



The Food and Shelter Initiative

Preliminary Report
2001



The Boston Foundation

What is the Boston Foundation?

One of the oldest and largest community foundations in the United States, founded in 1915, with current assets totaling close to \$600 million

About Community Foundations

First created in 1914, today there are more than 600 community foundations nationally, contributing close to \$1.6 billion every year to nonprofit organizations. Each is made up of funds that are established by many different donors, then pooled and invested together. The result is a permanent resource for the community with the flexibility to respond to changing times. Community foundations are governed by boards made up of civic leaders who approve grants and act as stewards of the funds.

A major funder

Making close to \$50 million annually in grants to nonprofit organizations that address community needs

A flexible giving vehicle for donors

With some 650 separate funds established for the general benefit of the community and for special purposes

A partner in philanthropy

Making it easy for donors to give and informing them about programs that are working

A civic leader and convener

Sponsoring special initiatives, convening people to discuss civic issues and working in partnership with other organizations to meet community needs

The Food and Shelter Initiative: Preliminary Report

A Special Report of The Boston Foundation
2001

Preface

“A decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family” – that was the promise of the federal Housing Act of 1949. It would take many pages to explain why this goal has never been reached, but I mention it as a reminder that America has been trying for more than 50 years to address its housing problems.

The problem became a crisis almost twenty years ago when homelessness rose to the top of the civic agenda in Boston and in other urban centers across the country. By 1983 there were hundreds of homeless people on the streets of Boston due to soaring housing costs in the face of persistent poverty, and lack of housing for the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, victims of domestic abuse and chronic substance abusers. At the time, there were only three shelters in Massachusetts to accommodate the homeless, and Governor Michael Dukakis put out a call for help. The Boston Foundation responded by establishing the Fund for the Homeless, which provided grants to buy, build and repair shelters and eventually focused on the conditions that cause homelessness.

Today, there are more than 100 shelters statewide, and a system that was designed to be a temporary solution has become a seemingly permanent fixture that no one sees as the ultimate solution, but everyone agrees is necessary. In addition, there is widespread evidence that hunger has increased across the Commonwealth.

The Boston Foundation focuses most of its own funding in this area on programs that address the causes of the interconnected problems of hunger and homelessness. This has been possible, in part, because of the generosity of the New York-based Starr Foundation, which established a Field of Interest Fund at the Boston Foundation in the early '80s to provide the other major and necessary response to these problems – direct assistance to the hungry and homeless.

Over the last several years, The Starr Foundation contributed more than \$1 million in additional funds, and with this support the Boston Foundation launched a two-year Food and Shelter Initiative in 2001. This preliminary report of the Initiative tells the story of how the grant money was used in the first few months of the program. It draws some fascinating conclusions that we believe will help us to strengthen future grantmaking.

The Boston Foundation often has played an important role in finding permanent solutions to complex problems by supporting small demonstrations that spark long-term improvements in the way the community functions. We are hopeful that this report will contribute to an ongoing dialogue about the ways in which funding in the areas of hunger and homelessness can be more effective and point the way toward permanent solutions.

We thank the thirteen nonprofit organizations that received funding through the Food and Shelter Initiative for their work and for their insights. We also thank the members of the Advisory Committee who assisted us to design the Initiative. And of course we are grateful to The Starr Foundation on behalf of those organizations, the people they serve and the Greater Boston community.



Paul S. Grogan
President
The Boston Foundation

Introduction

In the spring of 2001 the Boston Foundation launched the Food and Shelter Initiative, making more than \$1 million in grants to thirteen organizations in Greater Boston. Funding for the Food and Shelter Initiative originated with The Starr Foundation of New York, which asked the Boston Foundation to distribute funds to local organizations that provide direct assistance to hungry and homeless people. These funds complement the Boston Foundation's own work, which focuses on changing the conditions that underlie these complex and painful social problems.

During the Initiative's first five months, which are covered by this report, grantee organizations have provided assistance to more than 4,500 people in Greater Boston. Working people facing eviction have received the assistance they required to remain in their apartments; people living in shelters have been helped back into housing of their own again; homeless families temporarily housed in motels far from supermarkets have received deliveries of groceries; individuals unable to pay for utilities have been assisted with fuel and electricity bills; families doubled and tripled up with friends and relatives are now living in apartments of their own; women in flight from domestic violence have found shelter for themselves and their children; people with an array of urgent needs have been connected with sources of support; and hundreds of people have been helped to overcome temporary financial crises.

