residents have less access to private outdoor spaces or well-established public parks than in white neighborhoods.⁹⁷ These patterns of racial segregation continue to shape Boston’s urban agriculture system, making urban farming a central issue of racial justice. One 2012 study found that census tracts with a higher Black population have lower access to community gardens,⁹⁸ and existing community gardens often have long waiting lists,⁹⁹ preventing immigrants and other newcomers from participating. The City should acknowledge the ‘use value’ of land, expanding the spaces available for community gardens with an explicit racial justice lens to ensure all Boston residents have the opportunity to grow their own food and preserve cultural traditions around food production. The City should also financially support programs like the Urban Farming Institute’s Build 100 Grow Beds campaign, which provides residents with the equipment, tools, and support they need to grow their own food on a backyard, porch, or windowsill. Boston’s gardens and farms also serve as critical platforms for community engagement – providing seniors with opportunities for physical activity, celebrating the cultural and culinary diversity of all our communities, connecting the children of immigrants with their food heritage, and offering education and employment programs to our City’s youth. As Bobby Walker, training manager at Urban Farming Institute, sums it up: “We don’t just grow food; we grow

people.”

To bring new urban land into food production, the City should use tax incentives or vacant lot registry fees to encourage private landowners to transfer non-buildable vacant lots to aspiring farmers. In Pittsburgh, for example, city officials have identified 10,000 vacant and tax-delinquent parcels that can be redeveloped into farms, community gardens, or other forms of green infrastructure.¹⁰⁰ In coordinating land transfers, the City should give preference to CLTs and other organizational structures that ensure the permanent community control of land, including by offering administrative and financial support to new and established CLTs.¹⁰¹ The City should also require that the BPDA carefully assess the vacant parcels under its control¹⁰² to identify those suitable for agriculture and proactively seek out interested buyers looking for farming opportunities. These urban agriculture projects could be financed by green bonds, like in Washington DC, or through land value capture mechanisms, which recover a portion of the private property value increases that result from having a thriving urban farm nearby.¹⁰³ The City should lower the barriers to entry for new and aspiring farmers by providing soil testing and remediation services – potentially through a newly created Urban Climate Corps, which can also teach regenerative agricultural practices to build environmental stewardship among Boston’s youth.¹⁰⁴ The City can also subsidize the installation of new water connections, the procurement of technical assistance for sites that will require more extensive engineering, and other infrastructure necessary for commercial production.¹⁰⁵

In 2013, the City adopted Article 89, a zoning reform that made it easier for local restaurants and food retail outlets to purchase food grown within city limits. Thanks to Article 89, fruits and vegetables that are produced on Mattapan’s historic Fowler Clark Epstein farm, for example, can be served in restaurants like Dorchester’s Oasis Vegan Veggie Parlor and Nubian Square’s Dudley Cafe and distributed to patients at Bowdoin Street Health Center’s farm stand. Boston should build off of this success by coordinating partnerships with bodegas, corner stores, and food co-ops to bring locally produced food to all corners of the City.

Beyond expanding Boston residents’ access to locally-produced food and fostering community engagement, a stronger network of urban farms and gardens across the City would also magnify the potential benefits of a citywide composting program. Some Boston businesses participate in composting operations run by private companies – for example, Boston Public Market partners

with Dorchester-based CERO Cooperative, which composts food scraps from Boston businesses – but enrollment is cost-prohibitive for many residents. And though selected neighborhoods have access to Project Oscar, a community composting pilot program that diverted more than 100,000 pounds of food waste from landfills in its first three years,¹⁰⁶ too many of our food scraps end up in landfills, where they constitute a major source of methane emissions. Boston is a net importer of food, and therefore a net importer of nutrients. Without a cost-effective and ecologically sound way of disposing of these nutrients, our urban food system will remain out of balance.¹⁰⁷ Composting diverts food from landfills and turns it into a nutrient-rich organic fertilizer. Strengthening Boston’s network of urban farms will grow the local market for compost, making a curbside composting program more economically feasible and enabling the City to make progress towards our climate commitments through the Zero Waste Initiative.¹⁰⁸

Strengthen regional food system infrastructure

Boston also has the opportunity to expand residents’ access to food produced throughout the Northeastern region. It is important to note that regional food systems are not inherently sustainable or just, and policymakers must be careful to avoid “the local trap” that prioritizes foods’ geographic provenance over other environmental, social or community values.¹⁰⁹ Our region benefits from an enormous variety of small or midsize, diversified farms that employ regenerative agricultural practices,¹¹⁰ with few of the enormous monocrop and concentrated animal feeding operations that dominate other areas of the country. Farm operators in the Northeast are more likely than average to be young, female, and engaged in farming as a principal occupation, rather than a retirement or side project.¹¹¹ However, the proportion of farmers who are non-white, which is already under 5% across the country, is even lower in the Northeast – underscoring the point that regional food systems can perpetuate racial and other inequities if they are left unaddressed. Despite these important limitations, our regional food system offers Boston residents the potential to support the livelihoods of our region’s farmers, fishers, and ranchers while reducing the transportation emissions produced along our food supply chains. The City should scale up the processing and distribution infrastructure required to bring regionally produced food to its residents, including farmers markets, community-supported agriculture programs, and other retail initiatives.

