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Affordable Food: Everett's Pathway to Health and Economic Vitality

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More than one million Massachusetts residents, including over 300,000 children, live in economically-distressed urban and rural communities with limited access to markets carrying healthy affordable foods, including fresh produce, meat, and dairy products. Everett is no exception.

Families living far from the nearest grocery store must instead rely on food outlets like corner stores that often lack nutritious foods. As a result, these communities suffer disproportionately high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other preventable health conditions. Limited fresh food vendors in dense residential neighborhoods and downtown make it especially challenging for the elderly, disabled, and residents without cars to access healthy foods.

It also means that job opportunities are lost, along with new revenue streams generated from healthy food retail and distribution.

Fortunately, there is a solution. To boost access to nutritious food and help regional economies, the Legislature established the Massachusetts Food Trust Program in 2014. The program is designed to provide loans, grants, and technical assistance to support new or expanded grocery stores in our communities; help corner stores to increase their refrigeration so they can sell fresh produce, meat, and dairy products; and support food enterprises like farmers' markets, mobile markets, local food processing facilities, greenhouses, and food distribution hubs that will create jobs.

We've seen this type of program work elsewhere in the country. Pennsylvania's Fresh Food Financing initiative, seeded with \$30 million from the Department of Community and Economic Development, has supported nearly 90 fresh-food retail projects statewide, creating or retaining more than 5,000 jobs and improved access to healthy foods for more than 400,000 residents. Its initial \$30 million investment leveraged an additional \$165 million — the vast majority from private businesses.

For the Massachusetts Food Trust program to succeed, public seed funding must be provided. Led by the Massachusetts Public Health Association, 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, are working with the Legislature and the Baker administration to encourage timely funding and implementation of the program.

We call on the Legislature to appropriate \$5 million dollars for flexible financing that can increase access to healthy foods and good jobs here in Everett and across the commonwealth.

A promising local model, Everett Community Growers (ECG), works to increase health outcomes and civic engagement among Everett residents through urban agriculture and other food justice initiatives. ECG currently runs two community gardens in Everett, providing 35 families with space to grow their own produce. However, ECG understands that not every family wants or has the ability to grow their own food. With MFT funding, flexible financing could allow ECG to expand and begin a community farm with a greenhouse. This would allow ECG to grow, sell and donate affordable, culturally appropriate, locally grown produce for the community as well as create jobs and training programs for residents.

Funding from the Massachusetts Food Trust could also support Energize Everett, which has been working with local corner stores to provide and increase the amount of fresh, affordable produce available. The MFT could help the City of Everett expand this program by offering grants and loans to these store owners to increase their refrigeration so they can purchase produce from distributors at a larger quantity, therefore cutting costs for themselves and the consumer.

A wise investment, full funding of the Massachusetts Food Trust Program will enable residents in Everett's underserved neighborhoods and throughout Massachusetts to increase access to healthier foods while promoting job growth and creating healthier and stronger communities.