As this report goes to press toward the end of 2001, a worsening economy threatens hard times for many in this city, and agencies funded through this Initiative expect calls for emergency assistance to increase. However, problems emerged even before the economic downturn. While thousands of Bostonians benefited from the prosperity of the 1990s, many others found themselves forced out of the housing market, as median household income stayed level and average costs for two bedroom rental units increased by close to 60 percent between 1995 and 2000. Average rents for two bedroom apartments in working class neighborhoods of Boston have topped \$1200. By 1998, 51% of Boston renters were spending more than 30% of their incomes for shelter, a widely accepted measure of housing affordability. It is estimated that in the Boston metropolitan area, a family needs to earn \$42,040 annually to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment, so a minimum-wage worker would have to work 105 hours a week to reach that level.

Thus, for all low-wage workers, housing security has vanished. Yet subsidized housing resources are not available either. For example, the wait for public housing can stretch from eight to ten years.

As a result, by February of this year, according to the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, the occupancy levels in the state's shelters reached 120 percent and they have remained at those levels for many months. To deal with the situation, motels are once again being used for emergency housing. In November, 300 families were living in motels, up from a dozen or so in 1999.

Since families and individuals often have to choose between rent and food, hunger also has increased steadily. By the start of 2001, according to Project Bread, one in eleven people in Massachusetts were living in households where there was not enough money to purchase nutritionally adequate food. In late 2001, Greater Boston Food Bank agencies served close to 60,000 people a week, an increase of 13.5% since 1997. The Project Bread hotline recorded twice as many requests for emergency food assistance in October 2001 compared to the same month in the prior year. Many of those in need were families that owned their own homes or paid rent.

Food and Shelter Initiative Grantees

AIDS Action Committee
American Red Cross
Casa Myrna Vasquez
Catholic Charities
Community Action Programs Inter-City
Family to Family Project
Homes for Families
Lynn Economic Opportunity
Mass Coalition for the Homeless
Mass Housing and Shelter Alliance
Project Bread
Transition House
United Way of Mass Bay

In the seeming prosperity of recent times, the general public has lost sight of the plight of those at the lower end of the income spectrum, and the growing disparity of income in Massachusetts has tended to push those who benefited from the boom years and those who did not benefit into separate, and very different, worlds. “Do I think middle-class people in the suburbs understand what low-income people are facing today?” asks John Feehan, Deputy Director of Lynn Economic Opportunity. “No, I don’t think they have a clue.” Ann Marie Healey, Executive Director of Family-to-Family, echoes his view: “Hunger and homelessness are not sexy issues any more, and very few people know the actual situation that low-income people in the state face.”

With the Food and Shelter Initiative, the Boston Foundation has directed some assistance to families in Greater Boston who have felt the effects of today’s income disparities in their daily lives. It has also shed some light on their “actual situation.” Four insights emerge from the initial reports of the thirteen grantees:

First, despite the unprecedented prosperity of recent years, the need for help with the basic necessities of life clearly remains widespread, as evidenced by the speed with which some of the agencies involved in the Initiative spent their grant money. For example, the United Way Special Fund for Emergency Assistance, which helps low-income individuals cope with urgent food and shelter needs, spent 43 percent of its two-year \$100,000 grant

in three months. Family-to-Family, a Somerville-based organization which stabilizes homeless people, spent 80 percent of its \$50,000 grant over the same period, and Lynn Economic Opportunity, a community action organization serving several communities north of Boston, spent 100 percent of the \$30,000 it had received. As the director of one organization funded through the Initiative summed it up: “The need for direct, substantive assistance is enormous.”