Boston was home to the oldest farmers market on record, established in 1634, and continues to host a thriving network of farmers markets today, in addition to the permanent indoor Boston

Public Market. These markets offer Boston residents the opportunity to purchase fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and other grocery items produced regionally, while providing farmers the opportunity to earn price premiums not available in the wholesale market – particularly for small-scale, new or beginning farmers, who may not have the scale to reach more traditional market channels.¹¹² Despite the common perception that farmers markets cater to a wealthy clientele, the true demographic picture is more diverse, and the mean income of Boston’s farmers market shoppers is roughly comparable to that of all Boston households.¹¹³ A 2010 study found that the price of vegetables at farmers markets in Roxbury and Dorchester was no higher than the price at supermarkets,¹¹⁴ and the creation of the statewide Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) has further lowered the barriers for lower-income customers to frequent farmers markets.¹¹⁵

Beyond connecting residents with fresh food, Boston’s farmers markets also create vibrant streetscapes, with places for neighbors to gather and opportunities to showcase local musicians and artists and connect shoppers with important City resources and information, including SNAP enrollment. Several farmers markets in Boston are operated by Main Streets associations or Neighborhood Development Corporations, pointing to farmers markets’ role in a broader mission to create vitality and inclusion in Boston’s neighborhoods. The Ashmont Farmers Market, for example, hosts an annual Bike and Brew festival to promote safe streets policy, which in turn directs shoppers to other businesses in the area.

Boston should take an active role in fostering a thriving network of farmers markets across all of our neighborhoods. Even though community interest in local food continues to rise, some farmers markets still struggle to attract a regular customer base. Research shows that as the number of farmers markets increases, markets are increasingly competing for the same pool of customers¹¹⁶ – an experience borne out by testimony from Boston market managers. The City’s Office of Food Access (OFA) should engage in careful strategic planning as it works with the Inspectional Services Department to approve new markets, ensuring that markets are distributed evenly across the City’s neighborhoods and throughout the week to allow each market the chance to succeed. A variety of farmers market days and times will also help attract new customers, as traditional market schedules (weekend mornings or weekday evenings) are often not compatible with service sector workers’ schedules.¹¹⁷ The City should also explore vacant spaces suitable for pop-up markets, stretching the farmers market season through the winter.

A citywide strategic planning effort will also help integrate mobile markets within the City's network of more established farmers markets. Mobile produce markets may be able to serve a larger number of Boston residents by moving around the city. For example, About Fresh's fleet of trucks brings fresh fruits and vegetables to several Boston neighborhoods on a rotating weekly schedule. This mobility offers some logistical advantages, but mobile markets are less likely to fulfill the same placemaking functions as permanent farmers markets. A coordinated strategic planning process would bring together farmers market managers, mobile market operators, and other food access coordinators to establish a citywide plan to expand food access, directing each type of retail outlet to the neighborhood it is best equipped to serve.

The City should also ensure the long-term viability of farmers markets by investing in market managers. In a 2011 study, only 37% of Boston's farmers market managers were paid for their work.¹¹⁸ Market managers are enormously committed to their communities, dedicating their time and often their own money to ensure the sustained operations of their market. But this reliance on volunteer labor is not sustainable over the long term, and as managers leave for paid positions, market sales may suffer.¹¹⁹ OFA should launch a grant program to support the salaries of market managers, properly recognizing their public service in sustaining our regional food system and giving them the resources they need to stay in their positions long-term. This grant program would also better equip managers to help eligible market customers enroll in SNAP, a vital function of farmers markets that often goes unrecognized.

A City-run program to support market managers would also free up market resources to bolster other aspects of market operations, without putting strain on vendors through increased market fees. Continuity of vendors year-to-year helps attract a regular customer base, but several Boston farmers markets have seen the departure of beloved vendors, who have not been able to earn enough income at Boston markets to make them viable. After factoring in the burden of traveling to Boston and the labor costs involved in running a market, Massachusetts farmers need to make an average of \$250 in net sales each day for the market to be profitable, and only 59% of farmers markets in 2009 met this standard.¹²⁰ Farmer profitability is also eroded by the City's vendor fees, currently \$100 per market. OFA and ISD have exempted produce vendors from these fees¹²¹ in recognition of the public health benefits of bringing fruits and vegetables to Boston residents. But Boston residents' food security will suffer if farmers markets lose vendors or close permanently. Instead of viewing farmers markets as a revenue-raising opportunity, the City must recognize the

value farmers markets contribute to our communities by eliminating vendor fees across the board. By making it more affordable for vendors to participate in Boston markets, vendors will, in turn, be able to keep their prices down, helping markets attract a more socioeconomically diverse customer base.

In 2011, Boston farmers markets captured 0.1% of local SNAP dollars – ten times the national average – contributing \$556 in vendor sales per market.¹²² And since the 2017 expansion of HIP, which offers SNAP shoppers a dollar-for-dollar match on produce purchased from authorized vendors, Boston’s farmers markets have further expanded accessibility to low-income shoppers. HIP also sustains the financial viability of the markets: across the state, markets that offer the incentive program receive three times the SNAP dollars as markets that do not.¹²³ However, farmers must purchase expensive equipment to process electronic benefit transfer (EBT) transactions. When vendors cannot afford the equipment, market managers often step in to process HIP transactions for them. This can be a potentially stigmatizing experience for shoppers, who must publicly signal their low-income status as they bring their groceries to the market manager’s booth to complete their transaction. The City can reduce this stigma for low-income shoppers by subsidizing the purchase of EBT-processing equipment for all HIP vendors participating in Boston markets.

Creating pleasant shopping experiences will help markets expand their customer base, as market managers nearly unanimously agree that word-of-mouth is the most effective advertising strategy. Steve Marcelin, manager of the Roslindale Farmers Market, for example, explains: “If someone comes to this market and has an amazing experience shopping, they will tell their friends, and that brings more SNAP shoppers to me.”¹²⁴ But the City can accelerate the process of bringing new customers of all socioeconomic backgrounds to farmers markets by investing in market promotion, advertising, and placemaking, including by allowing food trucks to park alongside market locations. These campaigns must be carefully targeted to be culturally relevant to different communities within Boston, acknowledging that the perception of farmers markets can vary widely. Some immigrant communities, for example, perceive the open-air nature of farmers markets to be associated with a lower-class shopping experience, preferring instead to shop at large supermarkets perceived as higher-status. The City should coordinate with community and neighborhood associations to identify effective messaging strategies to communicate the benefits of farmers markets to all Boston residents. Boston should ensure that promotional materials, including information on SNAP and HIP, are available in a wide variety of languages, so that

language barriers do not prevent anyone from attending.

