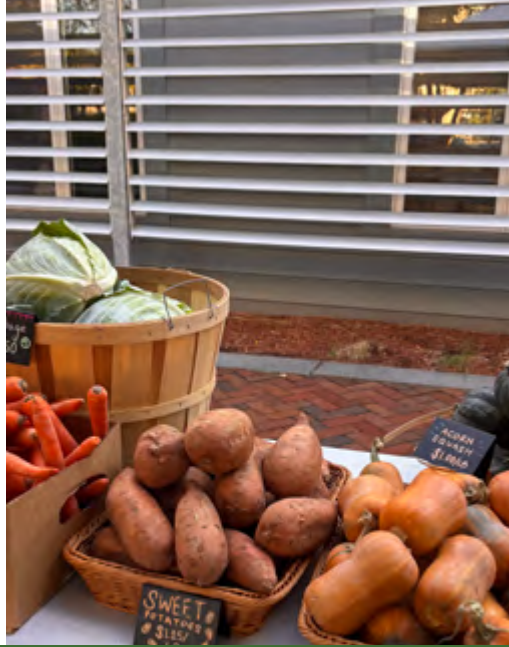




Somerville Community Food Assessment

2026





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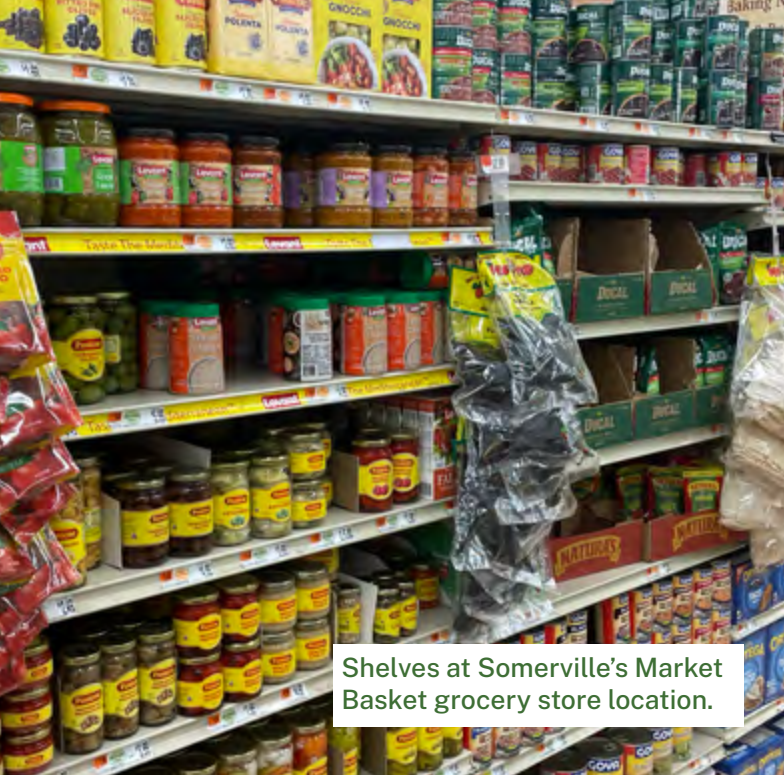
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Shelves at Somerville's Market Basket grocery store location.



Aoma Muma of Bombeta Farm at the Union Square Farmers Market. Bombeta is part of World Farmers' Flats Mentor Farm, a program which provides space and infrastructure for small immigrant and refugee farmers. *Photo credit: Carlos Ly for Union Square Main Streets*



Children's garden programming at the Growing Center. *Photo credit: The Somerville Community Growing Center*



A Food For Free truck of rescued food distributes to Somerville Homeless Coalition's Project SOUP.



Somerville Food System Acknowledgement

The City of Somerville and stakeholders who took part in this assessment recognize that the food system that sustains us is built on the theft of Indigenous land and knowledge and the genocide of first peoples. Somerville stands on land traditionally stewarded by the Massachusett, Pawtucket, and Naumkeag peoples. We extend our respect to the present-day members of these communities. We honor the practices of land stewardship and sustainable agriculture that Indigenous people have held for thousands of years and continue to hold.

We also acknowledge that our food system was created with the labor, skills, and expertise of enslaved African people and continues to benefit from hardworking, underpaid people, often immigrants and people of color. We honor and seek to learn from those leading efforts to address these injustices in the food system today.

We recognize that an acknowledgement is not sufficient to undo past or present harm. This report was written with these truths at the forefront, aiming to participate in actively dismantling these inequities.

For readers who wish to learn more about work being done to address inequity in the food system, there are many local organizations to learn from and support. A few examples are Justicia Migrante¹, the Urban Farming Institute², the Indigenous People's Network's Indigenous Food Sovereignty program³, and the First Light Shellfish Farm of the Mashpee Wampanoag people⁴, among many others.

1 Migrant Justice Justicia Migrante, "Milk With Dignity."

2 "Urban Farming Institute."

3 Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust, "Indigenous Food Sovereignty."

4 Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, "First Light Shellfish Farm."

Mayor's Welcome

Somerville's resiliency is regularly challenged, and we are proud that no matter the headwinds we face, we hold true to our values – especially when it comes to food access.

Food access may sound like a technical or abstract term. But not having food on the dinner table, or affordable fresh foods at the local store, or enough to eat on the weekends when there is no school lunch, is the most immediate and pressing need some of us face.

Stable access to food not only maintains our health and helps kids grow, it enables all else that we do: it's hard to accomplish goals and tasks like getting homework done, making it through a shift at work, or taking care of our families when we don't have enough to eat. Achieving food security for our community provides no less than the foundation for healthy and successful lives.

The effort we make in Somerville to build systems, partnerships, programs, and initiatives that expand and sustain food access is some of the most important work we do. We are fortunate to live in a community that understands this.

When the pandemic hit, for example, there was visible, overwhelming support to ensure neighbors were safe and food secure in their homes, and a resident-led ARPA Steering Committee funneled \$9 million into direct-support food programs (\$2.5M) and broader programs (\$6.5M) that

included food access as a component. When our constituents took part in two rounds of Participatory Budgeting to decide how to spend City funds, food and food security projects emerged as top priorities.

We build a thriving community for all ages by ensuring our people have multiple points of access to good, nourishing food. This is how we align with Health and Human Services' newly adapted HOPE framework, which reminds us that the more positive experiences youth have, the more likely they will have positive health outcomes across their lifespan.

As we do this work, data and common sense inform the City's investments in community-level food access. From our flagship Somerville Mobile Farmers Market and free school markets to the SNAP match at farmers markets and community and summer meals, the City invests time, staff, and money to partner with fellow food stakeholders and ensure all of Somerville can move beyond basic needs to flourishing lives.

Together, we are, however, facing growing challenges. While the current federal administration may sow confusion and harm around nutrition benefits and food support, here in Somerville we've shown we've got each other's backs. In November 2025, amid growing need, my predecessor Mayor Ballantyne appropriated, and as a City Councilor, my colleagues and I approved, using almost \$1 million to boost the agencies and programs that provide on-the-ground assistance to those who are food insecure. These organizations show up every day with compassion

and commitment to support Somerville residents in accessing the food they need for themselves and their families. Our community leadership stood up to keep them going.

I invite you to read this Somerville Community Food Assessment to understand the impacts we've achieved and to see where opportunity and need still exist. Please use this report to learn about your community, be inspired by others, and figure out how you can participate in this ongoing effort to not only meet vital basic needs but also celebrate food, community, resiliency, and health.

In these pages, you'll find many examples that show how Somerville both prioritizes fundamental food access and also understands the power of food to create connections, build community, evoke stories, and spark celebrations – all actions that grow stability and support the cycle of food security. Our longstanding community events, farmers markets, and public programming emphasize community and conversation with food as a centerpiece because gathering over food nourishes both bodies and civic strength.

Having this report in your hands is already a sign that you too are part of the solutions and progress we need. Thank you for your focus and determination.

Sincerely,



Mayor Jake Wilson





Shoppers at the Union Square Farmers Market purchasing produce from Kimball Fruit Farm.

Photo credit: Carlos Ly for Union Square Main Streets

Reader's Guide

Welcome to Somerville's Community Food Assessment. The goal of this report is for readers to gain a thorough understanding of food access and nutrition security in the Somerville community. The report was written with different audiences in mind while recognizing one thing we all have in common: on a daily basis each of us works to feed ourselves and others, whether children, elders, or friends. The assessment is meant to be read from the perspective of personal experience and empathy, as well as professional or community leader knowledge and expertise, reflecting the different hats we each wear.

Questions to keep in mind for the different hats you wear:

As a decision maker or funder

What progress has been made on improving food security directly and indirectly? Where else do we need to improve and how can your role support progress?

As staff in a related agency or business

Where does your work fit into this ecosystem? What will you leverage in this report to further your work?

As a student learning about food systems

What are some strengths of Somerville's food system? How do these real-life data and stories influence your thinking on changing policies, systems, or the environment?

As a resident

There's a lot going on in Somerville! Think about your daily food needs and expenses when it comes to eating and feeding others. How do you empathize with some of the ways people on tight budgets navigate the challenge of getting sufficient food? What have you learned from reading this report and where would you like to expand your involvement or get involved?

Acknowledgements

This report was a true collaborative effort. Many people contributed to the content, ideas, structure, and editing of the assessment.

A special thank you to:

The Community Advisory Group

This group was specially convened for this report and includes individuals representing key community agencies, City departments, and community connectors. The group met monthly from October 2024 - June 2025 to review data, advise on content, engage with additional community members, and guide ideas. Their dedication to a better Somerville lives on in this report.

Interviewees OFAHC interviewed twenty-three individuals for this report. Their willingness to share their experience and expertise navigating local food systems, resources, and benefits provides the human part of the data this report highlights. Their stories and quotes are woven into the chapters and remind readers that behind numbers and charts there are people, households, and families. Thank you all for taking the time to share with us and make this a more meaningful report.

The Somerville Food Coalition

The Coalition is a group of committed people representing agencies and communities who meet monthly to “connect, share information, identify solutions, and advocate for resources that support access to affordable, culturally inclusive food for all.” This group was founded in 2010 and has met continuously since that time, serving as the backbone and heart of food systems work in Somerville.¹

¹ “Somerville Food Coalition.”

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Note

Photos without a listed credit were taken
by OFAHC staff members Alissa Ebel,
Lisa Robinson, Sean O'Brien, and Quinn
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Other reports

This assessment builds upon and is in conversation with several recently published reports by the City of Somerville and by food system organizations in Massachusetts. Many of these reports are featured in relevant assessment chapters as “Partner Report Call Outs”.

Aging in Somerville: A Community Needs Assessment;

Ceara Somerville and Caitlin Coyle, Produced for Somerville Council on Aging, 2025.

City of Somerville Open Space & Recreation Plan;

City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Public Space and Urban Forestry Division, 2025.

Enhancing Youth Services in the City of Somerville;

Hania Marien and Gretchen Brion-Meisels; Produced for City of Somerville Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Youth Services, 2024.

Food Equity and Access in Massachusetts;

Voices and Solutions from Lived Experience; Greater Boston Food Bank, 2024.

Housing Needs Assessment;

City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Housing Division, December 2024.

Keeping Our Neighbors: Anti-Displacement Summary Report;

City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, 2025.

Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan;

Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Franklin Regional Council of Governments, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and Massachusetts Workforce Alliance; Produced for the Massachusetts Food Policy Council, 2015.

Regional Wellbeing Report; Cambridge Health Alliance, 2025.

The Cost of Hunger in Massachusetts;

Greater Boston Food Bank, 2025.

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Figure 0.1: Mapping Somerville's Food System: A Guide to This Assessment

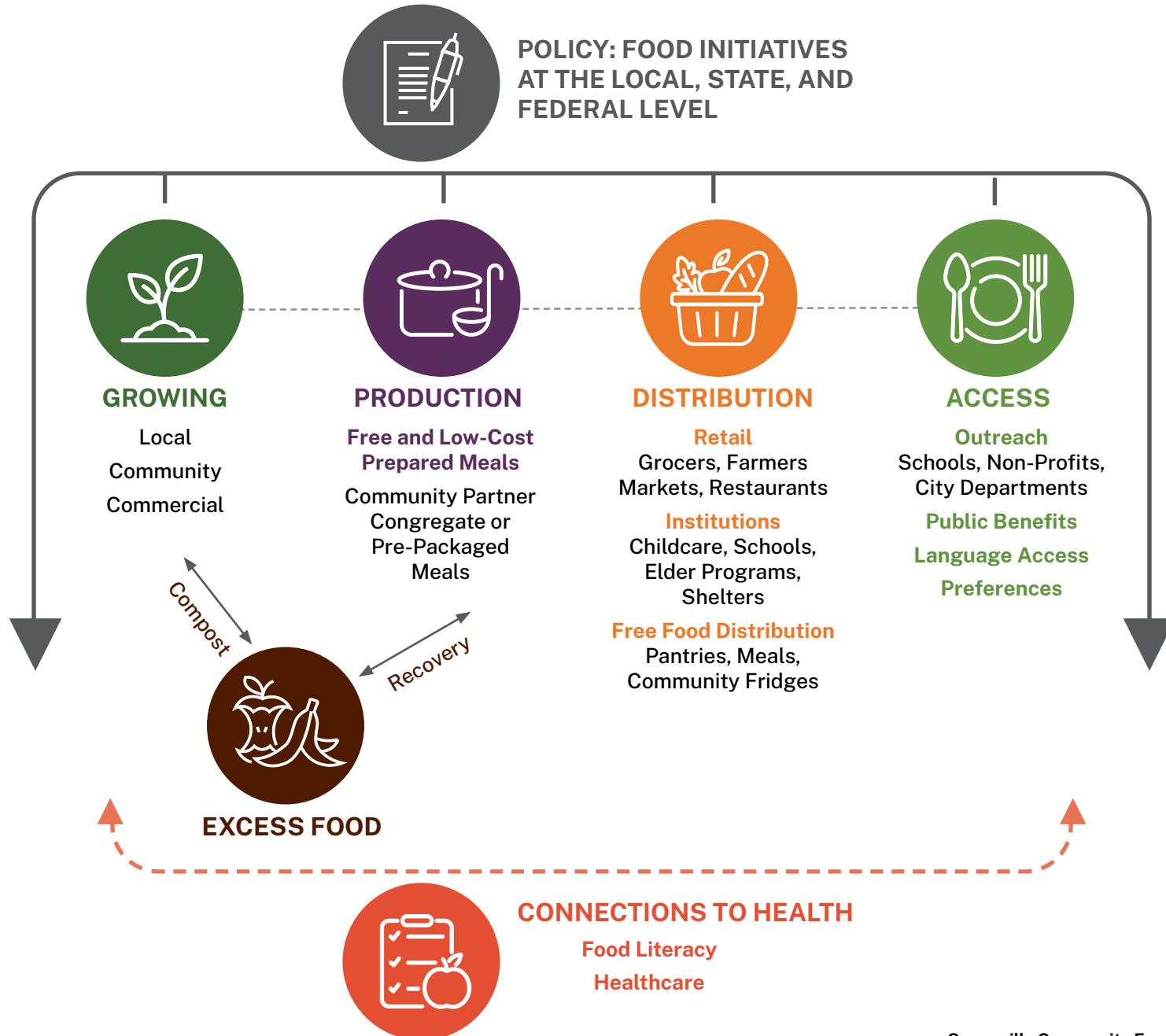


Table 0.1: Somerville Food Stakeholders

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Production: Local growing					
The Somerville Community Growing Center	Non-Profit	✓			
Mutual Aid Medford And Somerville (MAMAS) Gardening Collective	Comm Org	✓			
The Somerville Garden Club	Comm Org	✓			
Conservation Commission	Gov	✓			
Public Space and Urban Forestry, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Production: Commercial growers					
Farm vendors at Somerville Farmers Markets	For Profit		✓		
Farm partners with Somerville Mobile Farmers Market	Non-Profit			✓	
CSA shares that offer pickup in Somerville	For Profit		✓		

Key
Government (City and State, including State schools)
Somerville Public Schools
Non-Profit (includes large NPs like Healthcare)
For Profit
Community Org

Categorized by level:

- **Local** = Somerville only or Somerville + one other city
- **Local & Regional** = Prominent in Somerville but with regional work
- **State** = focused at State level
- **Federal/National** = anything with operations beyond MA

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Production: Food preparation					
Nibble entrepreneurs	For Profit	✓			
Community Cooks	Non-Profit		✓		
Community Servings	Non-Profit		✓		
Somerville High School Career & Technical Education Culinary Program	SPS	✓			
Foundation Kitchen	For Profit	✓			
Processing and Distribution					
Food For Free	Non-Profit		✓		
Greater Boston Food Bank	Non-Profit		✓		
Boston Area Gleaners	Non-Profit		✓		
Food Access: Retail (grocers, farmers markets, SMFM, restaurants)					
Farmers Markets:					
Center for Arts at the Armory	Non-Profit	✓			
Mass Farmers Markets	Non-Profit			✓	
Union Square Main Streets	Non-Profit	✓			
Somerville Mobile Farmers Market, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Grocery stores, Dollar Stores, Supercenters, Neighborhood markets	For Profit		✓		
Restaurants	For Profit		✓		

Table 0.1: Somerville Food Stakeholders, continued

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Food Access: Economy					
East Somerville Main Streets	Non-Profit	✓			
Union Square Main Streets	Non-Profit	✓			
Economic Development, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Inspectional Services Department, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Food Access: Care centers and shelters					
Childcare centers with food support:					
Head Start, Community Action Agency of Somerville	Non-Profit	✓			
Somerville YMCA	Non-Profit	✓			
Elizabeth Peabody House	Non-Profit	✓			
Mystic Learning Center	Non-Profit	✓			
Somerville Public Schools	SPS	✓			
Commodity Supplemental Food Programs:					
Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services	Non-Profit	✓			
Council on Aging, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
St. Patrick's Shelter, Catholic Charities	Non-Profit	✓			
Somerville Homeless Coalition Adult Shelter	Non-Profit	✓			

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Food Access: Free food support (pantries, meals, fridges)					
Somerville Homeless Coalition (Project SOUP, Monday Night Meal, and monthly Come to the Table Meal)	Non-Profit	✓			
Elizabeth Peabody House Food Pantry	Non-Profit	✓			
Food4All, Somerville Hispanic Association for Community Development	Non-Profit	✓			
Shepherd's Kitchen Food Pantry, Mission Church	Non-Profit	✓			
Missionary Church of the Haitian Community Food Pantry	Non-Profit	✓			
DISH Pantry, Bunker Hill Community College	Non-Profit		✓		
Food For Free (Just Eats boxes at SHA, School Markets, Heat and Eats)	Non-Profit	✓			
Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville (MAMAS) Grocery team	Comm Org	✓			
Come to the Table, Connexion Church (*except first Wed of each month)	Non-Profit	✓			
Dormition Family Table, Dormition of the Virgin Mary Greek Church	Non-Profit	✓			
Hearty Meals for All	Non-Profit	✓			
Somerville Community Fridges	Comm Org	✓			

Table 0.1: Somerville Food Stakeholders, continued

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Food Access: Connectors, supporters					
Riverside Early Head Start	Non-Profit	✓			
Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers	Non-Profit			✓	
Screening tool & Patient resource providers, Cambridge Health Alliance	Non-Profit		✓		
Somerville Cambridge Elder Services	Non-Profit	✓			
Somerville Homeless Coalition	Non-Profit	✓			
Community Action Agency of Somerville	Non-Profit	✓			
Supportive Services, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Community Health Workers, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
SomerBaby Home Visitors, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Social Worker, Somerville Public Library, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Office of Housing Stability, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Family Liaisons, Somerville Family Learning Collaborative, Somerville Public Schools	SPS	✓			
Office of Basic Needs, Somerville Family Learning Collaborative, Somerville Public Schools	SPS	✓			

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Padres Latinos de SPS	Comm Org	✓			
Asian Family Network	Comm Org	✓			
Mystic Tenants Association	Comm Org	✓			
Clarendon Residents United	Comm Org	✓			
Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville (MAMAS) Hotline team	Comm Org	✓			
Food Access: Benefits					
Somerville Cambridge Women, Infants & Children Nutrition Program (WIC)	Non-Profit	✓			
Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), Executive Office of Health and Human Services	Gov			✓	
Somerville Family Learning Collaborative, Somerville Public Schools	SPS	✓			
Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
FreshConnect	Non-Profit		✓		

Table 0.1: Somerville Food Stakeholders, continued

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Consumption: Knowledge					
UMass Extension, UMass Amherst	Gov			✓	
Somerville Public Schools educators	SPS	✓			
Green City Growers	For Profit	✓			
Somerville High School Career & Technical Education Culinary Program	SPS	✓			
Somerville Public Libraries, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Food Recovery or Waste					
Food For Free	Non-Profit		✓		
Food Link	Non-Profit		✓		
Spoonfuls	Non-Profit		✓		
City of Somerville Compost Pilot, Office of Sustainability and Environment, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
Compost vendors	For Profit	✓			
Greenhouse gas emissions inventory, Office of Sustainability and Environment, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			

Somerville Food Stakeholders	Type	Local	Local & Regional	State	Federal/ National
Policy & Advocacy					
Somerville Food Coalition	Gov	✓			
Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville	Gov	✓			
SNAP Coalition	Non-Profit			✓	
Make Hunger History Coalition	Non-Profit			✓	
Mass Food System Collaborative	Non-Profit			✓	
Project Bread	Non-Profit			✓	
Mass Law Reform Institute	Non-Profit			✓	
MA Food Policy Council	Gov			✓	
Governor's Anti-Hunger Task Force	Gov			✓	
Food Research and Action Coalition	Non-Profit				✓
Mayor's Alliance Against Childhood Hunger, Share Our Strength	Non-Profit				✓

Key
Government (City and State, including State schools)
Somerville Public Schools
Non-Profit (includes large NPs like Healthcare)
For Profit
Community Org

Categorized by level:

- **Local** = Somerville only or Somerville + one other city
- **Local & Regional** = Prominent in Somerville but with regional work
- **State** = focused at State level
- **Federal/National** = anything with operations beyond MA



Introduction

The City of Somerville is pleased to provide an updated Community Food Assessment that builds on the 2017-2018 Community Food System Assessment. Much has changed over the past seven years locally, nationally, and internationally. Since the last assessment, Somerville has experienced the opening of five new MBTA stations through the Green Line Extension, four new neighborhood markets, the expansion of a monthly community meal to weekly, and the first new building at the redesigned Clarendon Hill Apartments. The difficult crossing at McGrath Highway that many residents had to traverse to get to the Stop and Shop in East Somerville, including an infamous hole in the fence people crawled through, has been significantly improved with the addition of a traffic light and new fencing, resulting in a safer and more dignified way to get to the grocery store. The Ballantyne administration adopted participatory budgeting, an opportunity for Somerville residents to vote on how to spend \$1 million of the city's operating budget, and this has become a helpful source of support for food access. Finally, with the support of the City Council in November 2025, the Mayor allocated \$1 million in Community Benefits Funds for community-based organizations focused on addressing food insecurity.