Second, and perhaps paradoxically, the Initiative revealed that very small sums of money can be effective in preventing people from becoming homeless. Lynn Economic Opportunity was able to keep people in their homes for sums of \$750 and less. Likewise, according to HomeStart, small sums of money often help people out of shelters and back into residences of their own. These sums might amount to no more than a security deposit for an apartment. The experience of organizations like Lynn Economic Opportunity, HomeStart, Community Action Programs Inter-City, Inc., Homes for Families, Casa Myrna Vasquez and others described below, reveal how often a few hundred dollars is all that stands between being housed and being homeless. Given the high cost of sustaining people in shelters – not to mention the personally and financially devastating effects on an individual of becoming homeless – this finding has clear implications for changes in public policy. A bill such as the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT), for example, could be valuable in helping low-income families make financially precarious moves from shelters to permanent housing.

Third, grantees pointed to the “unrestricted” and “flexible” nature of the funds available through the Initiative as absolutely key to their effectiveness. Public funding from state and federal sources, which constitute the majority of funds available to several of the social service organizations participating in this Initiative, comes to organizations bound by numerous restrictions. For example, little money is available for the prevention of homelessness. The Food and Shelter funds, by contrast, gave organizations a great deal of latitude to meet the needs of their clients, thus making it possible for them to help people in ways they normally could not. The pent-up need for this freedom elicited descriptions of the Foundation’s grants as “a godsend” by some organizations and “a major boost to morale” by others, because many of the small sums mentioned above – e.g., for security deposits on new rental units – are so desperately needed and yet so rarely covered by public funds. By successfully demonstrating the value of funding certain needs, organizations can make the case for changing public policy.

Fourth, when organizations provide emergency assistance, they also can help individuals obtain services that address their long-term problems. Thus referrals are made for job training, health care or government benefits to which they are entitled. A variety of assistance programs are currently available to help people with long-term basic needs, but they are not fully utilized. This is especially true in the area of hunger prevention. The federal Food Stamps program is simply not reaching all those it is intended to help. Usage of this program by eligible people in Massachusetts has declined significantly in recent years, while at the same time hunger is increasing. An important goal of several programs funded through this initiative is to make people aware of a range of assistance programs and to help them with the often daunting application process.

This report highlights the work of several organizations funded through the Food and Shelter Initiative as they tackle the problem of homelessness through its entire arc, from the point where families on the brink of homelessness may be helped with timely infusions of money, to the point where families and individuals living in shelters have put together most of the money needed to return to a home of their own and now face the final obstacles. The report also describes the work of emergency networks that help families through financial emergencies by connecting them with a range of assistance programs. And it looks at new ways of dealing with hunger, which now represents a serious threat to children’s health and education.

Together the work of these organizations constitutes a portion of the social safety net in Greater Boston. It is a safety net that Anna Covino Goldenberg, of the United Way’s Special Fund, describes as “very frayed.” Food and Shelter Initiative funding has gone to the weakest points of that net, both to strengthen it at a time of growing need, and to reinforce it where much needed public funds are missing.

Advisory Committee to the Food and Shelter Initiative

Kelley Cronin
Boston Shelter Commission

Marie Rose Murphy
*Codman Square Neighborhood
Development Corporation*

Reverend Richard Richardson
Childrens Services of Roxbury

Lissette Rodriguez
Youth Build USA

Annette Rubin
Executive Service Corps

Preventing Homelessness

While large amounts of public money are currently expended to support people in homeless shelters, very little public money is available to prevent homelessness in the first place. This is why Lynn Economic Opportunity (LEO), an anti-poverty organization that provides an array of services to Lynn and surrounding communities, decided to use its Food and Shelter grant to create an emergency fund to help individuals avoid homelessness.

Lynn Economic Opportunity used this special fund – in fact, as noted above, it used the entire fund in the first three months of the grant period – to help 41 individuals and families remain in their homes or move to permanent housing. These families, points out Deputy Director John Feehan, were all in danger of becoming homeless. Yet LEO was able to help all of them with sums in every case no greater than \$750, an amount dwarfed by the costs incurred by individuals and the taxpaying public once people actually lose their homes.

“For example,” says LEO’s Energy Director Darlene Gallant, “we were able to pay court costs for one client. It was a small amount but it was one of those things for which there is just no public money. With the Food and Shelter money we were able to set this client back on her feet.” One woman helped by LEO needed only \$542 to get safely through the month in which she had to meet unexpected medical bills. An elderly couple needed \$294. A severely mentally ill woman needed \$200. These small infusions of cash, at critical moments, were remarkably effective in pulling individuals back from the brink of homelessness.