The City should also expand access to local and regional food by connecting low-income residents with community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares. The CSA model allows customers to purchase a portion of a farm's harvest in advance, providing farmers with much-needed income in the lean times before the height of the summer. CSA programs can take many forms, and the pandemic has prompted several local food justice organizations to launch CSA-like programs that distribute boxes of produce to those in need. The Urban Farming Institute, for example, has instituted a "pay what you can" program, giving away bags of produce to community members instead of operating a traditional farmstand. However, many of these programs have been funded through one-time Boston Resiliency Fund grants, threatening their long-term viability. Meanwhile, traditional CSA programs are often too expensive for low-income people to access.

The City could make CSA programs more accessible by launching a common platform to facilitate and subsidize enrollment for low-income residents. Just as OFA maintains a list of existing farmers markets, the City should promote all CSA programs available to Boston residents so that interested shoppers know their options. Through this platform, the City could front the cost of a CSA share, enabling those living paycheck-to-paycheck to pay for their share over time. This City could also subsidize the cost of CSA shares for low-income residents. During the pandemic, the Greater Boston Food Bank launched new partnerships with dozens of Boston Housing Authority locations to drop off food boxes for BHA residents, who have higher-than-average rates of food insecurity.¹²⁵ Instead of funding these efforts through a one-time BRF grant, the City could maximize its impact by subsidizing CSA shares for BHA residents – an investment in our City's public health that simultaneously strengthens our regional food system.

During the pandemic, several farmers markets have worked to move the shopping experience online, but this requires a serious time commitment from both farmers and market managers to keep online inventory up-to-date. To make this effort worth their while, the City's online CSA platform could be expanded to facilitate purchases and coordinate deliveries – perhaps fulfilled by youth employed by the City in a program like Groundwork Somerville's Green Team, whose members complete deliveries via bicycle. In exchange for access to this City-run delivery system, farmers market vendors would be asked to offer their excess produce at no or low cost to Bostonians experiencing food insecurity. Delivery service would be particularly valuable for elderly

residents and those living with disabilities, who may not be able to physically visit the farmers market or a CSA pick-up location.

Increase Boston residents' food purchasing power

Besides farmers markets and CSAs, the City should also work to expand the food purchasing power of Boston residents at all food retail outlets. During the pandemic, OFA launched the Wicked Fresh program to increase farmers market sales. Each week, market managers were given coupons, each one worth \$2.50, to distribute as they saw fit. Some managers tried to give these coupons to local businesses to give to their customers, potentially expanding the market's traditional customer base. But since Wicked Fresh coupons expire every week, this strategy ran the risk of letting coupons go to waste. Instead, most managers ended up giving the coupons out to existing farmers market shoppers, leading to a one-time increase in vendor sales. This is a missed opportunity to bring new customers to farmers markets, while also failing to expand food access for low-income Boston residents who are not already accustomed to visiting their local farmers market.

The limitations of the Wicked Fresh coupon program point to the tensions embedded within food access programs, which often try to solve two problems at once – supporting local and regional farmers, while also getting food to those in need. These two goals are sometimes aligned, as demonstrated by the popularity of HIP of Boston's farmers markets. But food access initiatives cannot neglect those who prefer to shop at supermarkets or other traditional retail outlets, whether because of convenience, familiarity, or cultural preferences. OFA must expand its food access initiatives to more traditional retail outlets in order to increase the food purchasing power of all residents. One opportunity is to dramatically scale up the Double Up Food Bucks (DUFBS) program, which provides a dollar-to-dollar match for SNAP shoppers on all purchases, up to \$10 per day – a major support for low-income shoppers. Historically, DUFBS only operated in a few authorized retailers, though City recently announced the program would expand to cover more stores.¹²⁶ The City should pursue the permanent and widespread expansion of the Double Up Food Bucks program to food retailers of all scales across all of Boston's neighborhoods, including small bodegas, corner stores, farmers markets, and Boston Public Market.

Increasing low-income shoppers' purchasing power at traditional retailers is essential to preserving their dignity and autonomy. Poor people should not be relegated to pre-packaged food boxes

distributed through our emergency food system; we should all be able to select the food we want, at times we want, in locations convenient to us. At Daily Table stores, for example – two of the four current DUFB locations – SNAP shoppers can use their DUFB benefits to purchase affordable, nutritious, culturally-relevant prepared meals, easing the burden of working people who don't always have the time or energy to create meals from scratch. Expanding DUFB ensures that we are not limiting our food access interventions to fruits and vegetables at farmers markets, but rather providing low-income families with the same food shopping opportunities as are available to their wealthier neighbors. The City can also encourage DUFB retailers to stock and promote healthy options, including fruits, vegetables, and prepared meals made by local vendors by providing grants, tax incentives, and technical support for store operators to install refrigerated cases, signage, and other store improvements to sustain the program.

An estimated 35,000 Boston residents are eligible for SNAP but are not enrolled,¹²⁷ cutting off access to innovative programs like DUFB. Recent state legislation has proposed creating a universal application for MassHealth and SNAP, which would facilitate easier enrollment for those who qualify. But Boston can take immediate steps to connect residents with available food resources. The Boston Public Health Commission, for example, has partnered with several community health centers to integrate food insecurity screenings into their clinical workflow.¹²⁸ The City should incorporate these food insecurity screenings into all City services to ensure that Boston residents benefit from the nutrition assistance to which they are entitled.

