

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

A CASE STUDY SERIES: FOOD IS MEDICINE DURING COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Food is Medicine interventions such as medically tailored meals, medically tailored food packages, nutritious food referrals, and population-level healthy food programs are a critical component of Massachusetts's COVID-19 response. A growing body of research illustrates that [Food is Medicine services](#) are an effective, low-cost strategy to improve health outcomes, keeping patients in their homes and out of our strained health care systems. Additionally, many of the chronic diseases that these interventions typically address are the same pre-existing health conditions that have been shown to put individuals at higher risk for severe illness and mortality from COVID-19.

Demand for Food is Medicine interventions has therefore continued to increase throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Yet many of the systems and supports for these services have proven inadequate, forcing community-based organizations (CBOs) to adapt rapidly or make difficult decisions regarding their Food is Medicine programming. In some cases, CBOs are draining vital resources to meet current demand, threatening their long-term sustainability, or delaying the start of important new programs. Others are seeking out additional funding, forging new partnerships, or seizing upon new infrastructure such as the [MassHealth Flexible Services Program](#) to ensure

their Food is Medicine programming remains intact during this troubling time.

Through a series of short interviews, [Food is Medicine Massachusetts](#) (FIMMA) compiled case studies exploring the challenges and opportunities facing Food is Medicine programs across Massachusetts as they work to respond to COVID-19. This report illuminates the incredible work being done by CBOs while exposing the operational and logistical hurdles that these organizations have had to tackle along the way.

METHODOLOGY

FIMMA contacted many of their community-based member organizations that were either offering or preparing to offer various types of Food is Medicine services as defined by the Massachusetts Food is Medicine State Plan. To ensure diverse perspectives, FIMMA collected information from CBOs ranging in size, scale, geography, and consumer focus. The services that these organizations provide also offer different levels of tailoring across the spectrum from prevention to treatment.

An initial email was sent out to selected organizations to assess interest, and phone interviews were scheduled with those willing to participate within a week after initial contact.

FIMMA conducted interviews that ranged from 20 to 30 minutes in length. Interviewees were asked a series of 10 standardized questions that included topics such as operational response to COVID-19, changes in food supply, and networks of communication. Follow up questions were posed via email communication. Answers were consolidated in the case studies into 6 categories and an introduction to each organization was included to provide background.

CASE STUDY



INTRODUCTION

[Just Roots](#) is an organization focused on expanding food access, reducing food insecurity, and supporting sustainable farm systems in Western Massachusetts. The organization manages the Greenfield Community Farm and operates a 300+ member Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that has consistently been the largest SNAP-enrolled CSA in the state. Through their own programming, as well as cross-disciplinary partnerships with other organizations in their area, they are committed to addressing resident-identified barriers to enable all

members of their community to gain access to good food in a way that works for them. Just Roots knows the critical connection between nutrient-dense food and health. They are therefore constantly innovating to increase the supply of local and healthy foods for all community members, complete with the nutrition education resources that help make the food they distribute truly accessible.

FOOD IS MEDICINE STATUS

Scheduled to launch in June of 2020, Just Roots has been planning a market-style CSA Food is Medicine intervention through the MassHealth Flexible Services Program in partnership with Boston Children's Hospital. This program is planning to serve Hampden and Hampshire Counties. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, plans have shifted slightly. While specifics are still being sorted out, the team is now preparing for a home delivery system with a start date in late June. The team has been working around the clock to make the necessary adaptations and address new challenges, including: how to enable participants to continue choosing their own foods, how to set up an online store, whether or not they will need insulated boxes, and how to navigate new liability questions.

Just Roots is thankful to have continued strong communication with their Accountable Care Organization (ACO) partners, Boston Children's Hospital and MassHealth. However, COVID-specific logistical challenges have certainly arisen. As health care providers are focusing most of their energy on COVID-19 response, Just Roots is having to shift their enrollment and distribution models to remove any need for participants to physically attend medical centers to take part in

their CSA program. Additionally, as they rework their Flexible Services program to be applicable to a post-COVID world, Boston Children's and Just Roots have reallocated transportation funding away from ride share vouchers to enhance the ability of Just Roots to deliver CSA shares directly to individuals in Western Massachusetts. The estimated increase in budget to provide home delivery for 150 of Boston Children's patients in Holyoke, Northampton, and Springfield is 33%. This increase covers the additional costs related to staffing, materials, and technology specific to delivery. Despite these challenges, Just Roots is committed to providing these critical Food is Medicine services in any way they can.

Just Roots and Boston Children's Hospital have changed the model of their market-style CSA Food is Medicine intervention to include home delivery.

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OPERATIONAL RESPONSE

Upon the seemingly sudden outbreak of COVID-19 and closure of non-essential services, Just Roots made immediate [adaptations to their programming](#) to expand delivery capacity and

ensure staff, client, and food safety. Their community garden remains open with safety and sanitation protocols in place, but they are no longer offering food samples or food demonstrations at their farm or through their markets. Just Roots will also participate as planned in their local Farmers Market in Greenfield, MA beginning in late May but is anticipating dramatic decreases in sales from this outlet.

Meal Program

All [Feastivals](#) (Just Roots' community meal program) have shifted to prepared-meal delivery or strictly managed pick-up distribution models and are prioritizing food-insecure, low income, and home-bound elders. In April 2020, Just Roots began partnering with the Stone Soup Café, a pay what you can café in Greenfield, to prepare and deliver 200 of these free meals to its target audience every other week. In this program, door-to-door delivery is provided for those living in low-income housing and for home-bound elders. Just Roots has also arranged a managed pick-up site in a central location to reach a broader impacted audience. Funding will need to be secured in order to continue offering this program beyond May.