Of the 41 people helped by LEO with the Food and Shelter grant, 24 were in immediate danger of eviction. Many were in court. Without LEO’s help, they stood to lose not only their residences but their household goods, which would have been trucked to a storage facility. The cost to retrieve them might be \$2,000, a

sum out of the reach of most, who simply must let their things go. Of course, people who go to shelters often lose their jobs as well, compounding the difficulty of returning to their own housing.

The flexibility of the Food and Shelter funding also made it possible for LEO to help people it deemed homeless but who would not be regarded as homeless under federal guidelines. It is well known that families are currently dealing with the high cost of housing by doubling and even tripling up in apartments.

“As many as three families may live in one apartment, each family with a single room that constitutes its entire living space,” Feehan says. “This of course represents a violation of the lease, as well as the health code, and is grounds for all of the families being evicted immediately.”

According to federal guidelines, however, families living in such tenuous circumstances are not technically homeless, and are therefore not eligible for assistance through federal funding. The unrestricted nature of the Food and Shelter Initiative funds made it possible for LEO to help move nine such families into apartments of their own.

Feehan points to the need for an official redefinition of homelessness. “In our view,” says Feehan, “families should be regarded as ‘homeless’ if they lack housing that is safe, decent, and permanent. Families living in overcrowded, potentially substandard conditions clearly need help. They should be regarded as homeless and therefore eligible for services.”

Feehan emphasized, too, that most of the people who came to LEO for help were employed. “In reviewing the case narratives [of people helped with these funds],” he notes, “there was no common reason that each household came to us for assistance aside from the obvious: Even though they were working, they

did not have enough money to cover their housing expenses.”

Some of these families, as LEO’s experience revealed, can be helped with little more than a small amount of cash at the right moment. Others, like those helped by Family-to-Family, need more assistance if they are to avoid homelessness.

Family-to-Family was established in 1988 by a group of ten families in the Greater Boston area who wanted to have a direct, positive impact on families facing homelessness. It is using funds from the Food and Shelter Initiative to help families caught in the housing crunch by providing them with grants of up to \$950. But Family-to-Family goes beyond meeting financial short-falls. “We want to do more than resolve immediate crises,” says Ann Marie Healey, Executive Director of Family-to-Family. “If we provide a security deposit, it’s important to be sure that the family does not – for example – have a back utility bill that will prevent them from getting utilities in their new apartment.” This is especially important for families with Section 8 housing subsidies, because failure to keep utilities on is grounds for losing the subsidy.

As Healey explains, when poor families have to move – either because they are doubled up in situations that become untenable, or because they have gotten a long-sought Section 8 subsidy but their landlord will not accept it, or because the building their apartment is in is being sold or converted to condominiums – they confront major financial obstacles. Moving into a new apartment now often requires putting down the first and last month’s rent, a security deposit, and a realtor’s fee (usually a month’s rent). A struggle for even middle-income earners to put together, this amount can plunge low-income working people into homelessness. One Boston couple that lost an apartment to condominium conversion spent a year in separate homeless shelters while they found an apartment they could afford and put together the amount they needed to get into it.

Family-to-Family’s approach, then, is to look very carefully at a family’s overall situation, to determine whether family members need psychological or career counseling, job training, or help with medical problems. Really stabilizing families may mean connecting them with a variety of services. Sometimes a need is very specific. One family being helped by Family-to-Family, for example, needed to find new beds to replace those damaged by the family’s adult autistic child. “Meanwhile,” says Healey, “everything is up on milk crates. The whole family is suffering from stress.” Family-to-Family raises money to meet such needs.

A staff member who has been working with Family-to-Family for just a few months, says of the organization, “When families are helped here, they are really helped.” Family-to-Family’s success rate in dealing with homeless families reflects this estimation. Of the families the organization has assisted over the last thirteen years, 80 percent were still housed one year after receiving assistance. The great majority of families receiving assistance from Family-to-Family have moved permanently out of homelessness.

The kind of help provided by Family-to-Family is increasingly important. Families are now the fastest growing group of homeless citizens in Massachusetts, currently constituting two-thirds of the homeless population. A recent report by the Better Homes Fund, cited by Family-to-Family, describes the “typical homeless person in our state as a small child in a family unit.”