The City should also find creative solutions to increase the food purchasing power of low-income Boston residents who are not eligible for SNAP or DUFB, particularly our undocumented residents. Despite its limitations as a food access intervention, the Wicked Fresh coupon program demonstrates that the City can act quickly to get cash to families in need with no strings attached. Beyond the pandemic, the City should launch a cash voucher program, redeemable at both farmers markets and traditional food retailers, for low-income undocumented residents who are excluded from federal and state nutrition assistance programs. Though funded by the City, the voucher program should be administered directly by immigrant-led organizations that have earned the trust of undocumented communities, alleviating fears that participation could lead to immigration enforcement actions.

**leveraging public
procurement to drive
broader food system
change**

05



Procurement is one lever of municipal power through which Boston can have an immediate and direct impact on the well-being of its residents, while simultaneously driving broader economic and social change. Through its food procurement, Boston determines what kind of food is available to its residents – whether that food is nutritious, culturally relevant, and health-promoting, or whether it increases the risk of diabetes or cardiovascular disease; whether food purchasing builds wealth in local Boston communities, or whether it maximizes profits for corporations that exploit land and people and extract resources from our local economy; whether that food is grown in regenerative agricultural systems that support our ecosystem health and climate stability, or whether it perpetuates large monocrop and concentrated animal feeding operations that threaten our future. As is often said, a budget is a statement of values – but so is a menu. Through its food purchasing power, Boston can send a signal to food service companies, vendors, peer cities and businesses about what kind of food system we want to build – what kind of food system truly serves the people.

In March 2019, Boston City Council passed the Good Food Purchasing ordinance¹²⁹ – the first municipality on the East Coast to launch such a program, leading our region in driving food system change. The ordinance requires city agencies and departments that purchase food, including Boston Public Schools, to set formal standards for its food service contracts, thereby mandating that food vendors track and report their progress pursuing six food system values:

- Supporting local economies, including small and mid-sized agricultural and food processing operations within the local area or region;
- Dismantling racial inequities by encouraging contractors to invest in our disadvantaged and minority communities, including by partnering with minority, disabled, and/or women-owned businesses, hiring from within these communities, and providing a living wage to all employees;
- Improving health and nutrition by offering generous portions of vegetables, fruit and whole grains and reducing harmful ingredients;
- Valuing our food chain workforce by protecting workers’ rights to organize and collectively bargain, and by expanding access to affordable healthcare and childcare for all food chain workers;
- Preserving the environment by supporting agricultural producers that employ regenerative production systems that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect our water, soil, and biodiversity; and

- Protecting the welfare of farm animals.

These six values represent a radical departure from mainstream commercial and industrial food service providers. Half of all institutional food service is contracted through one of three food service management corporations – Aramark, Sodexo, and Compass – that collectively earn \$33 billion annually.¹³⁰ These management companies sign massive multi-year contracts with the nation's largest food vendors and distributors, which compete for business by emphasizing uniformity and consistency over quality and variety, lowering their prices – which, in turn, requires lowering their environmental, nutritional, and labor standards.¹³¹ Consolidation in the food service management sector stifles innovation and dramatically limits opportunities for small and local vendors, but it also presents an enormous opportunity for cities that choose to seize it: Boston has enough purchasing power to incentivize food producers, processors, and aggregators to shift their practices to align with Good Food values, and to cause food service companies and their distributors to identify and do business with local farms, fisheries, catering and product companies that can meet these standards.

The majority of City food purchasing takes place in Boston Public Schools, with an annual \$18 million food budget. BPS benefits from the experienced and progressive leadership of a Director of Food and Nutrition Services who implemented a similar procurement standard in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which led to – among other things – the creation of 221 new jobs, a new union contract for delivery drivers, and a 22% reduction in LAUSD's carbon footprint.¹³² Nourishing school meals have an enormous multiplier effect on student wellbeing, including improved health outcomes and school performance, while also increasing student participation rates and leveraging federal funding through USDA reimbursements.

Boston began the process of shedding reliance on third party food service vendors in 2018 through the My Way Café initiative, which emphasizes scratch cooking and more variety and choice in meal options, while creating local union food service jobs. But by fully implementing the Good Food Purchasing program throughout Boston Public Schools and other departments and agencies, Boston can squeeze every last bit of social, community, and environmental value out of our food budgets and pursue food justice for Boston residents and our neighbors.

Fully implement Good Food Purchasing ordinance within BPS and other city agencies

The pandemic has taught us valuable lessons about our food system vulnerabilities that can inform the implementation phase of the Good Food Purchasing initiative. The 2019 ordinance requires all impacted City agencies and departments to complete a baseline assessment of their existing food contracts. This will provide us with a critical snapshot of current practices as we launch a community-driven process to develop a multi-year action plan for BPS and other city agencies to fully implement new Good Food Purchasing standards in upcoming food contracts. This community engagement process can strengthen and expand the multi-sector coalition that pushed Boston's GFPP ordinance forward, which included Massachusetts farmers and fishers; grocery store workers and Unified Food and Commercial Workers members; health care professionals and researchers; BPS parents, teachers, and cafeteria workers; local business owners; and environmental and animal welfare advocates. The City should use the completion of a baseline assessment as an organizing tool to bring together these stakeholders and expand the coalition to center the voices of those most acutely impacted by the pandemic, including families experiencing food insecurity, food chain workers, and food justice nonprofit organizations.