Winter CSA

Just Roots re-opened enrollment for its winter CSA program (January – May) for the months of April and May to meet rising demand. Pre-boxed produce packages continue to be available through this program. The choice-style market that was available to customers at distribution sites has been halted at this time.

However, Just Roots is currently working to develop a strategy to continue to offer some level of choice to its customers. Boxes are available for outdoor pick-up, where members must abide by strict protocols regarding social distancing, sanitation practices, and phone or online payment prior to pick-up. Home delivery is also available to COVID-impacted members living in low income housing developments and, to a lesser extent, to those living outside of developments. Expanded home-delivery of the CSA shares is expected to be rolled out in June.

Summer CSA

As they prepare to launch their summer CSA program (June – Oct), Just Roots is seeing the quickest enrollment they have ever experienced. This trend may be an indication of an upcoming surge in demand. Just Roots is preparing for such a surge and recently made the decision to offer an additional 100 slots in the CSA program. Even before enrollment became so rapid, Just Roots anticipated an increase in need due to the current crisis, and secured a \$10,000 grant through Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation's [COVID-19 Assistance Fund](#).

New in 2020 and since COVID, Just Roots also launched a COVID-level eligibility for its subsidized CSA for those who are circumstantially food insecure due to the pandemic. So in addition to those who are chronically low income, those who are currently food insecure but likely to have their circumstances improve will be able to receive relief through the subsidized CSA through the Just Roots COVID-Relief Fund.

While their usual CSA model consists of 50% full-pay and 50% subsidized customers, Just Roots is anticipating an increase in enrollment for subsidized CSA shares.

While additional grant funding has helped Just Roots meet demand, they continue to work to expand their subsidy budget. Their usual CSA model consists of 50% full-pay and 50% subsidized customers. However, they expect to see an increase in enrollment for subsidized CSA shares. They therefore anticipate needing to increase their subsidy budget by 46% to support low-income and food-insecure participants. To meet this goal, Just Roots is continuing to seek funds to support the program and provide even more subsidized or reduced-price CSA shares this season.

BIGGEST CHALLENGES

Just Roots' biggest challenge so far has been securing enough funding to meet the increased demand for their services. While Just Roots appreciates the great work that other organizations and coalitions have been doing to share information about response successes, they have been frustrated by the lack of collaboration or efforts to synthesize programs to use resources wisely for a broader impact. This issue is perhaps highlighted most notably in the race for funds, where funders are offering unprecedented funding opportunities to meet immediate need, but deadlines are short, leaving little time for

coordination of community partnerships and spurring a race to the finish with organizations competing for funds. Overall, this process often leaves critical, smaller and less-resourced organizations behind, and favors larger, more-resourced organizations. Also challenging has been the cancellation of large events that have historically supported their subsidized CSA program. In response, Just Roots pivoted to address the cancellation of the Food Justice Bike Ride, an independent fundraiser which typically occurs in-person and generates \$10,000 for the program, to a virtual Just Roots [Ride for Food Justice](#), open to walkers and riders over the month of June.

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Another challenge Just Roots faces daily is the management shifts associated with farming while physically distancing. Efficiencies are slashed when they are acutely needed at this point in the growing season. This problem is expected to continue, causing strain on Just Roots' ability to grow for an expanded audience within a staffing management structure that does not lend itself to efficient farming practices. Just Roots will need to increase staff to deal appropriately with efficiencies and programmatic components such as delivery. Finally, while their CSA program normally procures fresh produce from local area farms in addition to what they can grow themselves, many of these farms have shifted to CSA models of their own. This has caused Just Roots to secure new contracts/arrangements with alternative farm partners.

SAFETY PROTOCOLS

To ensure worker safety, as well as food and delivery safety, Just Roots staff members have attended various webinars held by Harvard Pilgrim, the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, and others, and established protocols related to social distancing, hand-washing, and mask-wearing. All volunteers and visits to the farm have been canceled through May. Large social events have also been put on hold, including those that typically raise funds to support Just Roots' programming. Just Roots will continue to follow the advice of state, local, and federal agencies in order to continue serving their clients.

COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

Just Roots has looked to the informational resources shared by the [Massachusetts Food System Collaborative](#) and [Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture](#) (CISA), and have utilized [Mass Farmers Markets](#) to help with food delivery. The Food Access Team has been attending local response effort meetings twice a week with the Franklin County Resource Network, a network of over 100 different agencies in Franklin County that have been working together to share resources, funding opportunities, and knowledge. Just Roots is also active in the Coalition to End Hunger, managed by the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. This coalition works across the four counties of Western Massachusetts to address hunger both in the immediate need and from a systems change perspective. Just Roots also participated as a panelist for Senator Jo Comerford's live discussion on food insecurity in Western Massachusetts to share successes and challenges more broadly.

A HOPEFUL FUTURE

The huge increase in demand that Just Roots is experiencing proves just how many people not only need, but are prioritizing, healthy food during the pandemic. COVID-19 disproportionately affects those with chronic illnesses that can be better managed or prevented with access to healthy food. Therefore, it is even more crucial to make the connection between nutritious foods and health in this moment. Following the crisis, Just Roots hopes to see government and individual agencies invest in increased access to healthy food, with a priority on local food. In doing so, state leaders can help to reduce the severity of future public health crises and support local economies and a sustainable farm system as these crises arise. Investing in long-lasting strategies such as the CSA model—which provides food security over time and invites people to leverage their resources to participate in the local food economy—while at the same time supporting emergency food programs that address the immediate need for food security is critical as we look towards the future.

About the Authors

The Voices from the Field project is led by the Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation of Harvard Law School (CHLPI) as part of its role as co-convenor of Food is Medicine Massachusetts (FIMMA). For more information regarding CHLPI and its work, please visit: www.chlpi.org.



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