The trend toward homelessness for children means that homelessness has become a threat not only to the current generation but to the upcoming one as well, extending the effects of the trauma of homelessness well into the future.

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Helping People Cope with Homelessness

Once people lose their homes and move to shelters their life challenges escalate dramatically. Now they must continue working from the shelter, or find jobs if they have lost the ones they had; they must find apartments they can afford, and they must save the large sums needed to get back into homes and resume their lives. Often small matters like transportation can loom large. Several organizations funded through a Food and Shelter grant to the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, therefore, have put portions of their grants toward providing transportation assistance to people living in shelters. In most cases, this means providing shelter residents with T passes and tokens.

For many people these tokens and passes are essential not only to keeping their jobs but to finding new housing, which in today's tight market is a significant undertaking for people at every income level. For the very poor, it is particularly difficult. According to Phil Mangano, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, recent years have actually seen an increase in housing affordable to people making 80 percent of the area median income, which in Boston amounts to \$36,750 for one person. But for those making 30 percent or less of the median income, which would be \$14,700 in Boston, the number of affordable housing units has fallen sharply.

This is a problem that requires new housing production to solve. Mangano believes that remedying the shortage in the Boston area requires the availability of 6,000 additional units affordable to very low-income people. Meanwhile, helping individuals living in shelters with transportation has become an important both to sustaining people in their jobs and to shortening their stays by aiding in their housing searches.

When people with children become homeless, they face even greater transportation problems than homeless individuals. Massachusetts is currently using motels to shelter homeless families. Some motels now in use are on highways like Route One, north of Boston, where families with children live amid truckers and tourists.

The use of motels as shelters had been discontinued a few years ago, but has now resumed, climbing from a dozen or so families in 1999 to 300 by November of 2001. A family advocate for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless (MCH) estimates that 53 percent of the 150 families she has visited in motels have been sheltered in them for longer than a month. Of the total families, 92 percent had transportation problems that made access to food a serious problem.

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless used its Food and Shelter grant to supply groceries to these families. Through its Door-to-Door Initiative, it has made weekly food deliveries to the three motels most utilized by the Department of Transitional Assistance. With the groceries, Door-to-Door has brought books and clothing for children, along with information on housing, education, and health care to these isolated families.

This effort to keep homeless families nourished has been complicated by the fact that many motel rooms have no facilities for cooking or refrigeration. (One mother living in a Route One motel told a newspaper interviewer that she washed her dishes in the bathtub.) According to a Boston Globe editorial on November 18, 2001, sheltering families in motels cost the Commonwealth \$3.7 million last year. Advocates for the homeless are urging the use instead of "scattered-site" and "apartment-type" shelters for families, arguing that they are not only more humane but more cost-effective.

"Scattered-site and apartment-type shelters, especially in the Boston area," notes Robyn Frost, Executive Director of MCH, "would provide families with the opportunity to search for permanent housing and for work, and to care for their children in an environment that is familiar and non-disruptive." She adds that many families placed in motels are transferred from motel to motel with little notice. These transfers especially affect school-age children, who may attend five or six different schools in a six-month period.

Helping People Out of Homelessness

People emerging from homeless shelters and transitional programs can clearly use all the help they can get. Programs like HomeStart, which received funds from the Food and Shelter Initiative through the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, can offer quite a lot.

HomeStart, established in 1995, has quickly become a leading provider of services for homeless people, helping with their housing searches and then working to stabilize them in their new communities.

“Our goal,” says director Linda Wood-Boyle, “is to end homelessness one person at a time.” HomeStart works with all major shelters in Boston and Cambridge. Their approach is tailored to the individual client.

“We have a ‘tool-box,’” says Wood-Boyle. “When a client is referred to us, we look in our toolbox and see what we have that matches the problem. The client may need help with budgeting, or with a negative landlord reference. We have an array of approaches specific to a variety of problems. We are, in fact, specialists.”

The organization claims a high retention rate: 85 percent of the people they help do not return to homelessness. That includes even the more vulnerable among the homeless population, such as disabled people and those in recovery from substance abuse. Wood-Boyle attributes the agency’s success to providing direct help to individuals both in locating housing, and afterwards in becoming oriented to the community.