In the first three months of the pandemic alone, the City disbursed more than \$10 million to nonprofits providing food relief to residents through the Boston Resiliency Fund.¹³³ These nonprofit organizations are deeply rooted in their communities, and they are able to provide culturally relevant and nutritious foods to Boston residents, including those who may be excluded from traditional food assistance programs. The City's procurement officials should draw on this expertise to make sure community needs are centered as the City puts out external bids for food service. The City also has a responsibility to support GFPP implementation through oversight and technical assistance. The pandemic has disrupted food distribution networks all across the City, and nowhere more than BPS, which has been asked to upend its food procurement practices while navigating the uncertainties of school reopening. The other publicly-funded food programs subject to the new ordinance – Meals on Wheels and HeadStart – have also seen massive increases in community need,¹³⁴ with limited resources and new operational challenges. The City should commit resources to these public agencies to ensure full implementation of GFPP on schedule, drawing on the Center on Good Food Purchasing for guidance, so that public dollars can immediately be put to work in building a better food system that builds our City's resilience – to acute shocks like COVID-19, as well as the more slow-moving food crises, like poverty and poor health, that affect our lives.

Incentivize the City's anchor institutions to adopt Good Food Purchasing standards

The City has direct control over municipal spending through its departments and agencies, but Boston can also encourage local anchor institutions to adopt Good Food Purchasing standards in their own procurement processes. Anchor institutions are those nonprofit institutions, such as hospitals, universities, museums, convention centers, and public transit hubs that tend not to move location.¹³⁵ The permanence of these institutions creates an opportunity to build deeply rooted relationships with their surrounding communities – both by contracting with local businesses and hiring local residents, and by extending locally-determined Good Food values across all of its external contracts. In Boston, hospitals and institutions of higher education have significant food budgets that, if redirected to align with Good Food standards, could amplify the impact of the City's direct Good Food Purchasing.

Hospitals:

There are 11 non-federal, short-term acute care hospitals in the City of Boston (not including long-term care facilities such as Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital). Based on the total number of patient days reported by each hospital,¹³⁶ the City's hospitals are collectively estimated to care for an average of 3,318 patients every day. With an average cost of patient food in health services estimated at \$8-15 per meal,¹³⁷ the total food budget for these hospitals is estimated to be between \$9.7 and \$18.2 million per year – a potential impact as large as the entire BPS food service budget. This doesn't even include the enormous opportunity in hospital cafeterias and catering to staff and visitors.

Due in large part to the advocacy work of Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), many of these hospitals are already starting to transition their sourcing in alignment with the Good Food Purchasing standards. Four institutions in particular – Boston Children's Hospital, Boston Medical Center, Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital, and Brigham and Women's Hospital – participated in HCWH's "Nourished by New England" program, which connects healthcare food service providers with local food suppliers.¹³⁸ There is a growing recognition among healthcare providers that food is medicine, that the food retail environment is a social determinant of health, and that healthcare institutions have a vested interest in improving the long-term well-being of their patients and workers by providing nutritious, health-promoting food.¹³⁹ For example, in 2013, Dorchester's Carney Hospital partnered with Roxbury-based City Fresh Foods to deliver low-sodium meals to the homes of patients experiencing cardiovascular disease, aiming to reduce

hospital readmissions.¹⁴⁰

Despite these efforts, Good Food programs at healthcare institutions vary widely, and the portion of hospitals' aggregate food budgets directed toward Good Food contracts is likely to be small and inconsistent. The City of Boston should work to streamline and bolster local and Good Food procurement efforts across all its hospitals. The majority of hospitals utilize outsourced food service operators like Sodexo and Compass, and belong to Group Purchasing Organizations (GPOs) that contract with mainstream food service providers and distributors such as Sysco, US Foods, Nestle and Kraft,¹⁴¹ leaving little opportunity for local or diverse sourcing or opportunities for small and independent businesses. Extending the Good Food Purchasing standards to these institutions would send a strong market signal that food supply chains must adapt if these enterprises wish to do business in the City of Boston.

Colleges and universities:

Boston's higher education institutions can also play a role in transforming food supply chains while delivering immediate benefits to their students. Although Massachusetts law encourages state agencies, colleges and universities to create a formal preference for in-state food products, the legislation does not extend the requirement to colleges and universities.¹⁴² There has been growing demand for farm-to-university procurement, in large part thanks to youth activists with Uprooted & Rising, the Real Food Challenge, and the HEAL Food Alliance, among others. But progress has been piecemeal, and food management companies such as Aramark and Compass have successfully lobbied to water down Massachusetts legislation, arguing that a local preference would drive up their costs – though research shows that local food can be competitive with food sold by distributors thanks to cost-cutting strategies that offer additional synergies with Good Food Purchasing values.¹⁴³ The City of Boston should present a counter-weight to these lobbying forces by proactively working with its anchor colleges and universities to institutionalize and grow local and Good Food purchasing efforts.

Boston is home to 29 colleges and universities and two community colleges, which collectively enroll 154,000 students.¹⁴⁴ Across Massachusetts, 66% of students (or approximately 102,000 Boston students) participate in their institutions' meal plans.¹⁴⁵ Meal plans are varied, and not every plan includes 3 meals a day, but based on BPS' average cost-per-meal, the collective food budget of Boston's higher education institutions can be estimated at \$34.6 million solely for the

meal programs, and not including spending on conferences, meetings, and other events. These estimates indicate that by using its levers of power to impact food procurement at the City's hospitals, colleges and universities, Boston could more than triple the impact of the original Good Food Purchasing ordinance.

How can Boston accelerate the adoption of Good Food Purchasing standards?

The City can utilize numerous levers of power to encourage its anchor institutions to shift their food procurement practices. The City should launch an Anchor Council to formally convene its hospitals, colleges and universities, convention centers and cultural institutions to set collective goals around Good Food spending. Leaders at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Wentworth Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences have partnered to gain leverage in their negotiations with the food service management company they each employ;¹⁴⁶ the Anchor Council could serve as a springboard for new such partnerships. The City should also leverage its participation in the Anchor Council to find creative ways to deliver more affordable fresh produce directly to low-income Boston residents. In Seattle, for example, childcare and senior meal sites use their purchasing power to set up community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares to distribute fresh, local produce to families.¹⁴⁷ The Office of Food Access could work with BPS, anchor institutions, and other major purchasers to buy excess produce, and contract with Boston nonprofit organizations to break down shipments into smaller CSA shares for distribution at Boston Housing Authority sites or community health centers.