Locally and nationally, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed how people access food. It shifted more

people to online ordering, made the delivery of groceries more common-place, and drew clear connections between economic and housing stability, healthcare, and the ability to get sufficient food. Significant recovery dollars, mostly via the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) funded food programs not only to operate but to scale operations, collect data, and evaluate innovative approaches to nutrition security support. Part of the innovation was the relaxing of rules and procedures to remove barriers to participation. Evidence has long suggested this is effective in maximizing enrollment and impact, but it took a global health crisis to temporarily implement these innovations.

As this report looks to the future, 2026 emerges as another transition point. Federal grants such as Local Food for Schools and Local Food Purchase Assistance grants have been cut. The country's most impactful food aid program, SNAP, has been fundamentally altered, meaning fewer people will receive this benefit in coming years. In tandem with this shift in federal support for the food safety net, pre-pandemic rules and procedures for SNAP and other programs have gradually been reinstated, reducing participation through increased complexity and rigidity. City governments and non-profits have felt the loss of ARPA recovery dollars, in some cases ending or scaling back programming. Meanwhile, food insecurity rates in Massachusetts are increasing, and the



Chef Maritza Jules of the Nibble Culinary Entrepreneurship Program leads a Micro Cooking Class at the 2025 Ignite Festival.
Photo credit: Tony Baum, Somerville Arts Council

community is leaning on the emergency food system in an unsustainable way. Post-pandemic price increases have made basic needs less affordable and turned food prices into a topic of national conversation that has the potential to influence politics.

While this is an unprecedented moment, with food access only one component of a larger threat to public health, access to sufficient and nourishing food remains foundational to positive health outcomes. As the Somerville community faces these changes, this report seeks to equip readers with community connections, stories, and evidence to take the actions necessary to meet this moment.

Images from a harvesting and planting workshop at the Somerville Public Library's Central Library demonstration garden. *Photo credit: Kerry O'Donnell, Somerville Public Library*



Values

The Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities (OFAHC) worked with the assessment's Community Advisory Group to develop guiding values for this project. These values informed every aspect of the process, including gathering information, sharing information with participants and advisors, identifying key findings, writing the assessment, and creating the food action plan.

- Food should be easy to access, meet cultural, religious, and dietary preferences, and should be enjoyed. **Income should not determine ability to meet these needs.**
- **Relationships and cultural identity matter** in how people seek help and engage around food needs.
- **A Judgment Free Approach:** Everyone's experiences are different and valued.
- **Involvement from People Impacted:** Projects should hear from the community in the planning process to ensure they meet community needs.

- **Navigable Systems:** Systems, programs, policies, and procedures should be easy to understand or approach. They should work within people's lives.
- **Plain Language:** Information should be accurate and easily accessible to a variety of readers.
- **Sustainability:** Recommendations must be sustainable from a funding and environmental perspective.
- The assessment was further guided by a focus on **health equity**. Health equity means that everyone has a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible. As expressed by Cambridge Health Alliance's 2025 Wellbeing Report, "to achieve this, we must remove obstacles to health — such as poverty, discrimination, and deep power imbalances — and their consequences, including lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care."¹

1 Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA), *CHA Region Wellbeing Report 2025*.



Community members chat over their shopping at the Clarendon Hill Towers location of the City of Somerville's Mobile Farmers Market.

Objectives

This report is intended to achieve the following objectives identified in collaboration with the assessment's Community Advisory Group.

1. Build upon existing knowledge from prior food assessments.
2. Update the City's understanding of populations at risk for food insecurity.
3. Document and summarize current food security support in Somerville, including answering the following questions:
 - a. What initiatives have been put in place since the last assessment?
 - b. What programs and strategies demonstrate effectiveness?
 - c. What existing programs, policies, practices, and partnerships warrant refinement?
 - d. Where do gaps in services or resources remain?
4. Produce an assessment that reflects a diverse range of perspectives through continuous community engagement.
5. Use both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a multi-dimensional overview of Somerville's food access landscape.
6. Examine broader components of the food system to identify connections and potential opportunities to improve food access.
7. Inform future goal setting and budget planning related to food access and nutrition security.

The Union Square Farmers Market.
Photo credit: Kate Noonan, Union Square Main Streets



Key Findings

Key Findings from the 2018 Assessment

This Assessment builds on key findings from Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities' and Somerville Food Coalition's 2018 Food System Assessment.

1. Transportation access is a critical determinant of food access. Residents consistently report that access to a vehicle is the preferred and most reliable means of obtaining groceries, particularly for purchasing affordable food in larger quantities.
2. People prefer to do their food shopping in person to have autonomy over selection, quality considerations, and price.
3. Grocery baskets with the same ingredients vary in cost, most commonly at neighborhood markets compared to grocery stores. This disproportionately impacts residents who are transit dependent and more often rely on nearby options.
4. Food access disparities persist for specific populations. Low-income and underpaid residents, seniors, certain immigrant communities, youth, people with disabilities, and female-headed households continue to experience disproportionate barriers to consistent access to sufficient and nutritious food.
5. Workers in the local food economy, particularly food service workers, earn less than the average worker in Somerville, increasing their risk of food insecurity.

Key Findings from this 2026 Assessment

1. Flexible sources of municipal funding have increased in the past five years through Community Benefit funds from rapid local development, newly allocated participatory budgeting funds, and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. The City of Somerville has prioritized using some of these funds for food access and nutrition-related programs.
2. While median household income has increased over the past decade, food insecurity continues to affect many residents on a regular or episodic basis.
3. Funding is the biggest constraint on food pantry operations, but food pantries face additional, unique constraints, such as storage and transportation depending on their space and organizational structure.
4. Transportation access remains a barrier to accessing fresh, culturally relevant, and cost-effective food options.
5. Local control over grocery store placement is limited. Transporting food to people or transporting people to food is often more feasible.
6. Use of emergency food assistance has increased. Food pantries are experiencing sustained or growing demand, underscoring the need for consistent and predictable financial support to maintain operations and service quality.

Key Findings

7. SNAP is a key food benefit for many food insecure residents, but it can be difficult to enroll in the program and recertify.
8. Food resources and policies change frequently, making ongoing communications and Coalition work with partners and the public important so they can stay coordinated and up-to-date.
9. Options for stretching food budgets are limited for residents without nutrition benefits. For individuals who are ineligible for or not enrolled in food assistance programs, few intermediate supports exist between market food and emergency food assistance.
10. Certain populations, such as high school-aged students and people with disabilities, have unique needs. These populations are not well represented at meetings where gaps in food access are discussed.
11. Urban growing is popular and can play an important role in connecting people and supporting health. It can also supplement existing food sources.
12. Existing infrastructure and resources are insufficient to meaningfully expand urban agriculture in Somerville.
13. Ready-made meals are helpful in supporting low-income residents with limited ability to cook.
14. Food literacy and nutrition education have declined in recent years. Food literacy is a critical component of long-term nutrition security.
15. Diversion of excess retail food is well established, but consumer-level food waste remains less well documented and addressed.
16. Food rescue operations are a growing part of food waste management but remain less common than other types of processing because rescue is more logistically challenging.



Project SOUP's walk in cooler stocked with produce ordered from the Greater Boston Food Bank.

Somerville Context

WHO LIVES IN SOMERVILLE?

Approximately **81,036 people** live in Somerville in an estimated **35,715 households**.

Somerville residents are disproportionately aged 20-59, with almost 75% of residents falling in this age group. The city has fewer children and older adults compared with Massachusetts as a whole.

- Although families and older adults are less well-represented in Somerville, they are still an important demographic. About 14.1% of households have someone under 18, and about 17.3% of households have someone 65 or older.

Somerville is a diverse and changing community.

- About 9.4% of residents speak English ‘less than very well’, which is similar to the proportion in Massachusetts as a whole in recent years.
- About **29% of residents speak a language other than English** at home, compared with 25% in Massachusetts.
- Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Chinese are among the most common languages spoken, other than English

All figures use US Census American Community Survey estimates for 2019 and 2024, the latest available data. Data for age, race and ethnicity, and income are aggregated into categories that make the most sense for the purposes of this report. Sources: Tables DP02, DP03, DP04.¹

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Social Characteristics”; U.S. Census Bureau, “Economic Characteristics”; U.S. Census Bureau, “Housing Characteristics.”

Figure 1.1: Somerville has many more young adults (20-34) and more middle-aged adults (35-59) compared with Massachusetts as a whole.

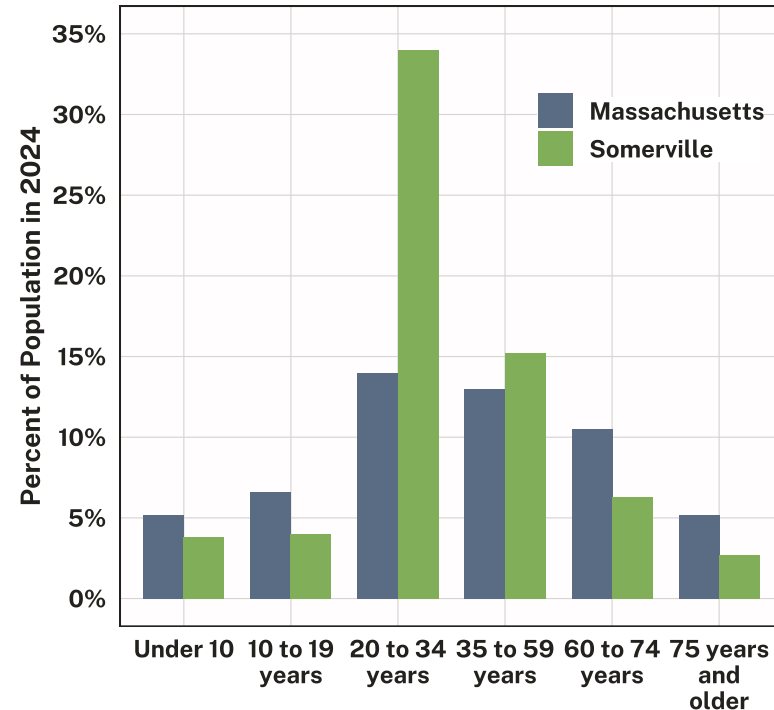


Figure 1.2: Many Somerville residents communicate in languages other than English.

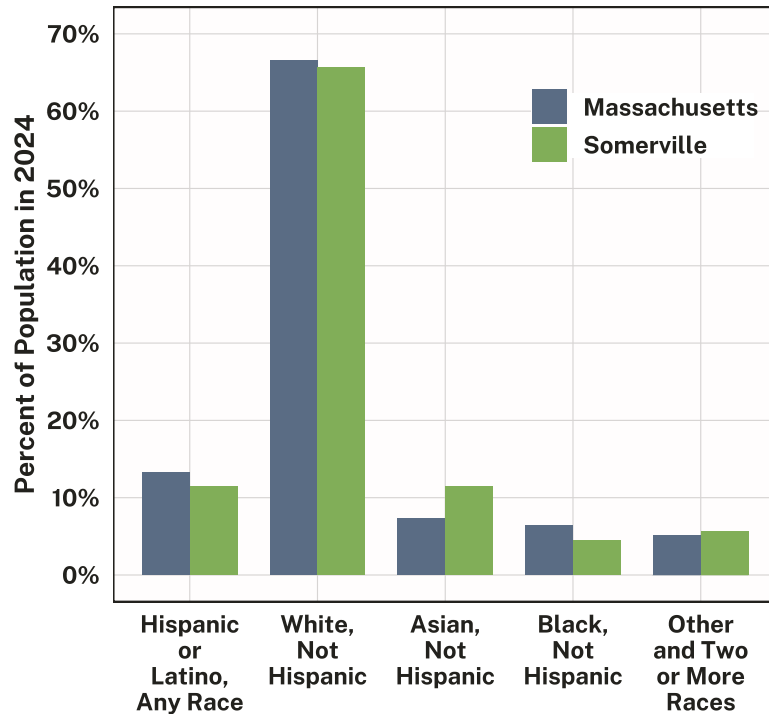
1 in 10 Somerville residents are less comfortable communicating in English.



29% of residents speak a language other than English at home.

Somerville Context

Figure 1.3: Somerville is a moderately diverse city, with similar demographic composition to Massachusetts



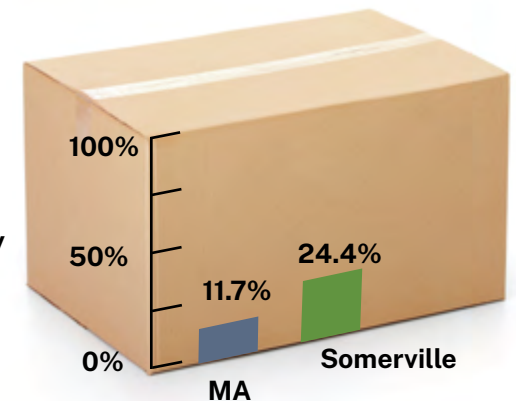
- The majority of residents in Somerville are White people who do not identify as Hispanic, but there are significant proportions of the population who identify as Hispanic or Latino, Asian, and Black.
- Five years ago, Somerville had proportionally more residents who identified as Hispanic or Latino compared to Massachusetts. Since 2019, this proportion has decreased slightly (1 percentage point) in Somerville and increased slightly (1.5 percentage points) in Massachusetts.

Figure 1.4: Somerville residents are more likely to rent and have moved recently as compared to Massachusetts overall.



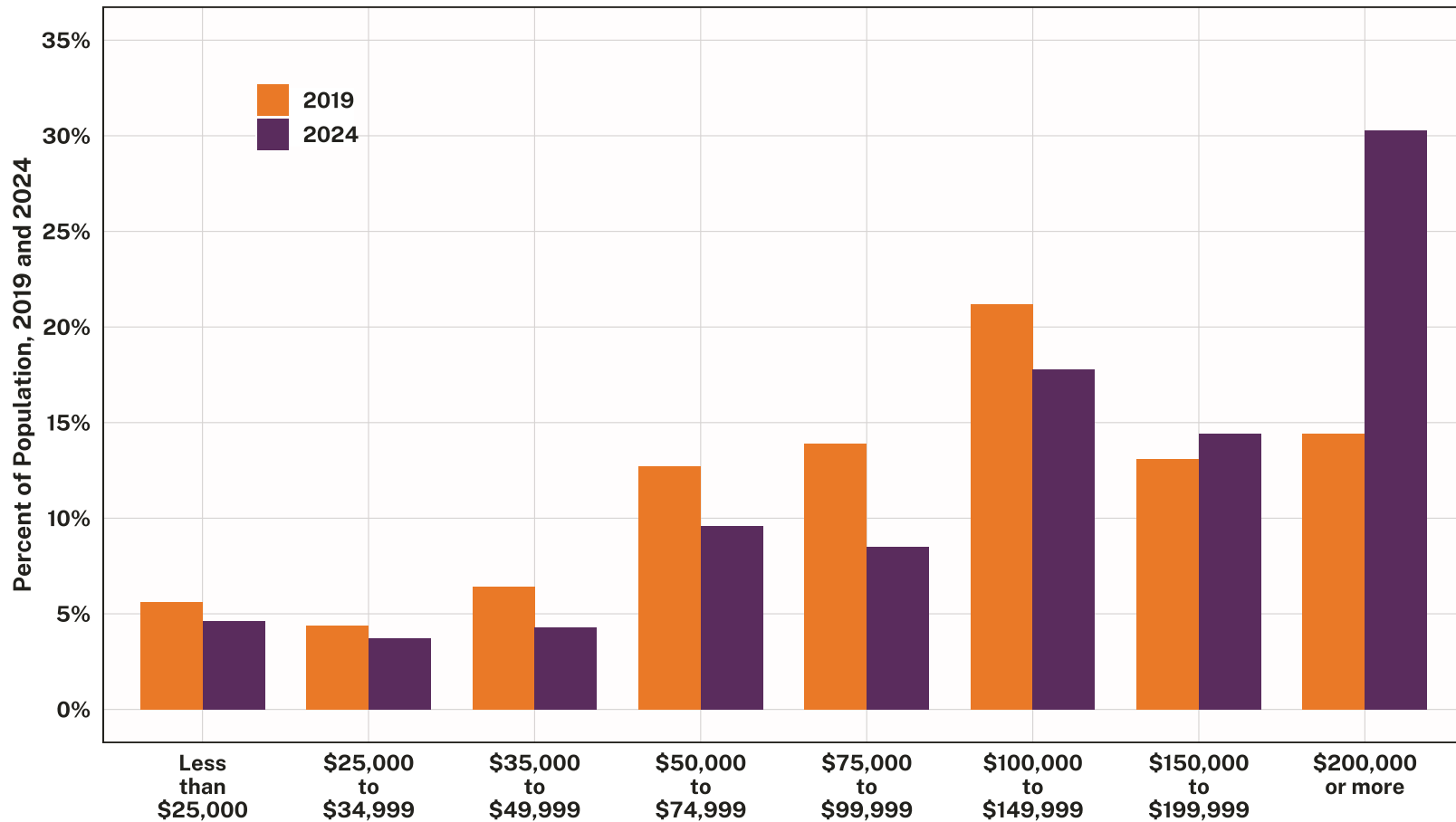
About 2 in 3 (65.8%) of households are renters, compared with 37.5% in Massachusetts.

In 2024, 1 in 4 residents had moved in the last year (24.4%), compared with only 11.7% in Massachusetts.



Somerville Context

Figure 1.5: From 2019-2024, Somerville lost households at lower and middle incomes and gained households at very high incomes.



- On average, Somerville has become more affluent in recent years, but there are still many residents who have limited incomes and may be at risk of food insecurity.
- From 2019 to 2024, the Somerville median income increased from \$97,328 to \$132,572, or 36.2%. In Massachusetts during the same period, the median income increased 28.0%.

Somerville Context

WHO IS FOOD INSECURE IN SOMERVILLE?

According to the Greater Boston Food Bank, about 30% of Somerville residents are food insecure. This rate is slightly lower than Massachusetts' statewide rate of 34%² as shown in [Figure 1.6](#).

Food insecurity in the United States is a consequence of inequitable systems built on oppression, racism, xenophobia, classism, and other power imbalances that create economic disparities and prevent people from accessing food and well-being. The United Nations defines global food security as a state where “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”³ In Somerville we are lucky to have plentifully available food in our grocery stores. We also have clean water, infrastructure, and basic healthcare, all of which allow residents to use food to support their health. Somerville's biggest challenges to food security come from lack of economic access, when people cannot afford to purchase sufficient, nourishing food. Economic access can also be connected to physical access, for example when someone with mobility challenges cannot afford adequate support or transportation to a grocery store.

