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Massachusetts can feed all our vulnerable citizens and put food service workers back on the job

School districts and youth agencies have stepped up to provide food during the COVID-19 crisis.

By Andrea Silbert, March 30, 2020



Children picked up meals from Conte Community School in Pittsfield on March 16. The lunches provided a good meal for children while schools are closed due to coronavirus. Ben Garver/Associated Press

One of the greatest needs during our current health crisis is to provide meals for all of our vulnerable citizens, and a wonderful example of success is taking place across the state from Cape Cod to Boston to the Berkshires. School districts and youth agencies in low-income areas throughout Massachusetts have opened nearly 1,200 emergency feeding sites which are

providing two meals per day (a breakfast and a lunch) to all children ages 0-18 in their areas, paid for by the US Department of Agriculture's COVID-19 emergency feeding program. These meals are available to any child, regardless of family income. If children are unable to get to sites, parents and guardians can pick up the meals on their behalf. (For a full list of sites across the state, see [Project Bread's website](https://meals4kids.org/) at <https://meals4kids.org/>.)

Last week, I visited a handful of these sites and was impressed by how efficiently and effectively they were preparing and distributing thousands of healthy meals while maintaining a safe social distance. School food and nutrition directors are highly skilled professionals, many with years of experience in institutional and large commercial food service operations.

One school district I visited was the Barnstable Public Schools, where school nutrition director Dave Badot, a former restaurant manager, distributed over 6,200 meals last Friday alone through four school-based and 10 bus stop sites. Badot expects demand to increase over the coming weeks and has the capacity to prepare more meals through the district's multiple school kitchens.

At the Eos Foundation, a philanthropy focused on fighting hunger and poverty, promoting education and gender and racial equity in Massachusetts, have been thinking about how to find scalable solutions to feeding vast numbers of people within our state, not just children. Could we utilize this 1,200-site strong statewide network of food service professionals and kitchens to feed all of our hungry residents with two prepared meals each day in the same manner that we are feeding our vulnerable kids? Once we reach capacity with the school kitchens, how about asking local colleges, universities, and restaurants to join in to prepare these grab-and-go meals? This would help provide jobs to an industry that has experienced significant layoffs — restaurant and institutional food service workers. We could not only be feeding all of our citizens, but also providing badly needed jobs and pumping more dollars into our state's economy quickly and efficiently.

Providing more prepared meals would have an added benefit by keeping people inside their homes and out of the grocery stores to the fullest extent possible during the statewide shutdown. What would it take to ramp up this system to feed another 1 million people? I have no doubt that, collectively, these food service directors could figure it out pretty quickly.

The remaining puzzle piece is funding the prepared food for the over-18 population. Unless and until the federal government steps up to provide more funding for meals for adults, we need the state to step in and pick up the cost of these meals from our \$3.5 billion rainy day fund. Schools produce these two daily meals at \$6.50 a day per kid. At this same cost structure, the state could feed 1 million adults for only \$6.5 million a day.

Let's harness the promise of this network to serve anyone in our state struggling to put meals on the table.

Andrea Silbert is president of the Eos Foundation.