To facilitate the sharing of data and best practices and the joint investment in supplier development, the City should also develop a public database to track local purchases by anchor institutions, and should deploy the Office of Food Access to partner with these institutions to track and report on their progress. During the pandemic, the MassGrown Exchange, a state-run online business-to-business marketplace, was launched in alignment with the recommendations of the Food Security Task Force;¹⁴⁸ this marketplace could serve as a platform for Boston institutions to connect with Good Food producers throughout the state, and with public institutions across the Commonwealth seeking similar progressive food system change. Student activism has been responsible for much of the food service progress in Boston's institutions of higher education.¹⁴⁹ However, because the student population largely turns over every four years, the pace of change in colleges and universities may be hindered. The Office of Food Access should coordinate a Local Food Procurement Working Group, made up of students, food system stakeholders, advocates, and

experts such as Massachusetts Farm to School in order to channel students' passion for sustainable and equitable food systems into long-term change.

The City can also wield its power to influence institutional procurement through its planning, development, and taxation policy. The Boston Planning and Development Agency should use the Institutional Master Plan (IMP) process to extract commitments from hospitals, colleges and universities to adopt Good Food Purchasing standards as they seek approval for major expansions. The IMP process was established to ensure that the City's major institutions enhance their public service and economic development role in their communities. Attaching procurement goals to institutions' community benefits commitments under their IMP would ensure that benefits extend not only to the immediately surrounding neighborhood, but also our broader Massachusetts community. Boston Medical Center's Preventative Food Pantry and Teaching Kitchen and Rooftop Garden, for example, are cited in that institution's 2019 IMP as community benefits initiatives intended to reduce food insecurity in the surrounding community by distributing 15,000 pounds of fresh fruits, vegetables and grocery staples each week¹⁵⁰ – but reorienting large-scale food contracts around our Good Food values would amplify that impact. The City should require further Good Food Purchasing commitments through these agreements and fund a staff position with the authority to enforce them.

Though nonprofit anchor institutions are exempt from paying property taxes in Boston, the Payment-in-Lieu-of-Taxes (PILOT) program collects voluntary payments from these institutions to ensure they are paying their fair share for the public services and collective human capital that the City provides. This program is another critical lever to ensure that growth in the “eds and meds” sector benefits all Boston residents, and the City should work to link institutions' food procurement goals to their community benefits commitments under the PILOT program. In 2019, anchor institutions' total community benefits commitments included \$5.9 million for improvements to the “built environment,” which includes access to nutritious foods.¹⁵¹ Interventions to create new healthy food retail in our communities should be applauded, but committing to Good Food Purchasing standards through all procurement contracts drives broader systemic change, while delivering direct benefits to the immediate community. The City should pursue these commitments to maximize the real value of the community benefits delivered through the PILOT program. As hospitals undertake required community needs assessments to inform community programming, this process should be more open, transparent, and coordinated to maximize impact and be tied to

clear strategies including a food justice plan. Colleges and universities should similarly demonstrate and quantify community benefits annually and engage in open planning efforts to justify PILOT.

**strengthening food
system coalitions to
pursue a food justice
agenda**

06



The issues outlined above all present exciting opportunities for the City of Boston to build food system resilience and economic opportunity, using existing levers of municipal power to transform our food system. But the fullest expression of food justice cannot be achieved without a broad and powerful coalition of advocates who understand the forces we're up against and have the resources we need to act. Beyond the four categories of City policy reforms outlined thus far, Boston residents also need policy change at the state and federal level. For too long, powerful special interests have taken advantage of a fragmented food advocacy community to obstruct and delay the policy reforms we so desperately need. But the pandemic has demonstrated that when the need is great, our elected officials and institutions can be forced to act. To meet the scale of the challenges we face, Boston residents must organize, build diverse coalitions, and raise our collective voice in pursuit of an ambitious food justice agenda.

This democratic vision of a broad coalition of food system activists may be best embodied in the food policy council (FPC), an institution that consists of representatives and stakeholders from many sectors of the food system who work with public officials to promote food system resilience.¹⁵² At their most effective, FPCs serve as platforms for coordinated action, bringing together advocates, community members, and policymakers out of their silos to work toward common goals. The Massachusetts Food Policy Council, for example, led a multi-year statewide planning process involving more than 1,500 stakeholders – rural and urban farmers, extension agents and researchers, business owners and grocery store workers, representatives of food hubs and food banks, school food advocates and public health experts, and more – to compile a Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan.¹⁵³

The number of FPCs across the country has grown dramatically in recent years, with the majority operating at the local level.¹⁵⁴ In our state, the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative serves as a network for the more than 20 local FPCs across the Commonwealth. These range from volunteer-run community coalitions to institutional bodies that are formally embedded within local government, including the Boston Food Access Council (BFAC).