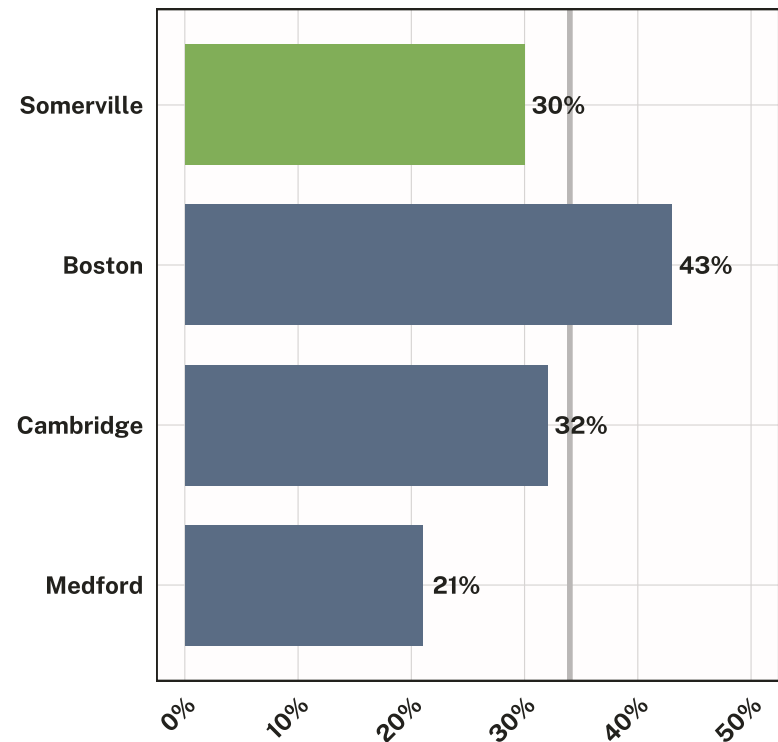
To consider food security, therefore, the figures below look at households' earned income and benefits, as well as the cost of living in Somerville. [Table 1.1](#) and [Figure 1.7](#) dig deeper into the food insecurity data presented in [Figure 1.6](#) to look at how many people and which groups may struggle to afford food.

² The Greater Boston Food Bank, “Closing the Meal Gap.”

³ Development Economics Division, FAO, *Food Security*.

Figure 1.6: 30% of Somerville residents are food insecure

These rates are reported by the Greater Boston Food Bank from their 2023 statewide food insecurity survey. The survey used the USDA's 18-question Household Food Security Survey Module.



Somerville Context

Table 1.1: How many residents in Somerville don't have a high enough income to meet their needs?

% of Federal Threshold	# of People	% of People	Why use this measure?
100%	7,682	9.8%	100% of the poverty threshold is the national level determined each year by the federal government for statistical analysis. It does not account for the cost of living in different parts of the US. See the note below for more details.
200%	15,344	19.6%	200% of the poverty threshold is closest to the value Massachusetts uses to determine SNAP eligibility for most households.
400%	32,456	41.6%	400% of the poverty threshold is closer to what experts estimate households need to live in the Boston metro area. MIT's living wage calculator estimates that households need between 335% and 580% of the federal poverty level to live in this area . The percentage depends on the number of working and non-working people in the household.

Sources: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2019-2024, Table S1701; MIT Living Wage Calculator.⁴

[Table 1.1](#) shows the number of residents in Somerville living at or below three different levels of 'poverty'. The threshold used nationwide and even the threshold used in Massachusetts for SNAP eligibility underrepresent food insecurity, in part because they do not consider the high cost of living in the Boston metro area. [Figure 1.7](#) looks at how income is distributed across different groups in Somerville. This figure considers the proportion of people at or below 100% of the federal poverty threshold to highlight groups that are likely to have lower incomes and thus also more likely to have difficulty affording food.



⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months"; Glasmeier, Amy and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Living Wage Calculator."

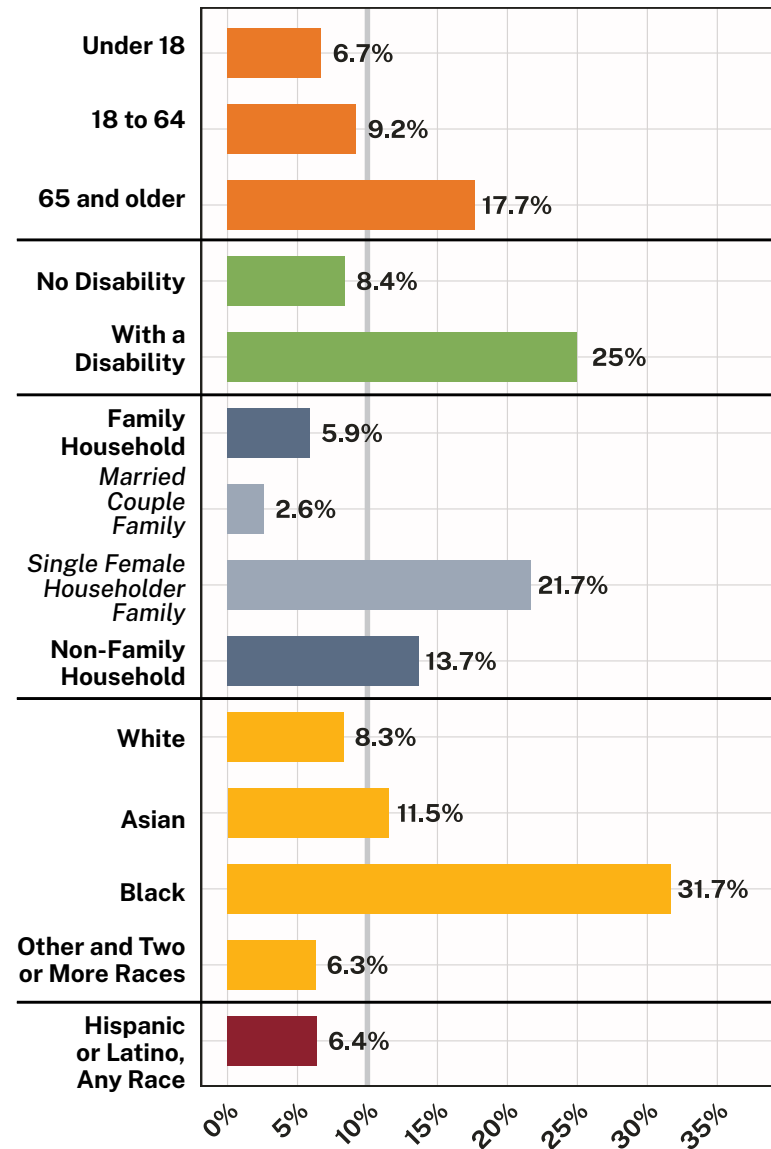
Somerville Context

People with a disability, families with a single female head of household, and Black or African American people are much more likely to be making do with an income at or below the federal poverty threshold, compared with all Somerville residents. While people under 18 have a rate of poverty similar to all residents, the rate for adults 65 and older is higher. Residents identifying as Asian, Hispanic, or Latino and residents living in non-family households (i.e. in roommate arrangements) are slightly more likely to have incomes at or below the federal poverty threshold compared with all residents.

This report focuses on the food access landscape for the city's lowest income residents, recognizing that these residents are more likely to be people who are single caregivers, are older adults, have a disability, and do not identify as "White, non-Hispanic". The report also acknowledges that many more people are affected by the high cost of living and may occasionally or even frequently struggle to get enough food while paying for rent and dependent care.

The figure shows the percentage of people in Somerville at or below the federal poverty line determined for their household size and composition. In this chart, race and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity are measure separately, meaning people who identify as Hispanic/Latino are considered in both this category and in the racial category they choose.

Figure 1.7: Income inequality in Somerville means some groups are much more likely to be food insecure than others.



Note: The income threshold to determine poverty depends on the number of adults and children living together as a household. To determine poverty, the household's income, includes earnings, cash benefits, interest, and rents, among other sources. Poverty status is not determined for people living in institutions, such as a college dorm or a nursing home.⁵ For the data shown in [Table 1.1](#) and [Figure 1.7](#), poverty status is determined for about 97% of the population.

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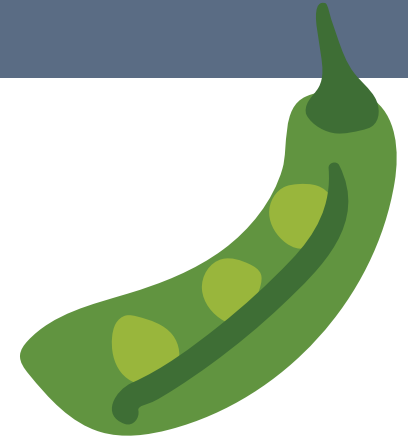
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5 U.S. Census Bureau, "Poverty Measures."

Approach and Methodology



Approach

The Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities (OFAHC) used several approaches to ensure an in-depth and multidimensional understanding of experiences and areas for improvement and growth. Community-based organizations, City of Somerville staff, and community members were key partners, and the City provided financial support for the assessment. The assessment process honored the time, data, conversations, and lessons from the previous assessment to make sure the 2026 assessment yielded outcomes and information that build upon those initial findings.

The assessment used an adapted participatory action research model to identify areas of interest, gather information, and refine findings and recommendations.

For the purposes of this project, participatory action research means the assessment:

- engages stakeholders at each step of the process, including determining questions, carrying out research, and presenting findings;
- is aimed at promoting systemic change by enabling action; and
- has a focus on power dynamics and equity.

The section on Methods below details how OFAHC implemented this approach in each step of the project. [Figure 2.1](#) shows the assessment timeline.

Figure 2.1: Community Food Assessment Timeline





Experts and stakeholders in growing food and addressing excess food joined the CAG to help connect these food system nodes to food access.

Methods

COMMUNITY INPUT ON QUESTIONS AND TOPICS OF INTEREST

In the spring of 2024, OFAHC gathered input on topics and stakeholders from community groups, community leaders, and community members. The participatory action research principles outlined above guided this engagement process.

- OFAHC started the assessment with a list of key stakeholders and general assessment areas. Three community leaders representing the edges of the food system then helped OFAHC to complete the universe of stakeholders and begin to refine topic areas. These individuals included a faith leader, the executive director of a business support organization, and a community leader who also works in housing stability.
- The Somerville Food Coalition and Immigrant Services Coalition both hosted meetings at which people provided input on topics and questions of interest.
- A survey sent to all Food Coalition members and public outreach at the City's Week of the Young Child event gave additional community members an opportunity to share their thoughts.

These steps yielded a list of preliminary topics and questions to be explored in the assessment. Among the most popular topics areas were:

- where people get food in Somerville,
- how people access and why they value growing spaces,
- how healthcare institutions connect to food access,
- what policies affect food access,
- and how housing stability intersects with food access.

Through later engagement with the Community Advisory Group and regular consultation with the Somerville Food Coalition, OFAHC refined these questions to the content in this report and action plan.

COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP

To gather substantive input from a variety of perspectives, OFAHC convened a Community Advisory Group (CAG) to review draft findings and discuss challenges and ideas. CAG members were invited to participate based on their connections with priority populations, direct connections with clients or neighbors facing food hardship, and as leaders using an equity centered approach to care. Those who were not City of Somerville employees received a stipend for their time and knowledge. The group met monthly in a hybrid model with in-person attendees hosted at the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA) conference room in East Somerville. A paid intern for OFAHC helped to coordinate these meetings and capture meeting minutes for review by the group and later use in the assessment. The culmination of these meet-

ings was a public open house to present findings, share draft ideas, and collect people's reactions to those ideas along with additional recommendations for addressing highlighted challenges or gaps. The Action Planning Meeting section below describes this meeting in more detail.

CAG members represented partners in social and school services, emergency food and non-profit sectors, and aligned City offices, as well as residents who are known as connectors. Members included representatives from:

- Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS)
- Shepherd's Kitchen Food Pantry, Mission Church
- Family Liaison Team, Somerville Family Learning Collaborative, Somerville Public Schools
- Racial and Social Justice Department, City of Somerville
- Community Health Worker Division, Health and Human Services, City of Somerville
- Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs, City of Somerville
- The Somerville community: residents who are connectors of food networks and neighbors

The monthly meeting topics were:

1. Introduction: what we know, what we hope to learn, and how we can guide with our values
2. Review of Somerville food resources
3. Sharing data on where people buy food
4. Bringing data to life

5. Formal and informal networks of food support
6. Growing food and surplus food
7. The value and limitations of food benefits
8. Pulling it all together

CAG members also played a key role in connecting OFAHC to people for interviews and, in some cases, acted as interpreters for them.



Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities staff gather community feedback at the Week of the Young Child event

Photo credit: Alex Gladwell, Food For Free

PROGRAM DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH

The mayor's allocation of some of the City's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for food security programs enabled temporary expansion of key food system programs from 2022-2024. OFAHC and many other food programs received funding and were required to report on program impact. The data collected from these programs are represented throughout this report to round out our knowledge of the community food system. Many additional non-profit partners who had no reporting requirements generously shared program data to inform the report. This report also draws extensively on publicly accessible data, reports, journalism, and academic research. The OFAHC team led research and data work with significant support for data exploration and visualization provided by the City's SomerStat Division.

PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

Community Interviews

OFAHC conducted 23 interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, with technical support from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC). The interviews were done in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Cantonese, and Haitian Creole. The goals were to learn about community members' current experiences navigating the food system in Somerville and identify ways to improve access. The participants had a diverse set of lived experiences, as shown in [Table 2.1](#). People living with these identities may experience more challenges accessing healthy and culturally affirming food due to systemic barriers within and outside of the food system.

Table 2.1: Experiences of Interview Participants (23 total participants)

Number of Interviewees	
Caregiving roles	
Is a single caregiver	8
Is a caregiver for someone with disability/elderly	4
Age	
Is an older adult on a fixed budget	5
Is a High School student	1
Benefits	
Uses nutrition benefits	16
Is just over income for SNAP	2
Ethnicity/National Origin	
Is of Spanish-speaking Latin American descent	4
Is of Brazilian descent	3
Is of Haitian descent	2
Is of Chinese or Taiwanese descent	1
Housing	
Lives at North St or Mystic	5
Struggles with housing stability	5
Was temporarily relocated from North St to Mystic	1
Lives in senior/disabled housing	2
Additional Identities	
Is an expert at stretching food budget	17
Is a first-generation immigrant to the US	12
Does the shopping/food prep and has children	10
Wants to garden but face barriers	7
Follows a special diet	7
Experienced transportation as a barrier to getting food	6
Lives with a disability	4
Uses the community fridges	1

MAPC analyzed and summarized the interview information into themes using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Some examples of themes include “experience using a food pantry,” “growing your own food,” and “barriers to food access.” MAPC matched themes to interview participant characteristics to identify themes common to certain experiences. This analysis allowed MAPC to categorize and interpret the data, identifying common themes across the data and participants’ backgrounds.

Supplemental surveys

Every program or outreach event provides an opportunity to collect data. Throughout the timeline of this assessment, the OFAHC team intentionally developed brief surveys or questions to use at community outreach events to inform this report. In addition, the report incorporates data from OFAHC-led program evaluations.

Surveys distributed specifically for the community food assessment include:

1. **Gardening in Somerville questions at community events:** The OFAHC team asked the same question in six languages at three well-attended community events in the spring of 2025: “Do you garden in Somerville? If not, why not?”. Results are in [Chapter 3: The Urban Agriculture Landscape](#).
2. **Stretching your food budget:** OFAHC developed an English and Spanish online survey asking about respondents’ behaviors and choices around getting and preparing food to summarize and share helpful crowdsourced ideas. OFAHC promoted the survey through email lists, partner organizations, newsletters,

and other online channels. Thirty-one responses were received from people of multiple ages, with most respondents in the 25-44 age range. Results are in [Chapter 7: Food Budgets and Benefits](#).

3. **High School student survey:** OFAHC created an online survey asking where students get food when school is not in session. Results are in [Chapter 8: Getting Food at Different Life Stages](#).

Surveys used for program evaluation with data and quotes included in this report:

4. **Taxi to Health End-of-Program Survey:** The survey included 10 questions asking about the value of the program and evaluating how it supported health, financial well-being, and food security. 130 people responded. Results are provided in full in [Appendix 1](#), the Taxi to Health program summary report.
5. **End of Season Intercept Survey for the 2024 Somerville Mobile Farmers Market:** Shoppers were asked four questions about why they shopped at the market, what they liked about the market, and what they would improve about the market. Questions were asked in person, in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole. The survey questions can be found in [Appendix 2](#).
6. **Tap Water Information & Promotion Campaign Key Informant Interviews:** In the spring of 2024, OFAHC worked with a Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy course to better understand tap water use in Somerville. Students conducted hour-long interviews with a community leader and an early childhood service provider.

TUFTS ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH PROJECT ON URBAN GARDENING

Professor Cathy Stanton and her fall 2024 undergraduate Anthropology Fieldwork Lab dedicated their semester of ethnographic research to exploring how people think about cultivating food in Somerville. The class of 10 students developed semi-structured interview questions to ask stakeholders how they conceptualize their growing activities, what they hope to see in the future, and the possible roles for city government in supporting food growing. They were able to speak with representatives from the following organizations or community groups:

- City of Somerville Community Gardens: 6 interviewees
- Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville: 6 Interviewees
- Somerville Community Growing Center: 4+ Interviewees
- Mystic Housing Community Garden: 2 Interviewees
- Van Hardy Community Garden: 1 interviewee
- Groundwork Somerville: Past affiliates and knowledgeable community members.

To complement their interviews, the students visited sites as participant-observers, took field notes and photos, and conducted a literature review of more than 100 relevant resources. Their presentation can be found in [Appendix 3](#).



Professor Stanton's Class presents findings on urban growing at City Hall.

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT ADVISEMENT AND REVIEW

Many sections of the report drew on the expertise of community-based organization (CBO) partners and City of Somerville staff. In some cases, OFAHC staff interviewed key partners and summarized information in relevant chapters of the report. In other cases, OFAHC created material for partners to review and augment. Throughout the report, connections are made to partners' work that relates to food access and provides a more detailed look at issues such as housing, older adult needs, youth needs, and public space planning. The many partners that contributed their expertise are listed in the acknowledgements section.

As part of the subject matter expert review process, OFAHC held an Urban Agriculture Stakeholder Meeting and conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities,

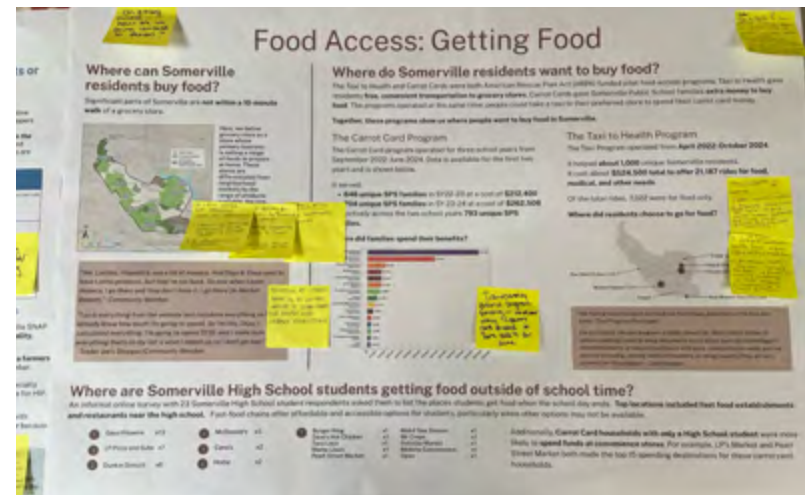
and Challenges) analysis. This approach stemmed from a current lack of coordination in the urban growing space, in part due to its fragmentation during the COVID-19 pandemic. To begin reconnecting this network, OFAHC convened a meeting of stakeholders to share information and discuss ways to support one another with existing resources. The attendees included people from 11 different organizations and community groups, most of which organize urban gardening programming or hands-on growing opportunities. During the meeting, these stakeholders completed the SWOT analysis together.

ACTION PLANNING MEETING

An initial set of recommendations was developed based on the findings from the CAG discussions, interviews, and other information gathered and summarized through May 2025. In June 2025, OFAHC staff and CAG members hosted an open-house workshop in East Somerville in coordination with members of the Somerville Food Coalition and the public to distill and refine recommendations. Findings were shared using category-specific posters with recommendations listed alongside. These posters can be found in [Appendix 4](#).

Thirty attendees, representing a wide range of organizations and backgrounds, used green, yellow, and red dot stickers to share their opinions about the proposed ideas with sticky notes available for further comments to expand on their ideas. Their feedback is captured throughout the report, and OFAHC developed the final report recommendations following this meeting. See [Chapter 12: Food Action Plan](#) for a full list of recommendations.

Future meetings will occur after the launch of this report to ensure continuous community input and evaluation of the goals and actions outlined in the plan.



June 2025 Action Planning Meeting and example poster.



The Urban Agriculture Landscape

Urban agriculture uses diverse methods, such as community gardens, backyard gardening, rooftop farming, aquaponics, and hydroponics, to grow plants within a city. It is often mentioned in social narratives as a tool for improving food access and nutrition security, but this is not its sole purpose.

In Somerville, the most prevalent forms of urban agriculture are **community gardens, raised beds in outdoor spaces, yards, and container gardens**. Somerville prides itself on



A MAMAS Gardening Collective garden near Union Square. Many MAMAS gardens are open for anyone to harvest food and/or help as they can. *Photo credit: MAMAS Gardening Collective*

its early work and investments in urban agriculture and empowering residents to grow their own food. Among the achievements that demonstrate this commitment was Somerville's 2014 Urban Agriculture Ordinance, which was the first such ordinance in the state and still serves as a guide for other municipalities. Other examples of Somerville's leadership in urban agriculture include **building or expanding school gardens, the South Street Farm, and the addition of community garden plots**.