Echoing others working to place homeless people, Wood-Boyle says, “The rental assistance piece is critical. Putting together that first and last month’s rent, plus security deposit and realtor fee – and maybe clearing up an old utility bill – is a major difficulty. People may have a job and savings, but they still can’t quite clear that hurdle.”



“For help with those final obstacles,” says Wood-Boyle, “the Food and Shelter money has been a great resource.” She adds that the Boston Foundation, through its regular funding, had given an important impetus to HomeStart’s work with a large three-year capacity-building grant. A specific example of the Food and Shelter funds in action? Wood-Boyle describes a recent success: A client in recovery for two years from substance abuse had gone back to school, gotten his GED, cleaned up his bad credit, gotten a full time job, saved his money, and finally located housing at market rate in Roxbury. But he was about to lose it because he was \$600 short of what he needed. “We paid the realtor fee and security deposit,” says Wood-Boyle. “He was so excited when he moved in that he brought the keys to his new apartment here to show us.”

Meeting Urgent Needs, Connecting with Long-Term Assistance

When families are faced with high housing costs, they tend to cut back on other things in order to pay the rent. Food represents perhaps the most flexible part of the family budget, and is often where the cutbacks are made. In Massachusetts today, according to Project Bread, 370,000 people live in households that are unable to purchase nutritionally adequate food. Over the last few years, lines have lengthened at food pantries, as demand for emergency food has steadily risen.

The American Red Cross of Massachusetts Bay, in response to this increasing need, has used its Food and Shelter funding to help launch a new food pantry in Waltham. The new pantry provides a three-day supply of groceries to low-income people on a monthly basis. Originally, the Red Cross expected the new pantry to serve 20,000 people over the two-year period of this grant, but those numbers may rise. "Since September 11, 2001, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of people coming to the pantry," reports Corinna Campbell, Director of Corporate and Foundation campaigns.

Like many such basic service providers in Greater Boston, the Red Cross sees the pantry as providing not only food but access to information about services. This effort gets at one of the serious problems in serving needy people in Greater Boston, namely, the lack of awareness of programs that can make a real difference in the lives of low-income people. Many providers of emergency services in the Boston area now make education about these programs a basic part of their work.

"In addition to the immediate assistance we provide," says Judith Whitmarsh of the Catholic Charities, which sponsors a network of neighborhood service centers in Greater Boston, "we make sure that those eligible for Mass Health, food stamps, and other assistance programs are receiving them. People come in for food,

utility, or rental assistance and leave with possible solutions to other problems, perhaps relating to a sick child, or the need to heat their home this winter."

Like the Red Cross Food Pantry in Waltham, the Catholic Charities network has also begun to register the effects on the American economy of the terrorist attacks of September 11. "Laid-off airport workers in Chelsea, Revere, Lynn, and Everett have begun coming to our initial response service for help," Whitmarsh says. As the economy continues to decline, Whitmarsh expects the need to rise in key areas. "Much of our Food and Shelter money will go to prevent utilities shut-off this winter," she says. Catholic Charities helps urgently needy people with unpaid bills, provides them with gift certificates to supermarkets, and links families with other organizations that can assist them.

A similar role is played by the United Way's Special Fund for Emergency Financial Assistance. This fund was established to provide quick, flexible emergency help to low-income people unable to meet needs for food, heat, utilities and shelter because of financial crises. It was designed to be a last resort for people who have exhausted all other resources. It too has encountered a high level of need in recent months. Before the end of the first quarter of the two-year period of the grant, the Special Fund had allocated 42.5 percent of its grant monies. One of its agencies received 50 calls a day after all of its funds had been expended; another received a hundred calls a day.

The AIDS Action Committee will take on another aspect of the hunger problem in the coming months. Its Nutrition Works project will address the unique needs of poor individuals who are living with HIV disease. It will provide fresh food and nutrition education so that people can obtain and prepare healthy meals.

Re-Framing a Basic Need

Like the front-line organizations described above, Project Bread has long been concerned with the issue of access – the missed connections between people and resources that account for so much private suffering in this community. Much of Project Bread’s work over the last several years has focused on changing and improving the ways people connect with services – especially when making those connections is stigmatized by our society. Project Bread is using its Food and Shelter grant to further this work with a new idea.