BFAC was created in 2009 by Mayor Tom Menino and housed in the Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives (OFI). Soon after Mayor Walsh took office in 2014, OFI became the Office of Food Access (OFA), organized around a new mission of creating access to "affordable, just, culturally connected, healthy and sustainable food in Boston,"¹⁵⁵ and brought BFAC under its jurisdiction. BFAC's position

within OFA was indicative of its relatively long tenure as one of the older FPCs in the country: formally embedding FPCs within government used to be more common, but today, only 26% of FPCs across the United States and Canada embody this organizational structure. The majority of FPCs are either housed within other nonprofit organizations or exist as independent nonprofits or grassroots coalitions.¹⁵⁶

Being embedded within a government agency like OFA does offer certain benefits, including potentially higher legitimacy among elected officials, greater visibility in policy circles, and stronger channels of communication between BFAC and the rest of the City government.¹⁵⁷ However, housing BFAC within OFA may also make it beholden to the political agenda of the current administration. Experts in food policy governance have found that local FPC influence depends on a close connection to the Mayor's office, making FPCs vulnerable to shifting fortunes as elections bring new leadership, new staff, and potentially new policy priorities.¹⁵⁸ BFAC's home within OFA may also limit its scope of imagination by discouraging the participation of community members who may disagree with aspects of the Mayor's agenda. In Los Angeles, for example, the FPC was launched as part of the Mayor's office, but that arrangement alienated community constituencies who later came on board when the FPC established itself as an independent collaborative under the fiscal sponsorship of Community Partners.¹⁵⁹ These concerns have repeatedly been raised by BFAC members who worry that BFAC's structure prevents them from working outside the Mayor's agenda.¹⁶⁰

Fortunately, many of these concerns have been effectively channeled through a BFAC Transition Committee, leading to a new iteration of BFAC launched in September 2019. Under this new structure, BFAC is led by an elected Steering Committee and organized into four different Working Groups. One of these Working Groups is formally dedicated to advancing the goals of the Mayor's Food Access Agenda of 2019-2021.¹⁶¹ The other Working Groups – Community Outreach, Education and Engagement; Fundraising; and Policy & Advocacy – are designed to have more flexibility in pursuing their own policy goals. This new structure is a positive first step towards guaranteeing BFAC's structural autonomy, able to effectively channel community needs into a bold policy agenda while maintaining a collaborative working relationship with elected officials.¹⁶² To take advantage of this new structure and formalize its independence, BFAC should take additional steps to diversify its membership and form new partnerships outside the traditional food policy sphere, while working with OFA to collect data needed to monitor progress toward citywide food system goals.

Diversify and democratize BFAC membership

The failings of our current system are experienced particularly by Boston's residents of color, poor communities, and other constituencies with little political power. Across the country, 81% of FPCs report that community relationships are essential to achieve progress towards policy goals.¹⁶³

The newly-restructured BFAC has already taken steps to democratize participation, including lowering the barriers to entry by publishing a guide for new members.¹⁶⁴ And BFAC's newly-elected Steering Committee includes a diverse representation of dedicated activists and advocates from all of our City's neighborhoods and constituencies. With greater participation from marginalized groups among its leadership, BFAC will be better able to set policy agendas that reflect the lived experiences of our community members.

BFAC should take additional steps to diversify its membership by creating a youth advisory council. Many of our City's most powerful levers of food policy change directly impact our City's youth, including through school food procurement at BPS, whose student body is predominately students of color. Yet FPCs around the country, including BFAC, suffer from a lack of youth representation. In 2009, young people in Toronto made history by forming North America's first Youth Food Policy Council, which formally channels youth food policy through the broader Toronto Food Policy Council. The youth council also engages Toronto's youth community in advocacy work by facilitating Food Policy 101 workshops at schools and community organizations. A similar youth council or advisory board in Boston would help ensure that BFAC's policy agenda is shaped by youth needs, and that our City's young people have a seat at the table when shaping our City's food system future.

BFAC could also pursue greater diversity of representation by formally adopting a racial justice agenda. The Toronto Food Policy Council has shown leadership in this arena, by forming a Food Justice Working Group to document inequities within the food system and adopting an Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism.¹⁶⁵ BFAC's members have frequently emphasized the need to center diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Council's programmatic work. BFAC could amplify this call by adopting a resolution committing BFAC's advocacy to a policy agenda that explicitly confronts anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression.

Form new partnerships to broaden food system coalitions

FPCs are intended to bring together stakeholders from different food system sectors, and BFAC

benefits from the expertise of community members from many areas of our City's food system. But food systems are shaped by a wide range of health, environmental, social, and economic policies, and a systems-based approach to food policy advocacy in Boston should include representatives of these other advocacy spheres. BFAC could more effectively address the root causes of food system challenges by taking on challenges outside of the traditional food supply chain. A restructured and empowered BFAC can build new partnerships to address the root causes of food system challenges and broaden the coalition pushing for food system reform.

There are numerous opportunities for food policy advocates to build mutually beneficial relationships with progressive advocates working in other areas. For example, Boston's health care professionals understand perhaps better than anyone that access to nutritious and affordable food is critical to preventing chronic diet-related conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. By partnering with health care organizations, BFAC could harness their medical expertise in the service of specific food policy reforms – for example, expanding the Double Up Food Bucks Program to make fresh fruits and vegetables more affordable. At the same time, BFAC could lend its legitimacy as a food policy organization to support local campaigns to increase nutrition education in US medical training.¹⁶⁶

Affordable housing and anti-gentrification advocates intrinsically understand the connections between housing policy and food policy: low-income people burdened by the rising cost of rent have a hard time affording groceries, while children who experience evictions are twice as likely to experience food insecurity.¹⁶⁷ Research shows that families living in subsidized housing are more likely to be food secure than those on a waiting list for such housing,¹⁶⁸ underscoring the point that housing policy reform is essential to food justice. A partnership between BFAC and affordable housing groups like City Life/ Vida Urbana would more effectively channel these intersections into specific policy demands. For example, BFAC members could testify in support of affordable housing priorities like rent control, and housing justice organizations could amplify the collective voice of their members in support of urban agriculture projects in disinvested neighborhoods.

These are just two examples of areas ripe for cross-sectoral community organizing in pursuit of a broader vision of food system reform. BFAC has the opportunity to pursue new partnerships with unlikely allies, embarking on the slow process of building trust throughout Boston's broader advocacy community. In this effort, BFAC can draw on the experiences of FPCs around the country

that have thrown their organizational support behind their partners' policy campaigns. The Worcester Food Policy Council, for example, joined the Raise Up Massachusetts coalition to push for a higher state minimum wage and paid family and medical leave.¹⁶⁹ This successful campaign demonstrates that by lending their efforts to existing advocacy organizations, BFAC can effectively address the root causes of food system issues while broadening the coalition pushing for specific food policy reforms.