As the densest city in New England, Somerville faces unique challenges in growing food to meaningfully address food access:

- **Land Use Competition:** The critical need for more housing directly competes with urban agriculture for use of available land. High real estate values exacerbate this competition.
- **Dense Housing:** Many residents live in apartments that have no or limited access to open space.
- **Seasonal Limitations:** A shorter growing season coupled with limited space for greenhouses means urban agriculture in Somerville is unable to serve as a consistent, year-round source of food.





Groundwork Somerville's South Street Farm. Groundwork collaborates with Somerville's Office of Immigrant Affairs to provide community garden beds to residents who don't have garden access at home.

These realities limit the ability of urban agriculture to reduce food insecurity in Somerville. At the same time, urban growing stakeholders recognize that urban growing is important for many reasons beyond food access, **shifting priorities** for this work. The emergency food system has grown since the pandemic and, along with social safety net benefits, provides a comparatively more efficient way to support basic food access. Organizations focused on growing, by contrast, highlight physical and mental health, community connections, food literacy, connections to culture-specific foods, and food sovereignty in their approaches to urban gardening.

Today, the urban gardening network in Somerville relies on a diverse coalition of community organizations, Somerville Public Schools staff, and various City departments. Somerville's largest land area for gardening, the community gardens, are governed by the Conservation Commission, while the City provides crucial support such as turning on water and delivering mulch. Non-profits like the Somerville Community Growing Center and Groundwork Somerville manage shared spaces, and Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville (MAMAS), the Somerville Public Libraries, and others provide additional growing opportunities. [Table 3.1](#) summarizes what currently exists as a collective "Urban Growing program". The table and this chapter consider all types of urban growing, whether it is for food or not. Food and non-food growing are often combined and this assessment demonstrates that growing can support individual health and healthy community food systems in many ways beyond accessing enough food.

Clarifying Somerville's priorities is key to improving the efficacy and reach of the urban growing network given the diversity of urban growing models and the expansion of roles for urban growing as a tool for well-being.

PARTNER REPORT CALL-OUT

2025 OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

In 2025, the City's Office of Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF) published an updated Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP).¹ The Plan asked OFAHC to **"clearly define urban agriculture program goals and identify discrepancies between goals and today's garden program," with the objective to "develop strategies to address those gaps."** This chapter advances that goal by summarizing community experiences and ideas to inform priorities and goals.

The OSRP also points to avenues of improvement for urban growing:

- According to the report, at the end of 2024, there were 650 people on the waiting list for a community garden plot. An OSRP survey found that more community gardens were a priority for respondents, especially for lower income and non-White respondents.
- The report notes community interest in mutual aid gardens which, although not equivalent to a community garden plot and requiring additional administration, "could meet other food access goals".

¹ City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF), "City of Somerville Open Space & Recreation Plan," April 12, 2025, https://voice.somervillema.gov/open-space-and-recreation-plan-update?tool=survey_tool.

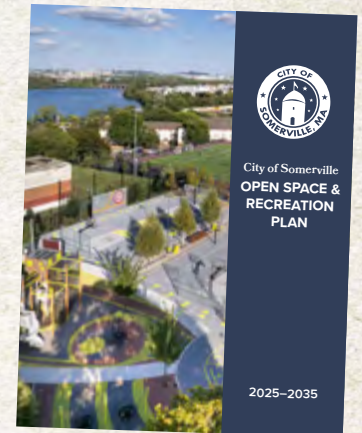


Table 3.1 Snapshot: Current urban growing spaces, organizations, and activities in Somerville

Program or Activity	Lead	Partners	Outcomes and Notes
School Gardens	Garden Champions at each school	Unclear at this time	District Wellness Coordinator position who oversaw this program was eliminated at SPS; the future of school gardens is unclear.
High School Garden & Curriculum	High School Career and Technical Education (CTE) Culinary Program and Green City Growers	OFAHC supports with City Urban Ag Ambassador funding	15 weekly 1-hour sessions for High School CTE Culinary students; began in 2023, led by staff at Green City Growers in partnership with Chef-Instructor David Ginivisian. Programming includes indoor hydroponic gardening.
Community Gardens (11 sites, 256 total plots)	Conservation Commission and Garden Coordinator	Office of Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF), Department of Public Works (DPW)	Garden Coordinator is a part-time role supported by a stipend. The Conservation Commission is coordinated by PSUF.
South Street Farm (1/4 acre farm on City land) includes a multicultural community garden space	Groundwork Somerville	PSUF, OFAHC, Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs, Somerville Redevelopment Authority	Main site for Green Team youth; food grown at the farm is distributed through the Mobile Farmers Market and Community Fridges.
Mystic Community Garden (8 garden plots on site at Mystic Housing for residential use)	Somerville Housing Authority (SHA)	Residents, Mystic Learning Center, Groundwork Somerville	Gardens are under construction with the goal to relocate some beds for Spring 2026.
North Street Community Garden	Residents at North Street Housing (Clarendon Hill Apartments)	SHA, Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH)	One large in-ground plot.
Workshops/Education on urban gardening	Somerville Public Libraries and Green City Growers		Monthly gardening workshops April through October, for a total of 16 workshops; also hosting seed libraries at all 3 branches.
Demonstration Gardens/Community gatherings/Workshops	Somerville Community Growing Center	Somerville Public Schools, including Somerville Public Schools' Somerville Family Learning Collaborative (SFLC); local non-profits, and community groups	Programming includes seed/plant swaps, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) pick-up site, and community conversations and lessons on gardening, urban pollinators, food, or related topics. They also host the space for partner organizations to use for playgroups.
Decentralized shared gardening	MAMAS Gardening Collective	Resident volunteers	Seasonal programming typically includes a seed swap, seedling swap, and community work days. Containers and spaces at host organizations and homes; anyone is welcome to garden and/or harvest items.
Van Hardy Community Garden on Concord Avenue	Community members/neighbors		A privately run open space in Union square with some raised beds.
ArtFarm	PSUF	Engineering, Arts Council, OFAHC	Future public green space with opportunity for community gardens.
Urban Agriculture Ordinance	Somerville Health and Human Services (HHS)	PSUF	Passed in 2014; allows selling of home-grown food, raising of bees and chickens; not many licenses issued to date.



CALL-OUT

GROWING JILÓ IN SOMERVILLE

One interviewee was an older resident on a fixed income, who had immigrated from Brazil. He grew jiló in his bedroom in Somerville, but a while back he met someone at Groundwork Somerville who offered him gardening space at the South Street Farm. The jiló thrived at the farm, and there was a lot of demand for it from the Brazilian community. Multiple TV channels ran stories about him growing jiló at Groundwork Somerville!

While South Street Farm still grows jiló, the interviewee revealed that he had lost contact with the farm due to staff turnover and was only growing jiló on the roof of his building. He buys jiló seeds from someone in Somerville who brought them back from Brazil, sells cuttings of the plant for others to grow, and shares the produce with his friends. He currently has three or four jiló plants but said “If I had space to grow, I would plant a thousand plants.”

Due to this discovery and connections made during a Community Advisory Group meeting, the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs teamed up with Groundwork Somerville to offer 15 community garden plots as a multicultural, multigenerational growing space. The 2025 growing season was the first year of this partnership and has opened up gardening opportunities to residents in the Brazilian and Latino community, including this interviewee.

This assessment aims to **establish a basis for updating priorities** by considering:

1. What are residents’ motivations for growing?
2. What barriers do people face to growing in Somerville?
3. How could Somerville improve growing opportunities?

Given diversity of stakeholders and challenges in the Somerville urban growing landscape, OFAHC employed additional information gathering approaches to consider these questions. This chapter draws on community interviews, a community event survey, an ethnographic research project undertaken by the Tufts class, and an urban gardening stakeholder meeting held to inform the assessment. Methods are further described in [Chapter 2: Approach and Methods](#). Taken together, these activities reached a diverse group of people with a range of interests related to growing in Somerville.

What are people’s motivations for growing?

Gardening appeals to people for a variety of reasons, including as a leisure activity, a way to make connections, a mental and physical health support, and a supplement to their food sources.

As the ethnographic study found: “There is no one-size-fits-all model for community gardening and urban agriculture; urban growing is inherently context- and commu-

nity-specific as well as continually in flux and shaped by multiple kinds of agency (including that of non-humans)."

For many, gardening is closely tied with **health and well-being**.

"From gardening, I gain--how can I say?--stability. And then, reduce my health (problems). I had high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and it's all reduced by growing food, and eating my own food, and fruits, and vegetables from my garden."

Of the community interviewees who gardened, many discussed enjoying it because of the mental health benefits. As one individual living with a disability said, *"I find it relaxing. I know it's not being in the forest, but it is some green space type, not astro-turf. So I love that."*

An individual who was a first-generation immigrant said: *"There are times when I feel stressed or overwhelmed by so many problems, because as immigrants we have two burdens: supporting our family here and our family back home. So, all of that can cause a lot of frustration in our minds... And the garden, I come to the garden, and I forget everything, I start cleaning, I start arranging the plants and it all goes away."* [translated from Spanish]

For immigrant interviewees, the ability to grow food from their home country and use it in recipes from that country was an important motivation. Interviewees grew tomatillos to make dishes from El Salvador, jiló for recipes from Brazil, and epazote for dishes from Guatemala.

CALL-OUT

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO URBAN GARDENING

Several interviewees mentioned innovative adaptations for gardening in small spaces.

The kitchen sink method: "I repurposed a big deep kitchen sink that got damaged. And my husband built a wonky-looking ugly base for it, but it sits up high, and it has all the different types of lettuces."

On the roof: "[I grow] on top of the roof... [I] tie everything together so that the wind doesn't blow it away."

Hydroponics: "I bought two packs of organic herb seeds to run my AeroGarden hydroponic up on the shelf...We have a couple of rotating recipes that need herbs that are expensive."



Access to culture-specific food through growing demonstrates the importance of food agency as another motivation. Intercept survey respondents who gardened stated they did so in their backyards and listed cucumbers, tomatoes, herbs, potatoes, beets, peppers, apples, cilantro and culantro among the types of produce they grew, underscoring that when one has access to land, water, time, and knowledge, gardening can provide a greater variety of food choices and an increased sense of agency in what one eats.

The ethnographic study emphasized and expanded upon this point: “Urban ag/gardening activities are often framed as

an alternative or resistant to the mainstream industrial food system, but it may be more useful to think about them as complementary starting points for increasing participation in civic discussions about food. Urban gardening will not completely replace reliance on grocery stores or retail food establishments, but it does serve as a useful starting point to explore how we might be able to change a system that is not feeding people adequately.”

Some interviewees and survey respondents were not interested in using their time and resources to garden. One interviewee who grew up in an agricultural community noted she



Left: High School students in the Culinary CTE program harvest basil grown using the hydroponic growing system.

Right: Basil after it has been harvested from the hydroponic growing system. *Photos credit: Green City Growers*

did not garden because: *“I’m a very busy mom... I know about farming, and I know that farming needs a little space and time”*. [translated from Spanish]

This and similar responses confirmed community research findings that urban gardening’s role is much more than food security. MAMAS has a unique perspective on this because the mutual aid group has both a gardening and a grocery support arm.

“People certainly get more food from the groceries team than they do from the gardening team. But the gardening group, I think, is a combination of food and social things. For me, I’m very into the idea that our goal is to actually produce food and make something tangible. But, in terms of practicality, you’re not going to grow that much food in a small box in your yard. So, I have to always remind myself that the goal is about community building as well as food.”

What barriers do people face to gardening in Somerville?

Themes that arose among people who wanted to garden but did not were: 1) limited space, time, or money; 2) limited knowledge; or 3) rats as a concern or reason they stopped gardening.

Intercept survey respondents who said they do not garden in Somerville noted the **lack of space** as a top reason. An interview participant echoed this when asked if they garden:



Earth day workshop at the Growing Center.

Photo credit: Somerville Community Growing Center

“No, I would like to, but since it’s not our house, we rent, we don’t have a place to do it. But if I had a place to do it, I would because we used to do it back home.”

Another interviewee who lost their home and is now living in shelter said:

“You should have seen my garden... Oh, it always had flowers. I had vegetables growing. Yeah, I miss that so much..... Like the community garden stuff. I should get involved in that... I would love to do that.”

The challenge of limited private growing spaces in Somerville’s dense urban landscape is compounded by an insufficient number of community garden plots to meet everyone’s needs. At least one interview participant mentioned their long-term wait for a community garden: *“I also was on a wait-list forever. I finally got a community garden plot.”* Some people who cited lack of space did say they used planters to grow



Glen Park community garden plots in early spring.

herbs or small amounts of produce, such as cherry tomatoes or lettuce, pointing to the importance of resources that teach container growing.

Time was also a commonly cited barrier, even for those who already garden. One interviewee suggested more shared gardening opportunities to address time constraints: *“That would be something that I would love to see with the community gardens is, you know, people struggle to maintain their plot by themselves. So just having a mechanism where the plot is communal in addition to the garden.”*

The prevalence of rats was cited numerous times as a barrier to gardening or a reason that people have stopped gardening. The issue came up most often at the Mystic Community garden but was pervasive throughout community and home gardens. One interview participant used to garden at home but stopped because of the presence of rats: *“We grew our own until the pandemic and the rats found that they decided to come for everything we grew.”*

The ethnographic study noted, however, that this common barrier helped people find community: *“Uniquely urban challenges, like Somerville’s rat population, both make gardening more difficult in the city and allow for new and creative approaches to growing food, often forcing growers to rely on each other for support and thus build community ties.”*

Lack of knowledge was another theme, including **not knowing how to garden and manage rats**. People who said they did not know how to garden were often not aware of the public libraries’ gardening education workshops and were happy to learn about them. The ethnographic study pointed

to the importance of “anchors”, long-time gardeners who can support newcomers, particularly in community garden space. *“Supporting anchors more may allow the gardens to flourish”*, and a good balance of newcomers and people who have been using a plot for a long time is important for a dynamic growing community. Anchor people are in many cases older adults making gardens good spaces for intergenerational connections.

How could Somerville improve gardening opportunities?

Since the pandemic, some urban growing programs and spaces have flourished while others are fallow. There remain many diverse actors in the urban growing network who operate with little coordination. An Urban Agriculture Stakeholders Meeting in 2025 brought these actors together and provided insight into opportunities to improve access for residents.

Some key themes from the meeting were:

- the need for better communication and coordination among stakeholders,
- confusion about the procedures for initiating water service, which impacts the ability to get water to school gardens, community gardens, and other community growing spaces, and
- the current state of [under-supported] school gardens.

[Table 3.2](#) summarizes the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis from stakeholder



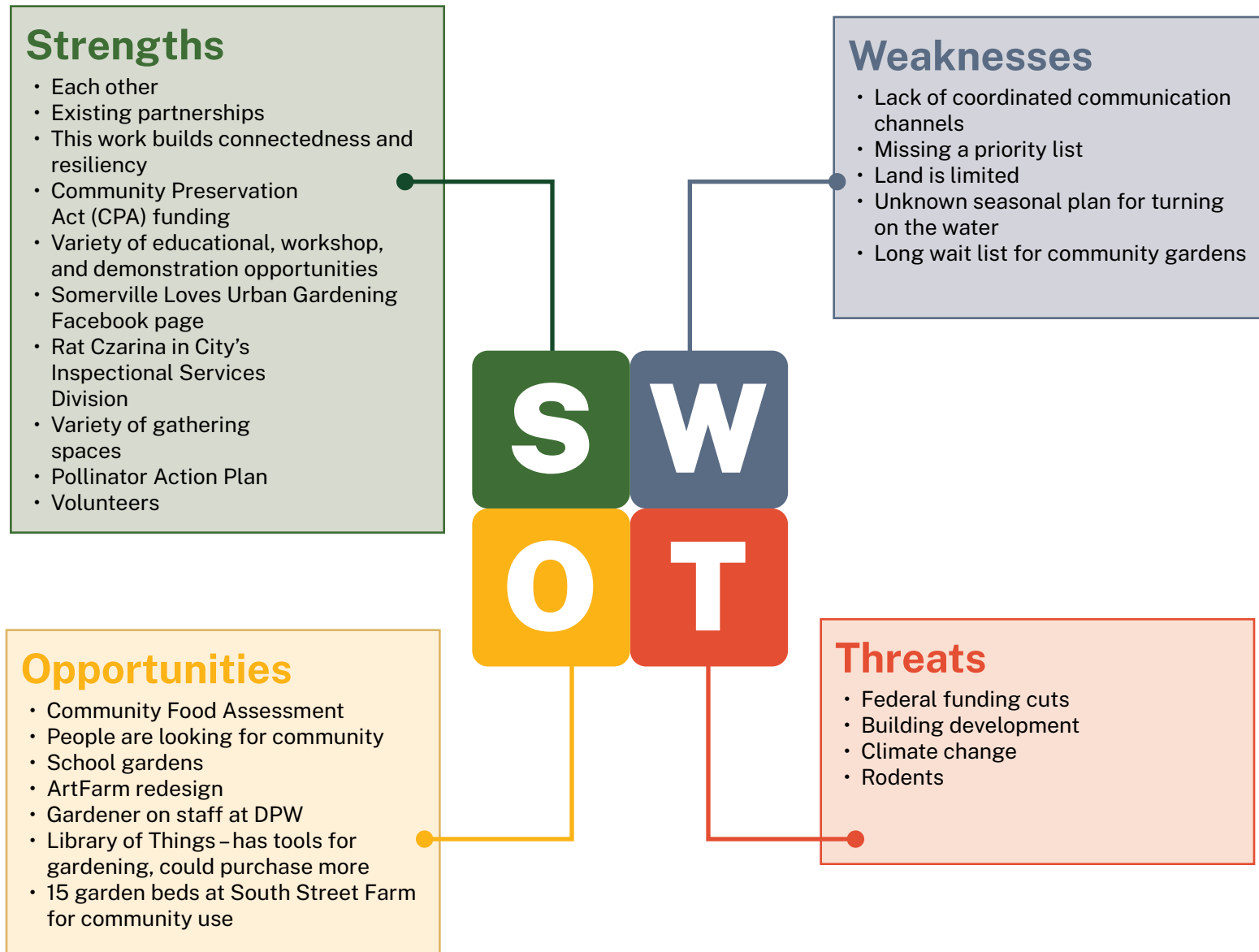
The second meeting of the Urban Agriculture Stakeholders group, hosted at Green City Growers in May 2026.

Photo credit: Alyjah Colon for Somerville Public Space and Urban Forestry

meeting, which echoes many of the gardening motivations and barriers discussed above.

A key question for the stakeholder group was how the City could and should support growing opportunities. The ethnographic study found that **City involvement is important but in a supporting role rather than a top-down management role**: “The City’s most useful role may be as a convenor and conduit for practical resources.” This was echoed in the stakeholder meeting, which highlighted confusion around procedures for seasonally turning on City water sources and need for technical support and materials to improve growing.

Table 3.2: SWOT Analysis of the Urban Gardening network



Takeaways & Recommendations

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- People who garden in Somerville have **access to space**; via community gardens or their backyards and/or have the knowledge and resources to garden using containers.
- **Urban growing can play an important role in:**
 - » Connecting neighbors and building social capital
 - » Supporting mental, spiritual, and environmental health
 - » Supplementing food sources (as opposed to replacing them)
- Although not everyone living in Somerville wants to garden or garden on a large scale, the waitlists for community gardens, attendance at library workshops, and the positive reception of the seed library indicate that **urban growing is still popular**.
- Existing infrastructure and resources are insufficient to meaningfully expand urban agriculture in Somerville.
- There is interest in more shared garden spaces, but also an acknowledgement that **communal garden spaces need active maintenance and oversight**.
- Successful gardening initiatives integrate thoughtful **land stewardship, cultural growing practices, and multi-generational opportunities** to share knowledge and strengthen community bonds.
- Some residents are aware of the existing organizations and programs to enrich their gardening experience, but many others are not. **This gap in awareness** is largely due to **fragmented messaging and programming** across the city.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE GROWING OPPORTUNITIES

- Use this assessment as a **foundation to engage partners in establishing urban growing priorities** that meet community needs while ensuring City involvement is balanced and community-based partners can sustain any expansion.
- Use **community priorities as a roadmap for an updated urban** agriculture vision and a discussion of **financial investment** in staff or direct programmatic funding.
- Publicly share City priorities and **engage community-based partners** in refining them to ensure City involvement is balanced and partners can sustain any expansion.
- Hire or designate a coordinator to **centralize efforts and build a cohesive network across gardens, schools, and community organizations**.
- Increase **public awareness of the urban agriculture network and learning opportunities** starting with streamlining and improving City webpages and community outreach materials.
- To address space constraints, pilot a **community garden plot using a shared space model** to allow access for more people. The City should work with a **non-profit or volunteer group** to ensure the project meets community needs and has investment from the community.

