

# Lauren Levesque: Boosting health, economy with access to healthy food

*By Lauryn Levesque*

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**PITTSFIELD** >> More than one million Massachusetts residents, including over 300,000 children live in economically distressed urban and rural communities with very limited access to markets carrying affordable healthy foods such as fresh produce, meat, and dairy products. This is a significant issue right here in Berkshire County.

When families do not live near a source of fresh and nutritious food like a grocery store or farmers market, they have no choice but to shop at corner stores that sell snacks or heavily processed food. Fast food chains become a replacement for a healthy home-cooked meal. As a result, low-income families experience significantly higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other nutrition-based diseases.

There is a solution to this crisis. The Massachusetts Food Trust program was created by the Legislature in 2014 to boost access to nutritious foods and help regional economies. The program is designed to provide loans, grants, and technical assistance to support new or expanded grocery stores; help corner stores make renovations so they can sell fresh food; and support food enterprises like farmers' markets, local processing facilities, and food distribution centers that will create jobs.

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However, the program was never funded by the Legislature. When funded properly, this type of program is very effective and delivers a major return on investment. In New York, the \$30 million Healthy Food and Healthy Communities Fund is supported with public and private resources that are used to expand access to healthy foods in under-served communities across the state. The fund leveraged \$155 million in private and public capital, 20 times the amount initially seeded by public investment.

For the Massachusetts Food Trust program to succeed, public seed funding must be provided. Berkshire Interfaith Organizing (BIO) has recently partnered with the Massachusetts Public Health Association, and a coalition of leaders from the food industry, public health, economic and community development organizations as well as the medical community and anti-hunger entities, and is calling for the Legislature to fund the

Massachusetts Food Trust. That would mean appropriation of state seed funding for flexible financing that can increase access to healthy foods and good jobs here in Berkshire County and across the commonwealth.

#### **TEAM EFFORT ON HUNGER**

BIO is an interfaith group of clergy, their congregations and regional affiliates who together, grounded in faith, seek to make justice real in our community. Clergy and lay leaders in the Berkshires have come together to build community, develop leadership and take action on issues of concern such as hunger and access to transportation. Our Food Insecurity Team has been working diligently to find ways to alleviate hunger in our community. We have successfully campaigned to increase funding for Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP), which funds food banks across the state.

Funding from the Massachusetts Food Trust could support two of the priorities that BIO's Food Insecurity Team has identified as needs in our community. A Mobile Food Pantry/Market could reach residents in isolated neighborhoods and hilltowns who are unable to come to the existing pantries and community meal programs. What is needed is a refrigerated truck and regular delivery schedule, which could also provide a valuable employment opportunity.

The Massachusetts Food Trust Program could also help address the need for a local food hub in Berkshire County. Currently, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts delivers food to a depot at Berkshire Community Action Council, where they have some limited refrigeration and freezer facilities. There are many CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture) and other farms in the area that would likely donate produce to a central food hub for distribution to our local pantries. This operation could present opportunities for a worker-owned enterprise.

A fully funded Massachusetts Food Trust program would contribute to alleviating the financial risk to make these and other projects possible, addressing residents' desire for better access to healthy food, as well as supporting much needed jobs. A wise investment, full funding of the Massachusetts Food Trust Program will enable residents in Berkshire County's under-served neighborhoods and throughout Massachusetts to increase access to healthier foods while promoting job growth and creating healthier and stronger communities.

Lauryn Levesque is the president of Berkshire Interfaith Organizing. This is written on behalf of the Executive Council, representing 15 member congregations