

# Massachusetts: Economic pressures close in on the hungry

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Massachusetts is experiencing growing levels of food insecurity, according to a recently released report by a non-profit agency that tracks hunger in the state. Hundreds of thousands of residents are relying on food banks and soup kitchens to feed themselves. Conditions, which have been exacerbated by the long-term effects of budget cuts and the economic crisis, are particularly dire in smaller cities that have witnessed the collapse of manufacturing industries.

The Greater Boston Food Bank's (GBFB) *Hunger in Eastern Massachusetts 2010 Fact Sheet* reports that the number of people the agency served increased by 23 percent between 2005 and 2010, to 394,800. This number represents slightly more than 8 percent of the population in its service area. Of those receiving aid, 32 percent were under the age of 18 and 6 percent were children under the age of 5. The GBFB distributes food to nearly 500 food pantries and soup kitchens in the eastern part of the state

According to the *Fact Sheet*, "32% of all households served in 2009 had one or more working adults," and 19 percent of all clients were employed. Many of those without jobs are on fixed incomes, with 42 percent receiving social security. Nearly 2 percent have been out of work for more than two years.

The average monthly income of Greater Boston Food Bank clients was \$990, in a state with high housing costs and at a time when heating costs are skyrocketing. As a result, the *Fact Sheet* notes, "44% of client households have had to choose between paying for utilities/fuel and food; 34% between paying rent/mortgage and food; and 37% between paying medical bills and food." The study notes that for the GBFB's clients, looking for work or commuting to and from work was made more difficult by having to choose between transportation and food.

Food aid from the state and federal governments has been paltry. Monthly SNAP benefits (formerly called food stamps) last the average client only 2.6 weeks, according to the *Fact Sheet*. The United States Department of Agriculture's TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) plans to give slightly less than \$4 million in food grants to Massachusetts this year.

A more substantial source of funding is from the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program, which distributes money between the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, the Worcester County Food Bank, the Greater Boston Food Bank, and the Merrimack Valley Food Bank, which serves areas north of Boston. These four organizations then use the money to provide services to local food banks and kitchens.

However, according to a fiscal year 2008 report, state funding for this program was reduced by more than \$1 million, from \$13.2 million to \$12.1 million from 2007 to 2008. Fiscal year 2011 funding was only \$11.5 million, and the Governor has proposed to flat fund the program in FY12.

The WWSWS spoke with Dianne Kuzia Hills, Executive Director of My Brother's Table, which provides lunches and dinners at its cafeteria in Lynn, a working class city approximately 10 miles north of Boston. Once known for its shoemaking industry, Lynn has suffered economically but remains home to a General Electric jet engine factory and a Garelick Farms dairy processing plant. Its population is slightly less than 90,000.

My Brother's Kitchen takes no government funds, but does buy some of its food from the Merrimack Valley Food Bank at a nominal price. According to Hills, My Brother's Table receives approximately 12,000 private donations each year, with the amount

averaging around \$50. Approximately 2,500 people from Lynn and surrounding communities volunteer at the organization every year, according to its web site.

Hills told the WSWs that My Brother's Table's clientele has increased by about 10 percent over the last few years. However, she stressed that the economic conditions affecting its clients—including long-term pressures on Social Security benefits, the Clinton administration's welfare cuts, and a decrease in the availability of single room occupancy apartments in the city—have accumulated over decades.

While many of the organization's clients are on fixed incomes, other meal recipients work for day labor companies, making them ineligible for unemployment even though they don't receive adequate wages. In addition to the increase in the number of clients, many existing clients have been coming in more often.

The WSWs also spoke with John Samaan, president and CEO of the Boston Rescue Mission (BRM), which provides meals to more than 500 people a day, and hosts a food pantry once a week. Like in Lynn, the economic crisis has impacted workers in Boston in numerous ways. Among the clients at the Boston Rescue Mission are recovering drug addicts and alcoholics. Samaan told the WSWs that the loss of a job can be a "vicious trigger" for people trying to get their lives back together, often causing them to relapse.

Rising fuel prices in the general economy have also increased the BRM's expenses associated with food pickups, cooking, and heating, according to Samaan. In addition, some of the organization's past donors are now unemployed. The BRM has been forced to look for alternate sources of donations, such as surplus food from sporting events at local venues.



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