CITATIONS:

City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF). "City of Somerville Open Space & Recreation Plan." April 12, 2025. https://voice.somervillema.gov/open-space-and-recreation-plan-update?tool=survey_tool.



Free and Low-Cost Prepared Meals

Access to nourishing, affordable food includes the availability of balanced prepared meals. Affordable prepared meals or ready-made meals are helpful when people cannot prepare their own food, often due to limited physical ability or a lack of access to a kitchen. The Somerville community offers one to two free community meals per week (listed below). However, since many people eat 21 meals in a week, this resource currently covers less than 10% of a person's weekly need for food.

How do free and low-cost prepared meals help food insecure residents?

Many people do not have regular access to a kitchen or the time needed to cook. As one pantry program manager noted: *"So many people don't have kitchens and can't cook. We might have people who come home from work at 4pm and need to pick up food, then go back to work at 9pm. We have a lot of people who are doubled up – multiple families in one apartment, with only one kitchen."* – **Representative of Food4All Pantry**

Another pantry that delivers regularly to the YMCA notes: *"We have a small population of folks that [receive delivered*

bags] at the YMCA. These folks live in a more dorm lifestyle. So, they do not have the ability to cook large meals. They do not have full size refrigerators. Because of this we give them canned goods, [including soups, tuna, chicken, chili, or protein shakes]. We also give them produce that does not need refrigeration [and that can be cooked in a microwave if needed, like bananas or potatoes]." – **Manager of Elizabeth Peabody House Pantry**

An interviewee living at a shelter noted that residents had no access to a kitchen, or even a refrigerator or microwave. They also cannot have food in their rooms, making it impossible to prepare anything. Prepared meals, whether grab-and-go or in a community setting, are an important support for these residents.

While SNAP benefits do include frozen or cold meals that can be heated at home, they do not allow the recipient to purchase hot foods that can be consumed at the point of sale, except for specific populations at a few Restaurant Meals Program sites that are outside of Somerville. See [Chapter 7: Food Budgets and Benefits](#) for more details on this program.

Youth panels regularly mention that older, more independent students would benefit from more healthful and affordable prepared meals after school on their way to sports, work or programming or on the weekends. Carrot Card program data suggest that high school students sometimes use the



Above: Somerville High School students and paraprofessional instructor Joy show off their program's prepared meals. Right: Culinary program meals stock the Winter Hill community fridge.



program's prepaid debit cards for convenience foods to fill this gap (see [Chapter 8: Getting Food at Different Life Stages](#), for more details). Taken together, **these findings point to a shortage of affordable or free ready-made meals** to support a variety of needs.

What exists now for free or low-cost prepared meals?

Over the past few years OFAHC staff and community partners have been working to develop a nutrition security network of prepared meals, aggregating small sources to create a more significant supply.

Prepared meals or ready-made meals may include **congregate meals that are served on site** or **pre-packaged meals that can be taken home** and consumed.

Community partners have worked hard to build out the schedule of hot, congregate meals in Somerville, which consists of four meal offerings over the course of the month. The frequency varies from weekly to monthly, and a different organization operates each meal. All the meals are hosted at churches, with the church or an agency partner coordinating the meal. All are welcome at these meals. Some meals have a "to go" option in addition to a sit-down option.



Monday Night Meal

Frequency: weekly

Location: 31 College Avenue, Community Baptist Church (Davis Square)

Coordinated by: Somerville Homeless Coalition

Average number of people served per meal: 35

Average number of volunteers needed to run the meal: 3



Come to the Table

Frequency: weekly

Location: 149 Broadway, Connexion Church (East Somerville)

Coordinated by: Connexion Church

One meal per month in partnership with Somerville Homeless Coalition

5th Wednesday, when applicable, in partnership with High School CTE Culinary Program

Average number of people served per meal: 45-55

Average number of volunteers needed to run the meal: 5



Dormition Family Table

Frequency: twice per month, first and third Wednesday of each month

Location: 29 Central Street, Dormition of the Virgin Mary Church (Spring Hill)

Coordinated by: Dormition of the Virgin Mary Church

Average number of people served per meal: 20-35

Average number of volunteers needed to run the meal: 5-8



Hearty Meals for All

Frequency: monthly, second Friday of each month

Location: 31 College Avenue, Community Baptist Church (Davis Square)

Coordinated by: Hearty Meals for All

Average number of people served per meal: 50

Average number of volunteers needed to run the meal: 6-8

Somerville has several sources of packaged ready-made meals:

- Participatory Budgeting (PB) funds support a City-School partnership between OFAHC and the High School to produce ready-made meals. Career and Technical Education Culinary Program chef instructors and students prepare meals for freezing as part of their curriculum. PB funds pay for the ingredients and cover the cost of equipment to package the meals. The meals are distributed by OFAHC's Food Access Coordinator to community fridges, HHS case managers' clients, and veterans living at Mass Bay Veterans Center.
- SCES provides Meals on Wheels to older adults, which are meals ready to heat and eat at home. To supplement these meals, they have recently added a five-pack of frozen meals. For more on this program, see [Chapter 8: Getting Food at Different Life Stages](#).
- Food rescue organizations pick up ready-made meals from retailers and distribute them to Somerville pantries, including Elizabeth Peabody House and Somerville Homeless Coalition's Project SOUP.



Above: A Hearty Meals For All board member in the kitchen of Community Baptist Church. **Below:** Staff and volunteers at Connexion Church's Come to the Table meal.

CALL-OUT

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING ROUND 1 SUPPORTS NUTRITION SECURITY

In 2022, Mayor Ballantyne proposed to the City Council the allocation of \$1 million for participatory budgeting (PB)¹. PB gives community members direct influence on projects in Somerville. A volunteer working group reviewed a total of 900 crowd-sourced ideas, narrowing them down to 20 for the PB ballot in spring 2023. Voters aged 12 and older picked their top five. The food security initiative on the ballot, “Support Direct Community Food Access”, was the leader for the entire voting period, winning a total of nearly 19,000 votes.

As a result, \$55,000 has been set aside in a City stabilization account. This funding goes to three partners to strategically increase food access through the community fridges in Somerville. Unlike the annually allocated general fund, stabilization accounts enable programmatic operations across fiscal years.

Boston Area Gleaners: Deliver fresh boxes of produce July through November to keep the community fridges stocked on a weekly basis. The Fall 2025 subscription supports the delivery of 72 cases of produce per week that are then redistributed by volunteers to the community fridges. The total distribution from this source exceeded 55,000 pounds of produce in the 2025 season.

Somerville High School, Career & Technical Education Culinary Program: Chef Instructors David Ginivisian and Paul Piantedosi augment their food inventory using PB funds to purchase proteins and staple items. The

program curriculum includes using the ingredients to prepare ready-to-eat meals that can be delivered to the community fridges. PB funds also paid for equipment and supplies to seal and label the meals for consumer safety. The program produced and distributed 675 meals during the 2024-25 school year (September 2024 to June 2025).

Community Fridges: The Community Fridge shelving infrastructure on Grant Street in East Somerville was rebuilt in the Spring of 2025 with the help of Just-A-Start. Funding from participatory budgeting reimbursed the group for materials.

The second round of Participatory Budgeting launched in September 2024. Food access was again a priority for voters, with “Boosting the Nutrition Security Network in Somerville” winning the second highest number of votes. The goal, envisioned during a Somerville Food Coalition meeting, is to purchase and install a walk-in outdoor cooler and freezer that serves as a centralized hub for fresh and prepared foods. A select group of food providers will be able to use the hub to redistribute food to access points, such as food pantries, community fridges, and churches.



Apples, sweet potatoes, and squash at the new Grant Street Community Fridge shelving.

¹ City of Somerville, “Participatory Budgeting.”

The quantity and sources of ready-made meals are dynamic, and the network has recently experienced setbacks. For nearly three years, Food For Free (FFF) contributed around 100 free, frozen, and prepared meals on a weekly basis to Somerville's ready-made meal network. Unfortunately, facing funding cuts and logistical challenges, FFF made the tough decision to downsize this program, thus limiting this source of prepared meals in Somerville going forward. For more on this program, see [Chapter 10: Rescue, Recycling, and Prevention](#).

The recent appropriation of City of Somerville Community Benefit Funds for food security will allow OFAHC to align with a culinary organization to provide a reliable source of frozen, prepared meals for the community.

Community Benefit Funds are now also supporting the East Somerville Restaurant Meal Voucher Program, operated by East Somerville Main Streets. This program provides \$15 vouchers for a takeout meal at a local restaurant to unhoused people in East Somerville and other residents struggling with consistent access to food. By providing a restaurant voucher, it also supports small immigrant-owned restaurants in East, many of whom have recently seen declining revenue. Many of these restaurants were already providing occasional meals to unhoused residents at no cost before the program began. A Tufts Community Grant funded a pilot of this program in 2025, providing 195 meals to East Somerville neighbors. In February 2026 it was relaunched with Community Benefit Funds.



Rei da Picanha on east Broadway is a participant in Community Bites, the East Somerville Restaurant Meal Voucher Program.

Photo credit: Iaritza Menjivar for East Somerville Main Streets



COMMUNITY COOKS

Community Cooks is a Somerville-based non-profit that has mobilized neighbors to cook for neighbors across Greater Boston for more than three decades.

Founded in 1990, Community Cooks operates a simple, durable model: volunteers prepare home-cooked meals in their own kitchens and deliver them to local partner organizations serving people experiencing food insecurity. Today, Community Cooks coordinates 900+ volunteers who prepare meals that feed more than 2,300 neighbors each month through 36 partner organizations across Greater Boston, including 12 in Somerville. Community Cooks' work is rooted in consistency, long-term relationships, and community care. Volunteers include people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, many of whom have been cooking monthly meals for years – some for decades.

Community Cooks provides volunteers with a comprehensive and readable volunteer welcome packet that includes clear food safety guidelines¹. However, because the organization coordinates volunteers to cook at home and donate, volunteers do not need any special license or certification. They are protected from liability in state law and through the federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act.

¹ Community Cooks, "Welcome New Cooks!"

Where are opportunities to expand production of free and low-cost meals?

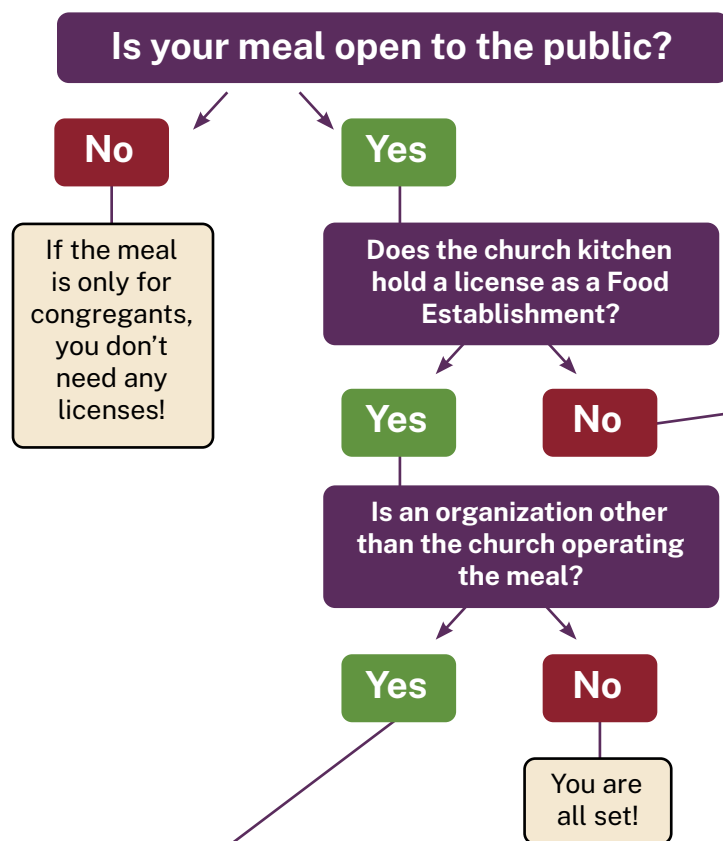
The current prepared meals network relies heavily on external funding for its survival. To create a more sustainable model for both producers and consumers, Somerville food access advocates have long championed the use of underutilized, commercially permittable kitchen spaces—particularly those within churches. This assessment revisits the feasibility of transforming these kitchens into robust community food hubs. It also considers the potential to incorporate ready-made meal needs into development opportunities.

ACTIVATING UNDERUSED KITCHEN SPACES AT PLACES OF WORSHIP

While some churches already host community meals, there is significant potential to expand these partnerships. Kitchens with existing health licenses could be activated for cooking classes or community gatherings. These spaces could also be used to reduce barriers for mission-driven food entrepreneurs. By converting church kitchens into commissary spaces, local food startups can be matched with affordable facilities. This synergy could help defray operating costs, ultimately lowering the price points of prepared foods for the community.

However, discussions with church leadership revealed two primary hurdles to expanding kitchen use: 1) navigating

Figure 4.1: The Licensing and Permitting Process for Community Meals at Church Kitchens



Apply for a food establishment license on the [Citizen Serve](https://www.citizenserve.com/Portal/PortalController?Action=-showSubmittalPage&type=License&original_iid=0&original_contactID=0) portal. This application includes¹:

- Documentation that at least one on-site staff member has the required certifications, including:
 - Food Protection Manager
 - Food Allergen Awareness Training, and
 - Choke Safe Certification (if 25+ seats).
- Workers compensation policy and affidavit.
- A completed plan review application.
- A pre-operational inspection to ensure compliance prior to issuing the license and follow-up routine inspections.

¹ https://www.citizenserve.com/Portal/PortalController?Action=-showSubmittalPage&type=License&original_iid=0&original_contactID=0

Permits and licenses are required to ensure a business is in compliance with safety and health standards. Food activities typically require licenses, for example a temporary food license for one-time events, a farmers market license to sell certain prepared foods at farmers markets, or a caterers license to operate a catering business. Separate from food activities, buildings and operating spaces generally require some kind of inspectional approval (for example fire and occupancy permits). These should be confirmed before operating and acquired if needed. All licenses and permits can be acquired through Somerville's online platform Citizen Serve or by contacting the Inspectional Services Department Health Division (ISD-Health) at Health_webcontact@somervillema.gov. Because of the complexities of this process, the City now has a small business permitting liaison in the Economic Development Division.

- If the church is taking responsibility for the outside operator(s) under their licensing, nothing else is required.
- If the outside operator will be assuming responsibility for safety and compliance, the operator needs their own Food Establishment License. Not sure what license you need? Find a full list on CitizenServe and contact ISD-Health if guidance is needed.

the City's multi-step permitting process and 2) securing the capital for necessary code upgrades.

In both cases, understanding the licensing and permitting process is key. Church kitchens do not need any special license or permit to host food-related events for church members, such as private potlucks or cooking classes for congregants. They do, however, need to be licensed by the City's Inspectional Services Division and obtain a temporary food permit to operate events open to the public, as described in [Figure 4.1](#).



The kitchen and space at Community Baptist Church near Davis Square host two community meals operated by different programs.

Licensing and permitting for commissary kitchens is more complex, due to the separate permitting and licensing requirements for both the kitchen, and each of its potential users. According to Somerville's permitting liaison, there is no successful example yet of using a church kitchen as a commissary space. Streamlining the permitting process generated significant attention during the 2025 mayoral debates. If food access is to remain a priority area of focus moving forward, identifying ways to more effectively facilitate a path towards easier and more accessible production kitchen use is extremely important.

POTENTIAL FOR KITCHEN SPACE IN NEW DEVELOPMENT

The development process provides another avenue to identify and maximize opportunities for shared kitchen space. Future developments or building renovations – for example the YMCA's redevelopment and Somernova's expansion – could imagine and incorporate dedicated community kitchen spaces. Somerville has been able to successfully leverage its zoning and development processes to get community benefits from large developments, including funds, jobs, and spaces. Kitchen space and other food access priorities, however, are not yet part of these conversations. Strategically integrating these goals into development projects would enhance access to food and community.

Takeaways & Recommendations

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- **Ready-made meals are helpful** in supporting low-income residents with limited ability to cook.
- There are **existing underused kitchens**, largely in places of worship, that could be optimized for versatile use, such as educational workshops and social events.
 - » This would provide an additional benefit in creating **incubator space** for mission-driven prepared food entrepreneurs.
- City officials and stakeholders can influence **development processes**, and these processes could provide opportunities for incorporating shared kitchen space.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO READY-MADE MEALS

- Work with ISD-Health to create, promote, and maintain updated **summary guides on how to navigate** the licensing process to support innovative food access initiatives.
- Help organizations with **underutilized kitchen** space to identify new opportunities for meal preparation and community gatherings.
- Find ways to **replace the discontinued Heat-n-Eats frozen meals** to maintain access to ready-made meal options.
- Financially support East Somerville Main Street's **restaurant meal voucher program to increase access** to prepared meals while **boosting local restaurants**.
- In collaboration with the City's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, **leverage community benefit negotiations** in the development process to better support food programming.

CITATIONS

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Community Cooks. "Resources for Our Volunteer Cooks." 2026. <https://communitycooks.org/resources-for-cooks>.



The Free Food Supply

This chapter considers the systems and organizations that underlie individual access to food through pantries, community fridges, and other food programming. Many Somerville residents regularly see what is or is not available at food pantries and fridges, but what factors determine that availability? Where do community organizations get food and what constraints do they face in getting food to individuals? How are community fridges complementing food pantries and distributions? Where are there gaps that the community can work to fill?

The chapter focuses on free food supply. This is a small part of the food distribution world, which includes distribution for retailers and food service. Commercial food supply appears briefly through food rescue from grocery stores to pantries and fridges. This topic is discussed in more detail in [Chapter 10: Rescue, Recycling, and Prevention](#).



Cases of peanut butter stocked at Elizabeth Peabody House's pantry.

Free Food Supply: Where and how do food pantries get food?

FOOD SOURCES

Somerville's food pantry programs get food from multiple sources. The **Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB)** is the most important source for all programs. The GBFB is one of four Massachusetts food banks that supply pantries with food for distribution to community members who need it. State and federal money, grants, monetary donations, and large-scale donations from food producers supply the food bank¹. Food pantry and other community distribution programs order and pick up food from the food bank. Each pantry is given a minimum and maximum number of pounds for their order. The number of visitors to each pantry or food distribution reported to the food bank helps determine the weight range for their GBFB food supply.

Pantries may also receive food from **food rescue organizations** like Food For Free, Spoonfuls, Food Link, and the Boston Area Gleaners. These organizations pick up food that

¹ Greater Boston Food Bank, *GBFB Annual 2024*.



Interior of Somerville Homeless Coalition's Project SOUP in East Somerville. Visitors walk through the pantry space and choose from available items.



Pantry items in storage at the Greater Boston Food Bank, which supplies all the food pantry programs in Somerville.

Photo credit: The Greater Boston Food Bank

cannot be sold and bring it to food pantries and other social service organizations. Food For Free, Spoonfuls, and Food Link focus on **getting food donations from local retailers** like Wegmans, Stop & Shop, and Whole Foods. They ensure that extra food or food that can no longer be sold gets to people who need and appreciate it, reducing food waste and providing additional support and options for people. They are funded by government grants, corporate and foundation grants, and donations so pantries can receive this food without cost. The Boston Area Gleaners focus on **harvesting and distributing food that local farms cannot harvest** and sell profitably. While supported partly by grants, the Gleaners also ask pantries and other users to pay a small fee to access rescued farm produce.

Regular **donations from local businesses, donations from community members, or food purchased with their organization's funds** provide additional food for pantries. Pantries vary in their ability to fundraise for staff, food, and other needs. Some are part of non-profit organizations with professional grant writers and development staff, while others are more community-based and rely heavily on volunteers and individual community support.

Each food supply has pluses and minuses. Pantries often pull together a combination of sources to meet all their needs within the limits of their budget and storage capacity. For example, a pantry with a weekly food bank order at the beginning of the week might arrange to receive food rescue items mid-week when their fridge space empties out. This ensures they have enough fruit and vegetables to last the whole week. [Figure 5.1](#) visualizes how pantries get their food. [Table 5.1](#) summarizes the pluses and minuses of each pantry food source.