As the lengthening lines at food pantries at places like the new Red Cross Food Pantry mentioned above clearly indicate, hunger is on the increase in Greater Boston. Yet the use of Food Stamps, the federally funded food program that has long been the first line of defense against hunger among low-income Americans is on the decline. In Massachusetts, participation in the program dropped 39 percent from 1994 to 1999, even as poverty persisted at 10 percent and the demand for emergency food rose steadily. According to Project Bread, the drop in Food Stamp use in Massachusetts is among the most dramatic in the nation. A survey of 50 states released in January 2001 reveals that only three other states now have lower participation. Today about half of the people eligible for Food Stamps in Massachusetts actually receive them.

The decline in usage of this program has important implications for children’s health, and even their education. Children who are hungry are twice as likely to have academic, social and psychological problems. Under-nutrition, along with other environmental factors associated with poverty, can permanently retard physical growth, brain development and cognitive functioning.

Clearly a major challenge, and an urgent need, is to get the message to parents that help with feeding their families is available to them. Project Bread is taking on

this challenge by creating a model that would help change the meaning of hunger – defining it not as a poverty issue but as a health issue. This is far more than an exercise in semantics. Repositioning hunger as a health issue would mean that it could be dealt with not at a downtown welfare office, but in the familiar environment of a community health center, where health-care professionals who detect hunger-related conditions would issue food vouchers in much the way they issue prescriptions for medications.

With funds from the Food and Shelter Initiative, Project Bread is creating the first models of this new approach to fulfilling hunger needs in five community health centers in Boston. The project is still in its initial stages, but the concept holds considerable promise.



Conclusion

In reporting on the first few months of the Food and Shelter Initiative, many participants commented on the effect the funding had on the morale of their staff people, who are often under a great deal of stress from the effort to meet urgent needs with limited funds. The unrestricted nature of the Initiative's funding permitted many organizations to help extremely needy people who otherwise could not be helped, and the sudden freedom to deal with problems gave a boost to many on the front lines.

But, as Phil Mangano, of MHSA, pointed out, "The unintended consequence of funding like this is that staff come to realize that an appropriate level of funding could end homelessness for many of their clients. These kinds of funds, then, become reminders of what could be done with the right resources."

...the evidence of this Initiative suggests that at least some solutions to the problems of hunger and homelessness lie within our reach.

If there is a sense of struggle at many of the organizations funded through this Initiative, it is the result in part of lack of funding in the face of great need. But part may also be attributable to a sense of isolation from the larger world that is now felt in organizations working directly with the poor. The problems they deal with on a daily basis have largely disappeared from public awareness. The homeless person seen on the street represents less than two percent of the homeless population, while the actual experience of homelessness, a phenomenon now affecting many working people, remains largely hidden from public view. Hunger too is invisible, often concealed by parents who skip meals themselves so that their children can eat.

But hunger and homelessness, and the threat they represent to families living close to the edge, are an established fact of life today, and are often exacerbated – rather than alleviated – by good times. The economic tide that lifted so many to new wealth over the last decade carried basic necessities such as housing beyond the reach of many low-income working people, leaving them with very precarious existences. As Judith Whitmarsh, of Catholic Charities, summed it up: "The experiences of the working poor today are not part of a sustainable lifestyle." John Feehan, of LEO, used the word "fragile" to describe their situation.

Yet the evidence of this Initiative suggests that at least some solutions to the problems of hunger and homelessness lie within our reach. As organizations receiving funding through this Initiative have demonstrated in their work, even small amounts of funds can, in fact, go a long way. What emerges most clearly from the Initiative's efforts to date is the need to re-think aspects of current public funding to make sure that the failure to meet small needs does not escalate into the need to meet larger ones. The parallel with health care is clear. Two decades ago, when costs of hospital and emergency room care rose to staggering heights, a new emphasis appeared on prevention – on screenings for disease, regular check-ups, exercise and diet. Keeping people healthy became one way of getting medical costs under control. Similarly, keeping people housed is clearly both more cost effective and more humane than permitting people to fall into homelessness. There is much in the experience of organizations participating in this Initiative to suggest that the prevention of homelessness and the provision of affordable housing deserve a new and greater emphasis.



The Boston Foundation

75 ARLINGTON STREET, BOSTON, MA 02116

617-338-1700 WWW.TBF.ORG