

# 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 [Mass-Health 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 a variety of 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

The [About Fresh](#) mission has remained constant since its founding: to provide easy access to healthy foods for those that need it most. Since 2013, About Fresh has operated weekly mobile markets and pop-up events through their [Fresh Truck](#) program. About Fresh has been and continues to be a leader in the field of food access, staying committed to their vision for a “healthy, happy, and hopeful” future.

### FOOD IS MEDICINE STATUS

In 2019, About Fresh began developing [Fresh Connect](#), a pre-paid debit card and analytic platform that makes it possible for health care organizations to cover the cost of healthy food for patients and measure related health impacts. The program was to be rolled out in 2020 through the Flexible Services Program in partnership with Brigham and Women’s Hos-

pital’s Medicaid ACO and Partners HealthCare. Amidst having to rework their entire business model with the outbreak of this virus, the implementation of this Food is Medicine work has been largely put on hold. Internally, the Fresh Connect team continues to advance the development of the program by working remotely on the technology. However, externally, all medical center partnerships have been put on pause as all focus has shifted to the crisis.

### OPERATIONAL RESPONSE

Prior to the crisis, the Fresh Truck Mobile Market program deployed converted school buses to dozens of weekly markets across Boston. Customers shop inside the trucks to pick out fresh produce. Inherently small and crowded spaces, the About Fresh team immediately recognized that their markets were a potential vector for spreading COVID-19 and suspended the operation of the program. For About Fresh, the potential health consequences at stake for their customers and employees outweighed the value of operating the markets. With the mobile markets on hold, the team spent 10 days designing a new program model that would be safer and scalable in the post-COVID world.

Awarded with a \$430,000 grant from the City of Boston through the [Boston Resiliency Fund](#), About Fresh developed the [Fresh Box Program](#), which features “direct to doorstep” produce delivery for house-bound recipients as well as centralized large scale delivery for later pick-up. The team was able to scale-up quickly through a strategic partnership with [Katsirou-bas Bros. Produce](#), a wholesale food service provider. In addition to sourcing and packing

produce for About Fresh, Katsiroubas Bros' fleet of 65 trucks and its 200-person labor force significantly increased overall capacity. Additionally, with restaurants closed, Katsiroubas Bros. was able to buy surplus stock at a steep discount. Thanks to these wholesale discounts and a recent outpouring of monetary donations from local companies and individuals, About Fresh is now able to provide 25 pound boxes of pre-packed fresh produce directly to people's homes or to participating organizations for \$20 each. Every week, About Fresh delivers 8,500-10,000 boxes of produce to the most vulnerable Boston households, local community-based organizations, and health care providers.

Participating households and organizations are identified by the City of Boston's Office of Food Access, the Boston Age Strong Commission, and a number of local hospitals, including Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital, Massachusetts General Hospital, and Boston Medical Center. Most referred individuals are self-isolating to reduce their risk of COVID-19 exposure, have underlying health conditions, are COVID-19 positive, or are struggling with other circumstances that make it impossible to shop for themselves. City referrals have so far equated to about 90% of Fresh Box clients. Health systems are specifically targeting individuals with underlying health conditions and COVID-positive individuals.

## BIGGEST CHALLENGES

Leveraging the Katsiroubas supply chain, About Fresh has significant capacity to pack and deliver Fresh Boxes to central community locations. However, scaling "last-mile" deliv-

ery operations - getting food direct to the doorsteps of residents - is presenting a major logistical constraint as demand increased at a rate of more than 50% per week during April. About Fresh is currently delivering ~2,500 Fresh Boxes per week door-to-door and is constantly exploring new ways to increase capacity for last-mile delivery. Addressing this capacity constraint, however, requires major infrastructure investments and new partners. The operational burden of last-mile distribution, storage, labor, and cold chain logistics are some of the issues that the About Fresh team is battling.

**About Fresh is supporting individuals and families who have never been food insecure and do not know how to navigate emergency food systems. One of their main goals through it all has been to coordinate with other organizations to make sure everyone is being served.**

## SAFETY PROTOCOLS

About Fresh worked with the Boston University Schools of Public Health and Medicine and Boston Medical Center to develop an effective safety protocol and volunteer handbook for maintaining social distance and offers guidance on proper use of personal protective equipment, workplace hours, temperature checking, and rules specific to coming back to work.

## COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

About Fresh was able to work with the City of Boston's Office of Food Access, Boston's Age Strong Commission, and Boston Medical Center to develop their new operating model. These networks strengthened the promotion and implementation of their Fresh Box program. Additionally, they worked directly with community organizations to target specific needs and to reach resident leaders that would help get the word out about their services and get food to the doorsteps of those who need it.

## A HOPEFUL FUTURE

About Fresh believes that this crisis will bring the issues of supply chain efficiency and the scope of food insecurity to the forefront of

people's minds. They are hopeful that, in turn, this will help to ensure future funding and public policies invest in infrastructure related to food access and Food is Medicine programming. Through their nimble response to this pandemic, About Fresh has proven not only that they are able to meet community need, even in times of crisis, but also that through improved operations they will be able to address a wide range of Food is Medicine needs down the road.

*The Voices from the Field case studies are published on a rolling basis, generally 3-4 weeks after interviews. During this time, organizational responses to COVID-19 are rapidly changing. For the most up-to-date information, we recommend contacting the organizations directly or checking their webpages.*

### 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](http://www.chlpi.org).



@FoodisMedMA  
FoodisMedicineMA.org

JUNE 2020 | 4