Figure 5.1: Food Pantry Supply

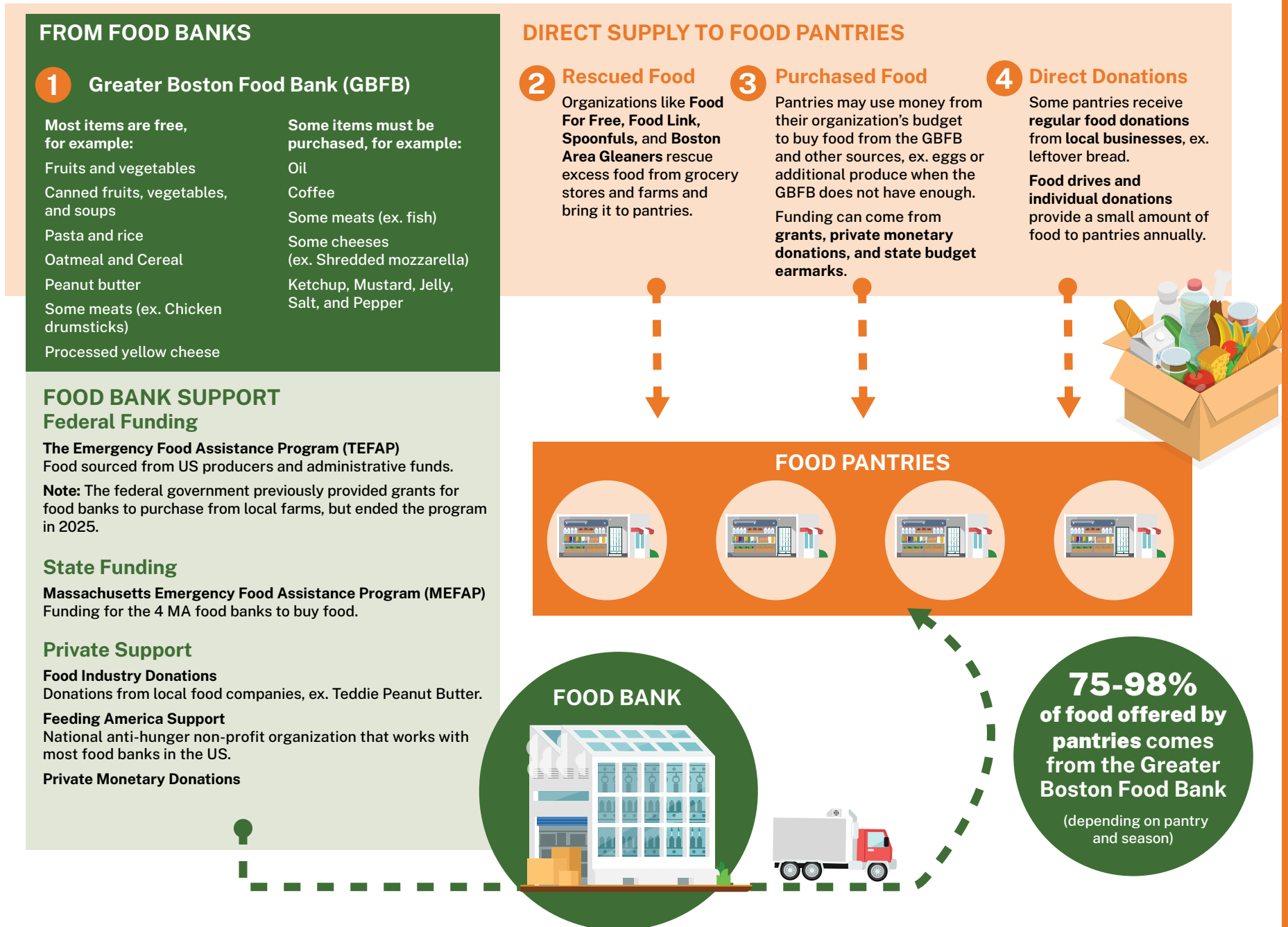


Table 5.1: Pluses and Minuses of Pantry Food Sources

Greater Boston Food Bank	
Pluses	Minuses
The majority of food is free for pantries, making this the key source of food for most pantries. This is especially true for organizations with less funding and fewer development staff. The GBFB offers grants and technical support. In the past five years, four Somerville pantries have received funding and/or technical support for registration processes, technology, and infrastructure. Pantries can receive a full pallet of single food item if they have storage capacity. Pantries can access a free ‘Marketplace’ of surplus items, which varies day to day and can sometime include items that were unavailable when the pantry placed their order.	The range of products available can be limited due to cost considerations, seasonal availability, philanthropic support, government food shipments, and storage capacity at the Food Bank. The size of each food order is limited by a minimum and maximum weight. While the Marketplace provides additional resources for pantries upon pickup, they cannot order more than their maximum weight. There is often a waitlist to increase a pantry’s maximum weight. They must also meet their minimum weight, regardless of what foods are available in a given week. Challenges with food availability and weight ranges can amplify each other: According to one pantry: <i>“Because we must meet a minimum order requirement, limited availability of fresh produce at the Food Bank often forces us to supplement with canned goods. While canned items help us reach the required weight due to their heaviness, they are not as popular or in high demand within the community.”</i>
Community Donations	
Pluses	Minuses
Donations of money allow pantries to spot buy items unavailable from other sources. For example, the food bank does not always have enough eggs. With donated money, pantries can buy them from a local grocer or wholesaler. Food donations can add higher quality, culturally relevant, or missing items. For example, a local bakery may donate day-old bread and pastries that are still good. Community members may donate higher-quality, more nutrient-rich canned soups than the canned soup typically offered by the food bank. Good donations make pantries feel supported by the community.	Liaising with donors, picking up or receiving food, and sorting items in mixed donations all take up valuable staff and volunteer time. Not all foods are helpful. For example, long-expired or open foods cannot be distributed, and pantries waste valuable staff time receiving them only to throw them away. Items like canned vegetables, which pantries can easily and freely get from the Food Bank, often take up more staff time in receiving and sorting than they are worth to most pantries. One local pantry typically does not accept food donations for these reasons: <i>“People have asked, but it’s tough because it has to meet certain standards. It can’t be something expired or old, which is often what people offer. We would have to review the items to see if we can really use them.”</i>

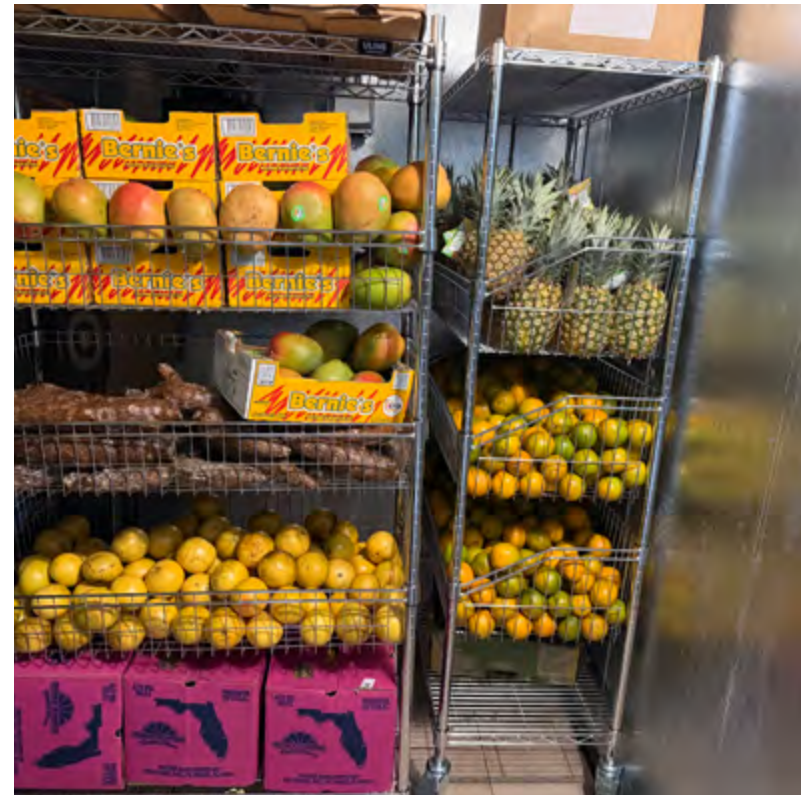
Food Rescue	
Pluses	Minuses
Rescue adds variety to pantry supplies, especially for fresh items like produce, dairy, and prepared meals. These items are usually offered free to pantries from food rescue organizations. Bringing food that would otherwise be discarded to people who can use it prevents food waste.	Food may be close to its expiry date, or not in good enough condition to give out. Clients may misinterpret labels and think they are receiving spoiled food. Food may require additional sorting and quality checks by pantry staff and volunteers.



Above: Food For Free distributes rescued food from local grocery stores to Project SOUP's food pantry.

Photo credit: Food For Free

Right: Mangoes, yuca, pineapples, and oranges in the cooler at Somerville Hispanic Association for Community Development's Food4All.





HOW CAN I MAKE A USEFUL DONATION TO MY LOCAL FOOD PANTRY?

Want to help your neighbors get the food their households need? The best way to help is to donate money or specific, items to non-profits that run food pantries and distributions.

The manager of Project SOUP provides an example: *"A guy came and said, 'I'm going to purchase something on your behalf, what do you need?'. We said black beans and that was it. He went and bought \$800 of black beans."*



GOOD:

Arrange a high-quality, convenient donation.

Ask the pantry what foods they want and donate those items. Items a pantry might need to buy, such as cooking oil, coffee, and spices, are usually good donation items.

Bring the items to the pantry at a time that is convenient for them. If you have multiple kinds of foods, try to sort the items into categories beforehand so they are easy for pantry staff to organize.



BETTER:

Donate money once or occasionally.

Donate gift cards for grocery stores. Pantries can use these to buy food or choose to give them out to families who may need extra help.



BEST:

Donate money to the organization on a regular basis.

Consistent donations are most impactful because the pantry can plan around them.

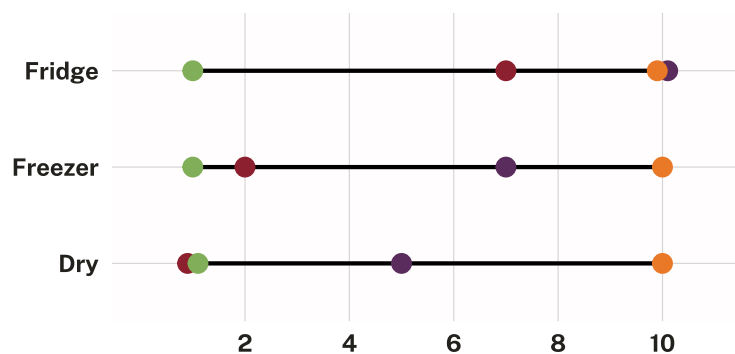
CONSTRAINTS ON PANTRY SERVICES

What challenges do pantries navigate in staying stocked apart from food supply? Pantry managers list storage space, transportation, and funding for staff and operations as limits on what they can offer to residents. The figures below show how four pantry managers ranked limitations in storage, transportation cost or capacity, staff, and budget as constraints on their ability to serve more residents.

Storage

Space can be a big constraint, especially in Somerville. Pantries need storage for dry, refrigerated, and frozen items. The storage space must be capable of keeping food safe from pests and maintaining a proper temperature.

Figure 5.2: Pantry Storage Constraints



Figures 5.2-4 show how four of Somerville's food pantries rated six constraints on their ability to serve more residents. One indicates a constraint that is not a concern at all while ten is a very big concern. Each pantry is noted with a different color dot in the figures. Response are de-identified.

I can't get some of the food because of storage. For example, I don't have room for bottles of juice, yet it is often available [free] at the GBFB and people want it. – Elizabeth Peabody House

We have limited fridge space, so our operations are limited in the summer. We pick up our food on Friday for Saturday distribution. In summer, we can't leave fruits that do better with cold storage, for example, in the truck overnight when it's too warm out. – Shepherd's Kitchen

Transportation

Somerville food pantries rely on renting a truck, hiring a trucking service, or paying for delivery to get their Greater Boston Food Bank order. Paying to transport food is a significant expense. In addition, transportation can be a barrier to picking up large food donations and to organizing delivery for homebound residents.

Figure 5.3: Pantry Transportation Constraint Rankings

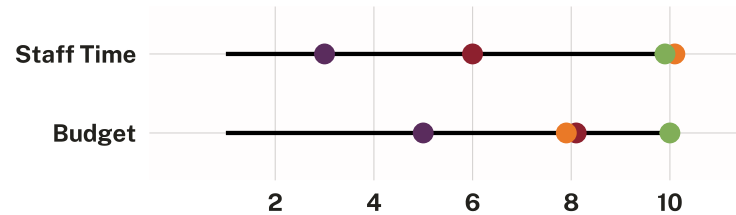


Transportation isn't a huge constraint right now since we are having it delivered, but it is certainly a budget item. We wouldn't be able to serve the volume that we are serving if we were not having our food delivered. It is definitely taking resources, but we are managing. – Elizabeth Peabody House

Staff and Funding

Funding is the big constraint for pantries, not only to purchase food but also to properly staff operations.

Figure 5.4: Pantry Staff & Funding Constraint Rankings



If we don't have enough staff on the floor, the line moves really slowly, and people have to wait. – Project SOUP

Because we cannot pay volunteers, they may come and go, they may want to change their day, they may get tired, they are not permanent. When you offer to pay something it's better. – Food4All

Above: A volunteer at Missionary Church of the Haitian Community

Below: Volunteers at Mission Church's Shepherd's Kitchen set up food items for pantry distributions.

Photo credit: Shepherd's Kitchen



How do community fridges operate?

Community fridges are a mutual aid tool with a low bar to access for anyone in need of food. They serve as a great way to **redistribute surplus and donated food items**. Community fridges are situated outdoors and on private land; anyone can put food in or take food out. In Somerville there are three community fridges, all initiated, monitored, and maintained by a group of volunteers. These local fridge sites include a household-size fridge, a pantry area for dry and shelf-stable storage, and a shed structure to provide protection from the elements. The Somerville fridge locations are in Union Square, in Winter Hill near the Elizabeth Peabody House, and in west Somerville at St. Clement Church on the Medford-Somerville border.

To start a fridge:

- An individual or group must purchase the fridge and build a shed and shelving to house the fridge and any dry food or cleaning supplies that accompany it.
- A host must be willing to have the fridge on their land and offer electrical power for it, typically about \$30 a month.
- A system of volunteers to regularly supply the fridge with food and keep it clean and clear of older food is integral to its success.

Anyone is **welcome to contribute to the fridge and take what they need**. Supply for the Somerville fridges comes



The Union Sq Community Fridge stocked with produce from the Boston Area Gleaners.

Table 5.2: Advantages and disadvantages of community fridges

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Enables access to people whose schedules do not line up with food pantry hours. • No paperwork needed for access. • People can get food anonymously. • Supplements other food resources. • Can reduce food waste. • Builds community. • Good site to communicate about other food resources.	• No tracking makes it hard to measure impact. • Inventory is unpredictable, making it an unreliable food source for users. • Volunteers are needed to regularly monitor inventory to keep it clean and well-stocked with good food. • Outdoor sites need special attention to electrical wiring and pest control. • Can be difficult to enforce food safety and sanitation guidelines.

partly from food recovery through Food For Free and unsold products from local farmers markets, including the Union Square Farmers Market, the Davis Square Farmers Market, and the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market. Uneaten summer meals from the Summer Eats free distribution to youth at Foss Park made their way into the fridge during the 2025 season.

In 2024, the top-voted idea in Somerville’s first participatory budgeting (PB) process was funding for food access programs that “redirect excess food to those in need and/or reduce the barriers to access free or subsidized food using tools like community fridges”². This initiative allocated \$55,000 to support the community fridges and other direct food access initiatives (See the call out box on PB in [Chapter 04: Free and Low-Cost Prepared Meals](#) for more). Some of the PB funding has been used to reimburse the community fridge group for rebuilding the Winter Hill fridge and supplying the fridges using a seasonal **Boston Area Gleaners subscription** that provides 72 cases of fresh produce each week from July-November. 24 bunches of kale, 8-12 cantaloupe, or 20 pounds of carrots, summer squash, potatoes or onions are

examples of cases the fridge might receive. 72 cases, or 24 for each fridge, is too much to distribute in a single day. The community fridges **work with Food For Free to store the produce** and distribute it from Thursday-Sunday as there is room to restock each fridge.

[Table 5.2](#) summarizes some key advantages and disadvantages of community fridges from the perspective of both organizers and users of fridges.

During the community food action plan meeting in June many people recommended adding a fourth community fridge in Somerville. Since that meeting, the Community Fridge group has announced they are partnering with the Dormition of the Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church on Central Street to establish a new fridge in 2026.

² City of Somerville, “Participatory Budgeting.”

Takeaways & Recommendations

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- Pantries get most of their food from the local Food Bank and food rescue organizations. **Community donations** can be most useful to directly fill gaps or to allow pantries to **fill gaps** by purchasing needed items.
- Food pantries face a unique set of constraints, such as transportation, staff, funding, and storage space, that are different from those of food retailers and other types of non-profits.
 - » **Funding is the biggest constraint on pantry operations.**
 - » Each free food operation has additional constraints based on their space and organizational structure, but some of these can be addressed by providing more financial resources.
- Community Fridges offer a **different model** than pantries. They can be especially useful as a **supplement** to more reliable resources, as a tool to **support a mutual aid approach** to food access, and as a way to **repurpose rescued or extra food**.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE FREE FOOD DISTRIBUTION

- Assess and plan for long-term allocation of the City's **community benefit funds** to support **consistent and longer-term application** for community partner food access programs.
- Continue to **leverage the participatory budgeting** process to support food security needs and innovations.
- Ensure that the **financial support** and **technical assistance** provided to food assistance programs address their **unique operational needs and challenges**.
- Coordinate and broaden Somerville Food Coalition messaging to **harness the community's desire to volunteer and donate** to food security.

CITATIONS

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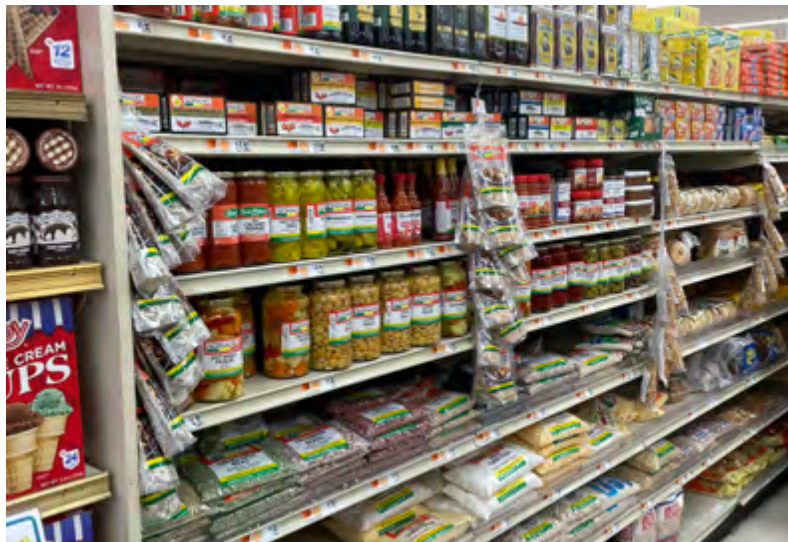
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Food Landscape and Preferences



This chapter examines where people can get food and where they want to get food. The assessment process acknowledged the difference between what is available to or convenient for residents – where people can get food – and residents’ preferred stores and other food access sites – where people want to get food. People may have a grocery store, food pantry, or farmers market near them, but it may not be their preferred place to get food if the prices, selection of foods, or environment do not meet their needs.



Shelves at Somerville’s Market Basket grocery store location.

Landscape: Where can people get food near them?

This section looks at the range of locations where people can get food to cook at home in Somerville. Residents can shop at five different grocery store chains, go to several food pantries and distributions run by local non-profits, and shop at four farmers markets.

FOOD RETAIL: WHERE CAN PEOPLE BUY FOOD?

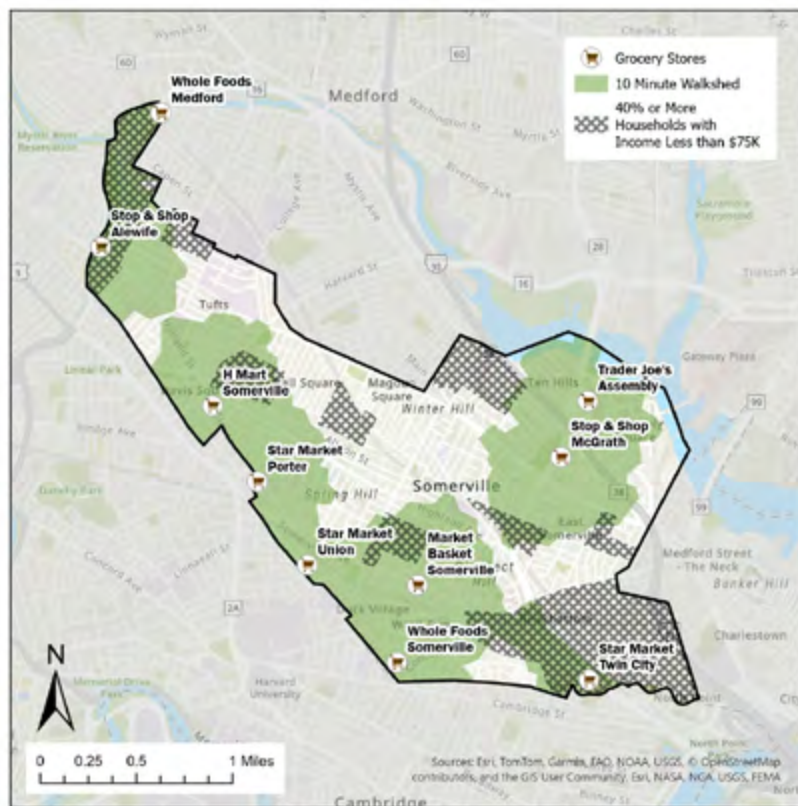
Somerville has 10 grocery stores, including two that are outside of Somerville but close enough to be within a 10-minute walk for some residents. Consistent with the 2018 Food System Assessment, OFAHC defines a grocery store as selling a broad array of food products, including a large variety of dry, fresh, and frozen foods. They are also distinguished by occupying a large lot and having more than 10 staff and more than two cash registers.