Collect data to monitor progress towards food system goals

BFAC's hybrid position as partially independent from OFA allows it to maintain credibility with Boston's broader advocacy community while still benefiting from OFA's institutional support. One way that OFA can further BFAC's advocacy agenda is by improving its systems for data collection, which in turn enables monitoring and evaluation of progress towards food system goals. Demonstrating a data-driven track record of progress will allow BFAC to pursue external grants and other funding opportunities, further institutionalizing its operational independence.

Boston should learn from the experiences of peer cities to ensure that publicly provided data is clear, culturally-relevant, and not selectively presented to further political goals. Since 2012, the New York City Council has mandated that the Mayor's Office of Food Policy prepare an annual food metrics report on a variety of food system indicators.¹⁷⁰ In Boston, the City Council should explore requiring the annual publication of a consistent set of food system metrics, including neighborhood indicators, such as missing meals per person,¹⁷¹ to identify hotspots of need. These can form the basis of regular public hearings to conduct oversight of the City's food-related programs. BFAC could take an active role in determining the list of required indicators, drawing on its diverse membership to come up with a comprehensive list of food system questions that OFA's institutional resources can help answer. These indicators should be as granular as possible to enable BFAC and other advocates to identify neighborhood hotspots of greater community need and monitor progress towards eliminating racial inequities.

Harness the City's collective power to drive state and federal reform

This report has outlined numerous avenues for the City of Boston to pursue food justice using existing levers of municipal power. But our City's food system is embedded within broader systems that the City cannot reform on its own. A newly independent, empowered, and data-driven BFAC, in close coordination with Boston's broader advocacy community, can more effectively push

for policies beyond the City level that will benefit Boston residents. A strong food system reform coalition can launch campaigns to build awareness of opportunities for state and federal policy reform and organize Boston residents to demand action.

In the Massachusetts State Legislature, for example, members of the Food Systems Caucus have laid the groundwork for a universal application for MassHealth and SNAP – but now it falls on Governor Baker to implement that change. A strong citywide advocacy coalition must push the Baker administration to close the SNAP gap, ensuring that all eligible Boston residents receive the benefits to which they are entitled. A strong citywide food policy coalition can also advocate to increase funding for HIP, untethering the program from the yearly appropriations process to guarantee its continuity over the long-term. We can also push for legislative changes to strengthen the state's procurement laws, extending Good Food Purchasing standards to all colleges and universities in our City and across the Commonwealth.

At the federal level, food policy reform is too often hampered by the lobbying power of large food and agrichemical corporations that stymie progress.¹⁷² A strong Boston advocacy community will help counter these forces and push for broad-based reform to the federal programs that shape the food environment of Boston residents. First, we must push to expand SNAP eligibility, including to undocumented immigrants, whose food security is intrinsically tied to the well-being of our entire community. We must also increase the maximum SNAP benefit, reflecting research findings that current benefits are insufficient for Boston residents to feed their families in accordance with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.¹⁷³ Massachusetts is one of only a few states where SNAP enrollment rose by more than 20 percent in the first months of the pandemic;¹⁷⁴ to meet the scale of this crisis, we must strengthen SNAP. We can also advocate for increased federal funding to build local and regional food system infrastructure, making it easier to connect Boston residents with food produced throughout the New England region.

Urban food policy is also a growing focus of international policy, and Boston should seek inspiration, resolve, and accountability by joining the 210 cities from all over the world that have signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, committing to address poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and inequalities in ways that improve health; address climate change; and protect biodiversity, while supplying nutritious, sustainably produced foods for all.¹⁷⁵

The above reforms are just a small sample of the possibilities to enact broader systemic reform at the state and federal level in pursuit of food justice. But strengthening Boston's food system coalition is a necessary first step towards securing policy changes at any level, creating immediate and tangible benefits in Boston residents' lives, while also laying the groundwork for a future where Boston's food chain workers and our independent restaurant industry can thrive; where our public procurement embodies Good Food values; and where all Boston residents have access to fresh, nutritious, affordable, and local food.

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Since then, I have continued to be inspired by Boston's food justice leaders in advocacy meetings, urban farm visits, food business tours, trips to the farmers market, and City Council hearings. Every single resident of Boston is a stakeholder in building a more just food system, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn from community members about how food can be leveraged to meet the urgency of this moment while planning for and making investments in Boston's future. My particular thanks go to Julian Agyeman, Jen Faigel, Danielle Andrews, Pat Baker, Laura Benavidez, Donna Brown, Luz Colon, Chester Coppin, Kyisha Davenport, Carrie DeWitt, Laura Flagg, Joy Gary, Jane Hirschi, Simca Horwitz, Nancy Kohn, Erik Kunz, Sue LaPaglia, Irene Li, Patrick Lynch, Steve Marcelin, Dan McCarthy, Minnie McMahon, Leran Minc, Edith Murnane, Ken Oringer, Yessenia Prodero, Donnell Singleton, Pat Spence, Doug Rauch, Maritza Rosario, Yamila Ruiz, Ross Wilson, and Barry Zuckerman for taking time over these last several months to share how the pandemic has impacted your work strengthening Boston's food system and your vision for the future of Boston's urban food commons.

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Elizabeth Dolcimascolo designed the report and Grace Abe created the beautiful illustrations, turning a policy agenda into a colorful and joyful display of how food builds community and celebrates diversity in Boston. Sienna Svob created this report's digital home and ensured this food justice agenda is accessible to all online.

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