Barriers that organizations face in the effort to fight food insecurity
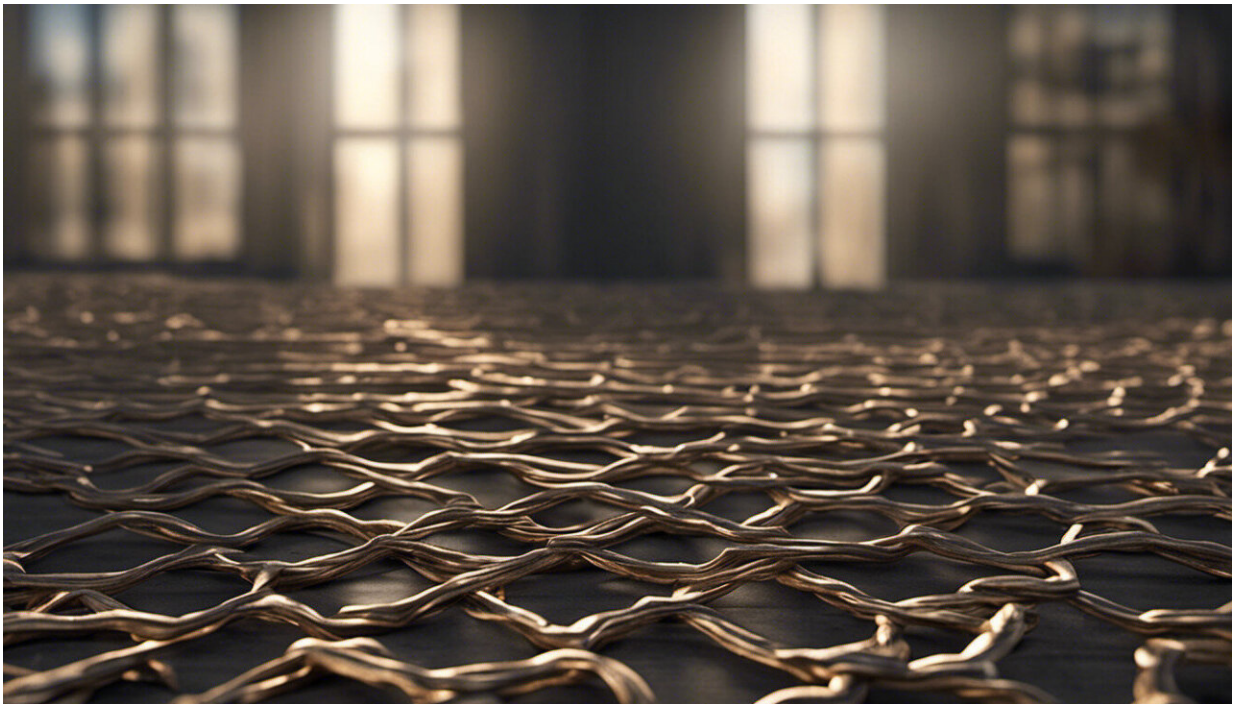
October 19 2015, by Amy Elvidge

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

An exhausted working mother with her two toddlers in tow slowly approaches me at the East Boston Neighborhood Health Clinic. I am staffing the application desk for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, and she is looking for extra help during the brutal winter.

Between her car payments, mortgage, utility bills and child care expenses, she isn't able to afford both rent and food—yet I have to tell her that her $41,000 salary for a family of three is still deemed too high for federal assistance. It pains me to turn her away. Hungry and desperate, she accepts a pamphlet for a nearby food pantry.

While the U.S. economy is rebounding, putting food on the table is still a struggle for many families. Today in Massachusetts, food insecurity—the lack of access to healthy food—is roughly 40 percent higher than it was before the start of the 2008 recession.

To help identify what drives food insecurity across the state, a team of six Friedman School students from the class of 2015 were asked to write a report for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, a state agency. Making up the team were Erin Foster West, Abigail Harper, Samantha Kelly, Elena Martinez, Ashley McCarthy and Nina Rogowsky, with Urban and Environmental Planning Professor Julian Agyeman and Jennifer Obadia, N11, serving as advisors.

They found that Massachusetts is a leading state in the fight against hunger, with exemplary nonprofit and for-profit organizations that collaborate with local communities. Nonetheless, in profiling several of these organizations, including my employer, Project Bread, the students found these organizations face many barriers.

A common problem is that many donors want to see their dollars go to food, not staffing. For example, while Project Bread would love to fund dozens of people in my position as a SNAP enrollment coordinator—connecting food-insecure individuals with the resources they need—we only have enough funding for me and another advocate in Worcester.

Further challenging these organizations is the sheer number of people in

need. Since 2008, the influx of first-time clients as well as residents seeking emergency food aid make it hard for hunger organizations to make headway on long-term food security.

In addition to identifying the most vulnerable and underserved counties in Massachusetts to better target food-insecurity resources, the students made several recommendations. Increasing the minimum wage to $11 an hour by 2017 would enable more families to afford food on their own. Expanding the Healthy Incentives Pilot would allow SNAP-recipient families to purchase more fruits and vegetables. Supporting the Massachusetts Food Innovation Trust Fund would encourage more farmers markets, food trucks and other vendors to set up shop in underserved "food desert" communities. Nonprofit hospitals could also help by using allocated federal Affordable Care Act funding to address the need for health-promoting food in their communities.

I agree with the report's finding that current efforts are reducing hunger in the short term, but that there needs to be a greater focus on the long term. As a SNAP advocate, I can enroll a family for emergency benefits for a month at the click of a button—but this is by no means a permanent solution to their need for fresh, healthy [food](.).

Provided by Tufts University

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