[Figure 6.1](#) shows the parts of Somerville that are within a 10-minute walk of the city’s grocery stores. The 2025 opening of H-Mart to replace BFresh in Davis Square has addressed access for residents in that neighborhood. However, Winter Hill and Brickbottom stand out as areas without an easily accessible grocery store.



Chayote, yams, malanga, aloe, and tomatillos in Stop and Shop's 105 Alewife Brook Parkway location.

Figure 6.1: Most residents can walk 10 minutes or less to a grocery store, but there are still some gaps in access in Winter Hill and Brickbottom.



Green shading shows the area where you can walk to a full-service grocery store in 10 minutes or less. The **grey pattern** notes areas where 40% or more of the households have incomes less than \$75,000/year; in other words, households that might struggle to afford food.

CALL-OUT

HOW CAN ZONING INFLUENCE FOOD RETAIL?

The City of Somerville can influence development by zoning different areas of the city for different land uses, including grocery stores. The 2019 Zoning Ordinance update allows grocery stores to occupy the majority of land in Somerville. Much of the city is zoned as neighborhood and urban residential, which permits for “occasional neighborhood stores [...] on advantageous sites.”¹ This implies a restriction on the number of stores that can be approved there. However, there are other factors that influence where stores are located that outweigh zoning concerns.

Market forces are a major determinant of grocery store locations. Grocers want to ensure with as much certainty as possible that the store will be profitable. Many factors can influence this, including the neighborhood population and demographics, existence of other nearby grocery stores, and more. An example of market forces impacting grocery store outcomes is the former Star Market in Winter Hill, located at 299 Broadway. Winter Hill’s neighborhood plan explains that much of the potential customer base for a new grocery store is covered by the Stop & Shop on McGrath Highway, making the Star Market site not an ideal location. Given this competition, the neighborhood is not dense enough to justify a second store in the same market shed.²

Lot size is also a considerable concern. Grocery stores like Market Basket, Stop and Shop, and Star Market require a large amount of land. This makes it difficult to site them even in mixed use developments designed to have commercial space.

¹ City of Somerville, “Zoning Overhaul.”

² City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, *Winter Hill Plan*.

FOOD PANTRIES AND DISTRIBUTIONS: WHERE CAN PEOPLE GET FREE FOOD?

Somerville has five pantry programs and easy access to one pantry in Medford within a 10-minute walk or easy bus ride. Of these six programs, four are open multiple days each week, one is twice a month, and one is monthly. Somerville also offers **two programs for specific populations**: monthly food distribution for Somerville Public School families and a twice monthly distribution at many Somerville Housing Authority residences. Residents can supplement these resources with free food from **Somerville's three community fridges**.

Where are our pantries and how do they operate?

Residents in need of free food can choose from several food pantry programs. Each pantry is operated by a different non-profit organization and has slightly different procedures. Despite these differences, pantry operators connect with each other through the Somerville Food Coalition, allowing them to coordinate and provide complementary services. In recent years, programs have coordinated to ensure their open hours are distinct so that residents have as many opportunities as possible to access free food. The following pages describe Somerville's five pantry programs..

Elizabeth Peabody House



- **Where?** Winter Hill-East Somerville
- **When?** Weekly; Wed 5-7, Thu 10-12, Sun 10-3.
- **How often can visitors get food?** 1 x per week
- **Average visits/month in 2025:** 1,359

Visitors can receive food once per week and do not need to live in Somerville, although most do. Due to space constraints, food bags are partially packed in advance, with some items like frozen meat offered as a choice when visitors come to the pantry door to pick up their bag. The pantry also began a delivery program in 2024. They bring about 85 bags a week to Somerville Housing Authority's Corbett Apartments on Jaques Street, Clarendon Hill Apartments (North Street Housing), and the Somerville YMCA's dormitory-style temporary housing.

Project SOUP



(program of the Somerville Homeless Coalition)

- **Where?** East Somerville
- **When?** Weekly; Tue 12-3, Wed 10-3, Thu 2-7, and Fri 10-3.
- **How often can visitors get food?** 2 x per month
- **Average visits/month in 2025:** 1,498

Project SOUP visitors can receive food twice per month and visitors must live in Somerville. When people arrive at the pantry, they check in and then move through the pantry space choosing items they want. In addition to the in-person pantry program, Project SOUP has long operated a home delivery program for homebound residents. In 2025, they averaged about 128 deliveries a month, which are included in the total visits shown above.

Food4All



(program of the Somerville Hispanic Association for Community Development)

- **Where?** East Somerville
- **When?** Weekly; Mon 11-1*, Tue 8:30-3:30.
*as of Spring 2026, formerly Wed 9-12
- **How often can visitors get food?** 1 x per week
- **Average visits/month in 2025:** 1,060

Food4All allows visitors to come to their pantry once a week. Visitors do not need to live in Somerville, although most do. Following a remodel in 2025, pantry visitors now check in and then move through the pantry choosing items they want. Their largest distribution is on Tuesday when they receive their Food Bank delivery, but the pantry recently began offering hours on Monday since no other Somerville pantry had Monday hours.

Shepherd's Kitchen



(program of Mission Church)

Photo credit: Shepherd's Kitchen

- **Where?** Central Somerville
- **When?** Monthly; Sat 9:15-until supplies last.
- **How often can visitors get food?** 1 x per month
- **Average visits/month in 2025:** 100

Shepherd's Kitchen is open once a month from September through June. They are the only distribution site close to Union Square and central Somerville. Visitors do not need to live in Somerville, although most do. The program is entirely volunteer operated. Volunteer coordinators and helpers set up food on tables and visitors can move through the space choosing items they want.

Missionary Church of the Haitian Community Pantry



- **Where?** Winter Hill (next to Mystic Housing, Somerville's largest public housing site).
- **When?** Twice monthly; Fri 2-until supplies last.
- **How often can visitors get food?** 2 x per month
- **Average visits/month in 2025:** About 200

Missionary Church of the Haitian Community's pantry currently opens twice monthly on Friday afternoon. The program estimates that about 35% of participants are Somerville residents, with many participants coming from other cities such as Malden, Medford, Dorchester, and Lynn. The program is largely run by volunteers. Volunteers pack bins of food for visitors. Bins are brought to the door of the pantry, where visitors can then choose the items they want from the bin and return any unwanted items.

How accessible are our pantries?

How easy it is to access a pantry depends on location and on when the pantry is open. [Figure 6.2](#) and [6.3](#) look at geographic access to pantry programs that offer a wide range of hours each month, and at least one open day per week. The figures include Mystic Valley YMCA's Mystic Community Market in Medford because it is open six days a week within walking distance of some residents. The maps do not include Mission Church's Shepherd's Kitchen and Missionary Church of the Haitian Community in Somerville because these pantries operate monthly and every other week, respectively.

Weekly pantries are concentrated in East Somerville – Somerville Homeless Coalition's Project SOUP (referred to as Project SOUP hereafter) and Somerville Hispanic Association for Community Development' Food4All (referred to as Food4All hereafter) – and the eastern part of Winter Hill – Elizabeth Peabody House. [Figure 6.2](#) shows areas within a 10-minute walk of a weekly pantry and [Figure 6.3](#) adds areas that are within easy or ok transit access of a weekly pantry. Somerville pantry locations place them within walking distance of parts of the city with lower incomes. However, there are **pockets of lower income residents throughout the city, who are not within walking distance** or an easy bus ride to a weekly pantry, notably most of **West Somerville**, near Clarendon Hill, and **Union Square**.

Two of our pantry programs offer consistent individual or bulk delivery options. Project SOUP, as of 2025, has about 60 homebound delivery clients who receive food twice a week. Elizabeth Peabody does three weekly bulk deliveries to buildings with high food access needs. These deliveries offer a key

support to residents with disabilities and those who do not have easy access to a pantry. Both programs receive more requests than they can fulfill, suggesting there is **considerable unmet need for this service**.

Where are other free food options, and how do they complement pantries?

To provide more free food options across the city, Somerville has partnered with Food For Free to offer two additional free food programs for specific residents: Somerville Public Schools (SPS) families and residents of public housing.

The **Just Eats program has been bringing boxes of food to Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) sites** since July 2021. Food For Free supplies boxes of produce with one or two dry good items, and SHA coordinators distribute the boxes to residents. Since October 2022, eight developments have received boxes every other week. The program began through City of Somerville American Rescue Plan Act funding, but since the July 2024 expiration of these funds has been supported solely by Food For Free and SHA.

In 2024, 740 Just Eats boxes were distributed per month to Somerville Housing Authority sites. Boxes come every other week. In most cases, the same residents receive a box at each distribution, which is two to three times per month. [Figure 6.4](#) shows the number of boxes distributed every other week compared with the number of units in each development.

Factors such as ability of residents to cook their own food, proximity to other resources, and number of interested residents determine how many boxes go to each site. For

Figure 6.2: Weekly food pantries are concentrated in East Somerville and Winter Hill.

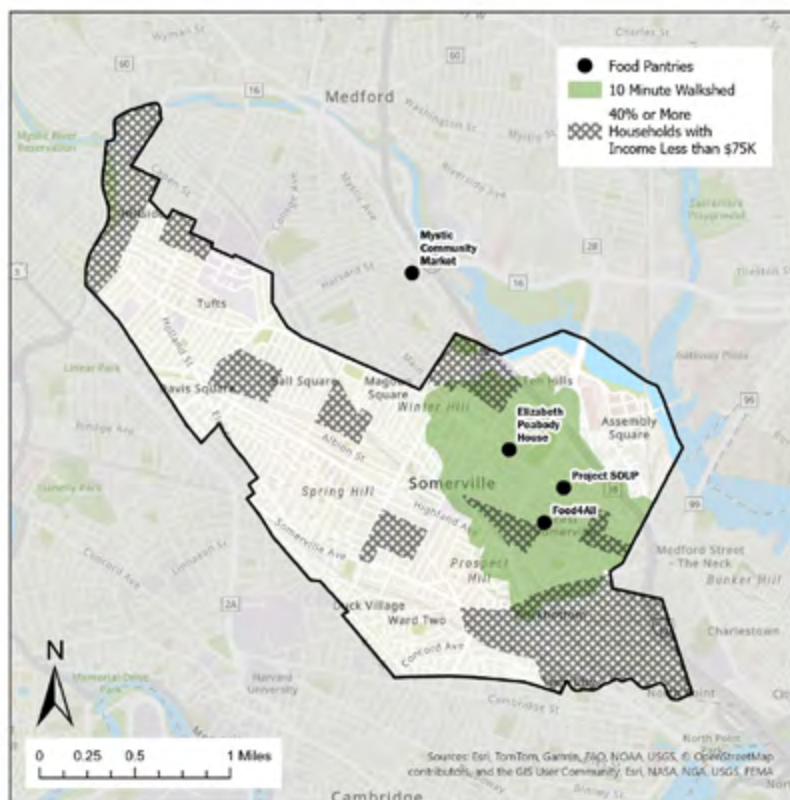
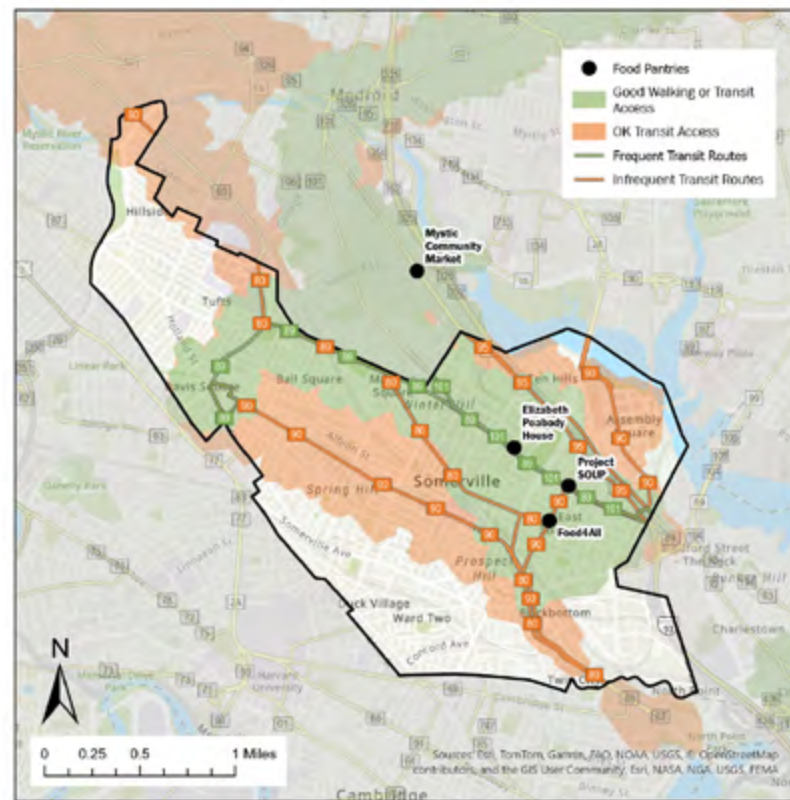


Figure 6.3: Public transit expands access to pantries a little, but much of Somerville still does not have easy access.



Green shading in Figure 6.2 shows the areas where you can walk to a weekly food pantry in 10 minutes or less.

Figure 6.3 shows areas with good (**green shading**) and OK (**orange shading**) public transit access to a weekly pantry. Good and OK public transit access are both defined by a 5-minute walk to a direct transit route that drops off within a 5-minute walk of a food pantry. Good access is distinguished by bus frequency of 30 minutes or less midday on a weekday. OK access denotes routes that are less frequent midday. The **grey pattern** notes areas where 40% or more of the households have incomes less than \$75,000/year; in other words, households that might struggle to afford food.

Figure 6.4: Food For Free, Somerville Housing Authority, and Somerville Public Schools Bring Food to People, Including Many Who Cannot Easily Access Pantries

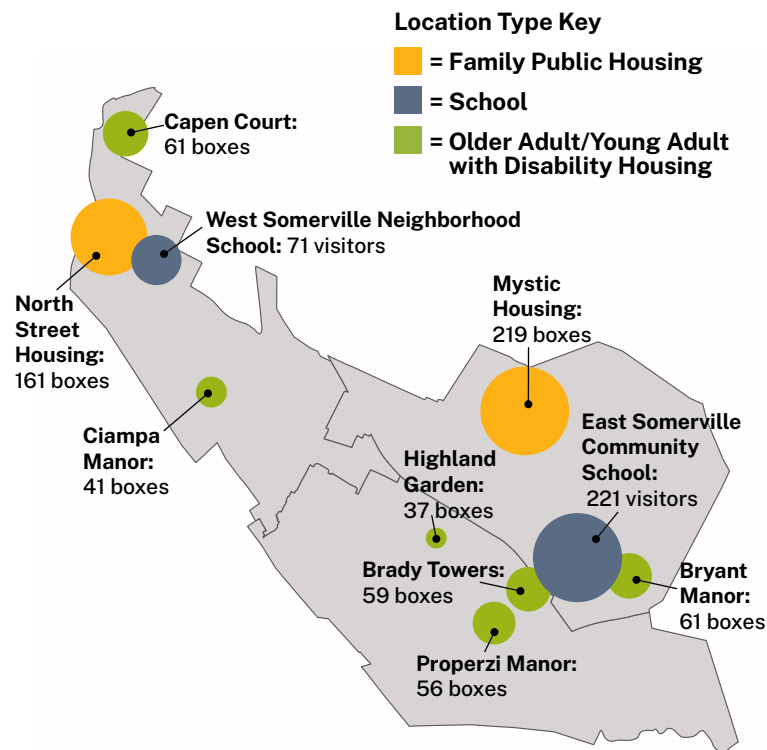


Figure 6.4 shows the sites that receive Just Eats boxes and the Free School Market sites as of November 2025. The number and size of the circle indicates the average number of boxes distributed per month from October 2022-June 2024 for Just Eats and the average number of visitors per month at each school market from November 2024-June 2025. Housing Authority sites include Somerville's two family public housing sites, marked in **yellow**, and six older adult/young adult with disability buildings, market in **green**. The two schools with school-year free markets are marked in **blue**.

example, North Street gets a high proportion of boxes compared to total units because it is far away from Somerville's weekly food pantries in the eastern part of the city. As one interviewee notes "I use the food pantry they bring here, to Clarendon Hill... for Project SOUP I have seen they have a variety of open hours, so I think that's not an obstacle, more than anything it's the transport, that it's far." [translated from Spanish]

The **free 'markets' at the Somerville Public Schools** are another targeted free food distribution that supplements our food pantries. Food For Free and the Somerville Public Schools (SPS) operate these markets each month at East Somerville Community School (ESCS) and West Somerville Neighborhood School (WSNS) when school is in session. In July and August, only the ESCS market operates.

In 2021, Food For Free started this program in collaboration with SPS to meet food access needs exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the closure of the Winter Hill Community Innovation School, it hosted a third market. Now that Winter Hill students have moved to the Edgerly building, across the street from ESCS, Winter Hill families are invited to use the ESCS market. In December 2025, Food For Free launched a third a market at the Healey School.

Food For Free uses City and donor funds as well as their existing infrastructure, food sources, and staff to support the program. The program received ARPA funds through the City of Somerville for the 2024-25 school year, and the City continued offering some support after ARPA funds ended. As of 2025, the City provides Food For Free \$90,000 to run the program. SPS provides staff time and coordinates volunteers to operate the market, with Food For Free providing additional operational support in the summer when SPS staff are less available.



Figure 6.5: What goes into the Free School Markets?

Food For Free and Somerville Public Schools offer a monthly free food ‘market’ for school families. These families can come to the East Somerville Community School or the West Somerville Neighborhood School and choose from an array of nutritious and culturally comfortable foods to bring home.

What goes into running this food program?

Food For Free provides:

- Staff time, infrastructure, and food sourcing relationships to order, pick up, and deliver food for the markets.
- About 11,300 pounds of food per month for the East and West markets.
- Food is primarily from FFF’s Greater Boston Food Bank account, supplemented by other sources to ensure consistent and good quality foods.
- Support in operating the markets as needed.

The schools provide:

- About 120 hours of staff time per month: 8 hours of time per month for 15 staff members.
- 20 volunteers across both markets.
- Space and custodial staff to manage the food packaging.



As of Fall 2025, there are a total of 22 Free School Markets per year, serving 295 families on average.*

East Somerville Community School:

- 12 markets per year
- 217 households served/market, on average
- 828 individuals served, per market on average

West Somerville Neighborhood School:

- 10 markets per year
- 78 households served, on average, per market
- More than 300 individuals served, on average per market

Information and connection to other resources for families. For example:

- In Summer 2025, City and SPS multilingual service providers attended to help families identify and activate their SUN Bucks cards.
- In May 2025, Somerville Community Corporation staff invited families to attend local job fairs and learn about workforce development opportunities.

* excludes Healey School market which began December 2025.

The program has been valuable for SPS families. A High School student interview participant who helps his family access food noted:

“But we also use the school market because it does help us with our economics because it’s a whole week of food. Sometimes also more. Sometimes it’s almost two weeks.”

During the 2024-25 school year, the school markets had an **average of 295 visits per month**. West Somerville Neighborhood School had a monthly average of 78 visits, while East Somerville Community School had an average of 217.

The markets have also been very successful in providing an **opportunity for social service providers to connect with school families** in a space where they feel comfortable. In the past school year, more than eight local organizations and City departments have come to the market to share resources and information, including: Community Action Agency of Somerville, Community Health Workers, Food For Free, OFAHC, Somerville Community Corporation, Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs, SomerPromise, and Somerville Public Library’s Social Worker. School market outreach has included helping families to navigate summer SUN Bucks benefits and reduced-cost MBTA cards, as well as connecting families to legal resources, afterschool and summer programs, and job fair and training programs.

In addition to pantries and distributions, residents can access free food at community fridges. Somerville has three community fridges that are open 24/7 to anyone in need and a fourth is expected in 2026. Community fridges can be a good supplement to the other food pantries and programs in

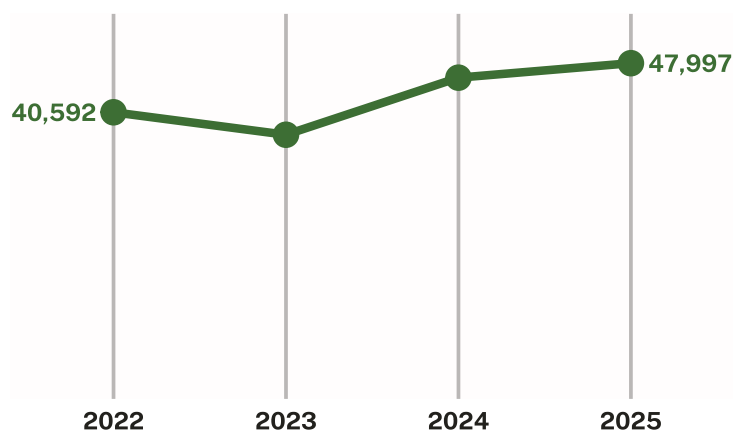
Somerville. They may be closer to home, people can access them at any time of the day or week, and they do not require any paperwork or sharing of personal information. However, by design, there is no tracking of who uses a community fridge. This makes it hard to evaluate the impact and determine who is being served. Community fridges are also often an unreliable resource. What is available depends on what is donated on a given day and how many people have stopped by the fridge looking for food. Lots of volunteers and a steady supply of donated and recovered food can make community fridges more reliable, but users will always experience some unpredictability.

How many residents use pantries and other distributions and has need increased?

The number of visits by Somerville residents and the number of unique Somerville residents who use pantries are difficult to estimate. Each pantry – Project SOUP, Food4All, Elizabeth Peabody House, Missionary Church of the Haitian Community, and Shepherd’s Kitchen – is operated by a different organization, and pantries are careful to protect the personal data they collect from users. Thus, we don’t know how many residents visit multiple pantries in a month. And while some programs are restricted to Somerville residents – such as FFF’s Just Eats and School Markets or SHC’s Project SOUP – several Somerville pantries serve residents of other cities. Somerville residents also go to pantry programs outside Somerville, such as Mystic Community Market in Medford.

[Figures 6.6](#) and [6.7a-b](#) consider two ways to look at total pantry use and how that use has changed in recent years. [Figure 6.6](#) shows the combined increase in total pantry visits from 2022-2025 for the four pantries whose visitors are mainly from Somerville: Project SOUP, Food4All, Elizabeth Peabody House, and Shepherd's Kitchen.

Figure 6.6: Pantry visits steadily increased from 2023-2025 after a slight drop in visits from 2022-2023



Numbers shown are a sum of the total visits per year for each pantry, including multiple visits for households who used the pantry more than one time in that year. Some pantries allow weekly visits while others are twice a month or monthly. Source: Program data shared by individual pantry programs.

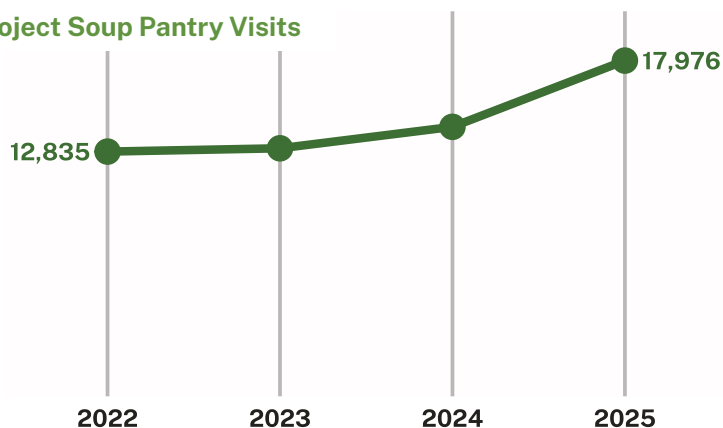
[Figure 6.6](#) indicates there has been a steady increase in visits to pantry programs since 2023. The increase is likely to include more residents using pantries and residents using pantries more frequently. Need for free food is not the only driver of changes in pantry use. Changes in pantry capacity and operating procedures also affect the number of visits. Two of the pantries in this calculation had significant operating changes during this period.

- Elizabeth Peabody House went from operating one day a week in 2022 to three days a week starting in 2024, resulting in triple the number of visits. The response to increased days indicates there was unmet need before the increase.
- Food4All, conversely, has seen a steady decrease in visits over the period. They note that reduced access to food, fewer drop-in hours, changes in neighborhood demographics, and better reporting have all contributed to this decline. The pantry, however, still sees a lot of visits, with an average of 1,060 visits per month in 2025.

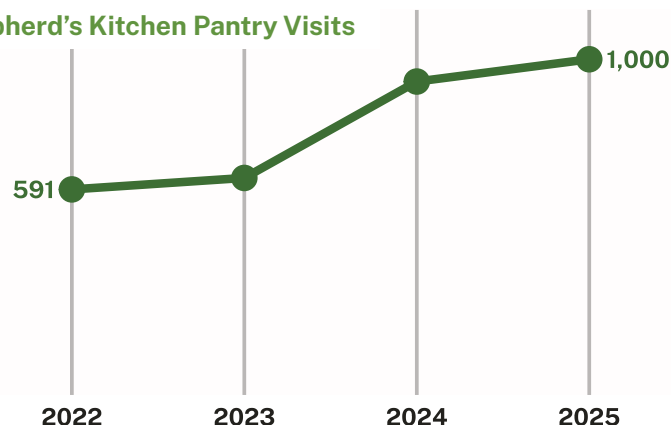
Project SOUP and **Shepherd's Kitchen** operations have remained relatively unchanged from 2022-2025, making them the best measures of how demand for free food has changed during this time. [Figure 6.7a-b](#) show the number of visit per year to each program.

Figure 6.7a and b: Visits steadily increased to pantries whose operations did not change significantly from 2022-2025.

a. Project Soup Pantry Visits



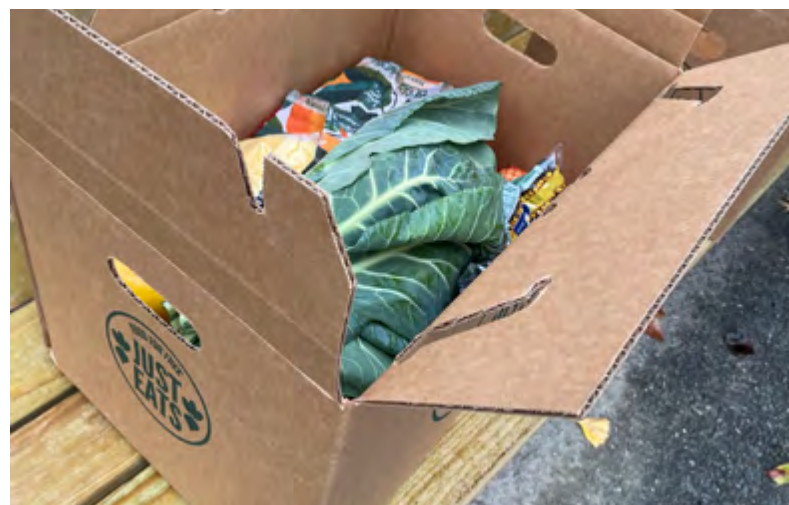
b. Shepherd's Kitchen Pantry Visits



Numbers shown are the total visits per year for each pantry, including multiple visits for households who used the pantry more than once in that year. Project SOUP was open 4-5 days a week and allowed 2 visits per month during this period. Shepherd's Kitchen was open once a month and visitors could come each month for 10 months. Source: Program data shared by Shepherd's Kitchen and Project SOUP/SHC.

Both pantries show an increase in use, indicating more residents are seeking out pantry food. Shepherd's Kitchen saw slight increases from 2022-2023 and 2024-2025 with a larger jump from 2023-2024. Project SOUP has seen growing increases in use, with the largest increase from 2024-2025.

Overall, visit numbers from food pantries and food distributions show that **many residents rely on these resources**. Use has grown in the past few years, and data suggest **pantries would see more visits if they had the capacity to serve more people**. Pantries are within walking distance of some residents who need them, but pop-up free markets and box distributions are necessary to fill gaps in geographic access. Finally, the success of the free school markets demonstrates how important pantries and food distributions can be in connecting residents with resources and information, something that many programs offer in addition to food.



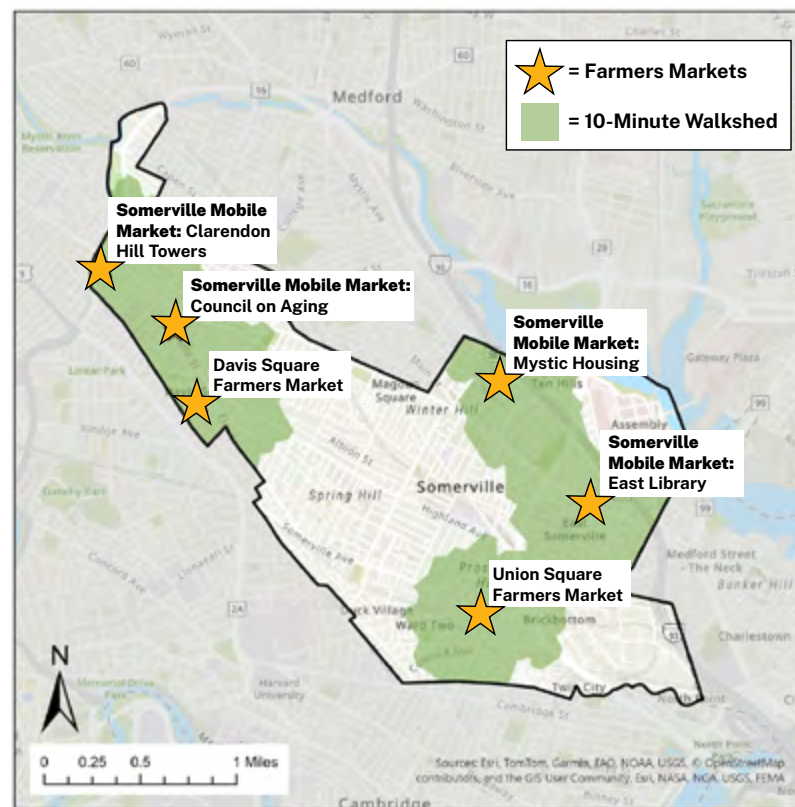
A Food For Free Just Eats box on a bench at Clarendon Hill Apartments (formerly the North Street Somerville Housing Authority site).

FARMERS MARKETS: WHERE CAN PEOPLE BUY FOOD DIRECTLY FROM LOCAL FARMERS?

Somerville has three farmers markets as of 2025, ensuring that a farmers market is open 48 out of 52 weeks per year. Davis Square Farmers Market, which is operated by Mass Farmers Markets, is open every Wednesday from mid-May through November. The Union Square Farmers Market, in the heart of Union Square, runs Saturday mornings from May through October, and is coordinated by Union Square Main Streets. The Somerville Winter Farmers Market is operated at the Armory building by the Center for Arts at the Armory on Highland Avenue. It is open Saturday mornings from November through April, keeping local food and community connections going throughout the winter season. Starting in 2026, Assembly Row near East Somerville will also have a farmers market.



Figure 6.8: West Somerville, East Somerville, Winter Hill, and Union Square are within a 10-minute walk of a farmers market during the height of the farm produce season.



Above: Areas shaded in **green** are those within a 10-minute walk of a farmers market from July-October, when the highest number of markets are open.

Left: The Winter Market is omitted because it is only open November-April.

Between these three markets and the City-subsidized and operated Mobile Farmers Market, many of Somerville's residents are within walking distance of a farmers market. West Somerville, East Somerville, Winter Hill, and Union Square all have access to a farmers market during the main produce season (late spring through early fall), as shown in [Figure 6.8](#). Central Somerville can access one of the only winter farmers markets in the region from late fall through early spring.

Preferences: Where do people want to get food and how do they get there?

The closest grocery store, pantry, or farmers market may not always be the place people prefer to get food. The average cost of groceries, the availability of culturally comfortable foods, the experience of getting food at that location, and the benefits that the location accepts can all influence where people want to get their food. Access may also be limited by available transportation options. Online shopping provides a potential solution, but although it has grown in popularity, the majority of people on limited budgets prefer to shop in person. As a result, people often shop at multiple markets and go to food pantries to find all the foods they want at a price they can afford.

WHICH GROCERY STORES DO PEOPLE WANT TO GO TO AND WHY?

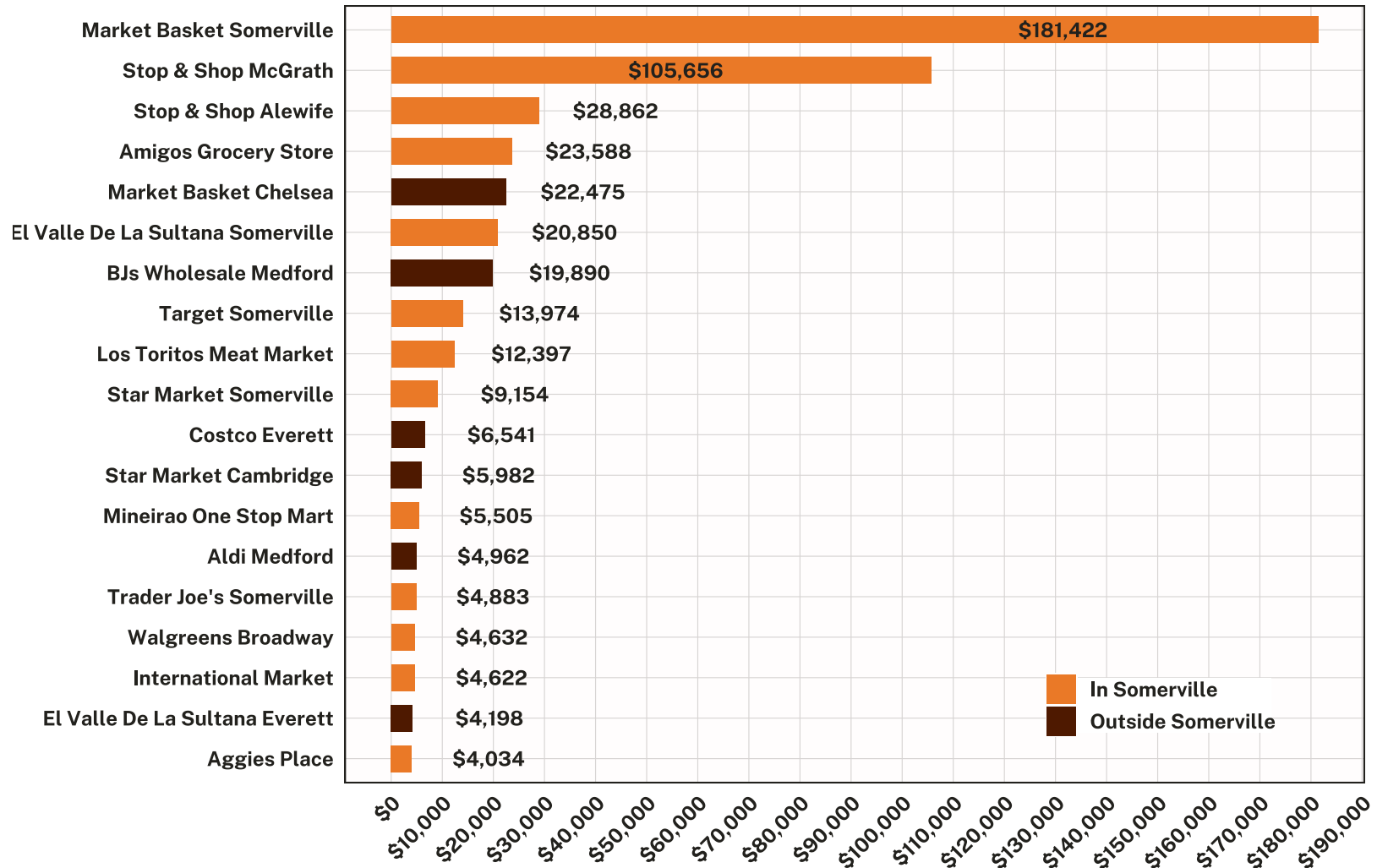
Market Basket was the most popular grocery store for interview participants and users of programs captured in this report. Stop & Shop in East Somerville was second most popular, and many people do use a different grocery store that is closer to where they live, for example the Stop & Shop in West or Star Market near Spring Hill. People also rely on neighborhood markets, specialty markets, and stores that focus on affordability.

[Figure 6.9](#) lists the most popular food destinations for Carrot Card users in and near Somerville by amount spent at each location (see Call Out for more information on this program). While Market Basket and our two Stop and Shop locations



Somerville's popular Market Basket location.

Figure 6.9: Somerville grocery stores, neighborhood markets, and non-traditional groceries focused on affordability were the most popular shopping locations for Carrot Card users



Spending amounts reflect total spending from September 2022-June 2025. The East Somerville Community School had the most students with Carrot Cards, which partially accounts for the high representation of stores in or near East Somerville.

Source: Program data shared by Food For Free.

CALL-OUT

THE CARROT CARD PROGRAM AND THE TAXI TO HEALTH PROGRAM

This section on where people want to get food draws on data from two temporary City-funded benefit programs supported by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

The Carrot Card Program This program allowed lower-income SPS families to buy food for their households. Each month, participants received \$25 per child with an extra \$10 added during some holiday months to make up for the lack of school-based meals. The program served 3,435 students from September 2022 to June 2025. East Somerville Community School families used the program most, followed by Winter Hill Community Innovation School and Healey School families. In December 2025, City of Somerville Community Benefit Funds were allocated to restart the program in 2026.

The Taxi to Health Program This program gave participants an average of four free taxi rides per month to address medical, food, and other health-related needs. Participants qualified for the program by receiving SNAP, MassHealth, or WIC benefits, being housing insecure, or being food insecure. The program served more than 1,000 residents and provided over 21,000 rides from April 2022 to October 2024. About 22% of participants were 60 or older. Approximately half spoke a first language other than English. About a third lived in income-restricted housing, and 13% were unhoused or in temporary shelter. For more details on Taxi to Health participant characteristics, see [Appendix 1](#). Program records indicate that at least 34% of the free rides participants took were for food needs.

were the top locations, users also chose to shop at **many neighborhood markets** like Amigos, El Valle De La Sultana, Los Toritos, and Mineirao. These markets all offer a wide array of culture-specific items that families of Central and South American descent seek out. **Stores that focus on affordability** like BJ's, Costco, and Aldi are also a clear preference. None of these stores are in Somerville, pointing to a need for good transit to affordable food sources.

One interviewee who was a Carrot Card recipient noted that she likes shopping at Aldi, but *“It’s farther...you can’t get there without a car. Because there’s no bus, there’s no bus going there.”* She has a friend who goes and sometimes offers her a ride, *“So, I take advantage of the opportunity [to go].”* [translated from Spanish]



El Valle de la Sultana neighborhood market on Broadway in Winter Hill. The market is a popular provisioner of Brazilian products and other culture-specific foods sought by Somerville’s immigrant residents.

Another interviewee who also relies on friends to get to more distant grocery stores noted that wholesale style stores like BJs are a good place to purchase larger amounts of heavier products like beverages because it is less expensive and reduces the times when you need to arrange transportation.

Neighborhood and specialty markets play an important role in conveniently offering culturally-specific foods, especially for immigrant families:

- A Brazilian interviewee said she only buys beef at a local Brazilian-owned market because the quality is better and there are more cuts available.
- An interviewee from Cape Verde said of an Asian specialty market: “I love going there because I can buy real fresh, fresh fish.”
- An interviewee from El Salvador explained that she usually buys her masa flour at Market Basket where it is cheapest, but she is happy that her neighborhood market also has it in case she runs out and needs more before she can get to Market Basket.

HOW DOES TRANSPORTATION LIMIT FOOD ACCESS?

Somerville is heavily reliant on public transportation. 21.6% of Somerville households do not have access to a car, compared with only 11.7% in Massachusetts as a whole.¹ Local buses are often the only option to get around the city. **Transportation** came up frequently in interviews and

community meetings as a **barrier for people trying to get the food they want and need**. Interviewees noted it when asked about the biggest challenges the city could help to address:

One West Somerville resident and former Taxi to Health user notes: “No [I don’t go to pantries like Project SOUP], because it’s too far away and the [bus] timetables, but mainly because it’s so far away.” [translated from Spanish]

Another resident of West Somerville echoes this: “*The problem I have is it’s hard to get the bus...I want to go somewhere but because of the transportation it’s difficult.*” [translated from Haitian Creole]

When asked what the City could do to improve food access, a resident of East Somerville said: To have transportation to bring people to get food. I can go nearby with a cart, but to go farther I have to pay for the bus or get a ride from someone. But which bus? And with bags...I mean, for those who are of older age, I think it’s nice to have transportation to take them and drop them off with their food.” [translated from Spanish]

The quote above alludes to the reality that a bus is often not the easiest way to get to food. Bus schedules, available routes, and difficulty carrying boxes and parcels on buses can all be challenges for public transit-dependent residents.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Social Characteristics.”

Figure 6.10: Taxi to Health program use patterns suggest people who rely on public transit cannot easily get to their preferred grocery stores.

Figure 6.10 shows the number of trips from grocery stores to home addresses. Addresses are grouped by census block groups to protect user privacy. Trips include program ride data from April 2022 to October 2024. Source: Taxi to Health Program records, Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities, Somerville HHS.

Legend: Number of Trips to Block Group

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| — 1-5 trips | → 24-61 trips |
| — 6-13 trips | → 62-212 trips |
| → 14-23 trips | |

MARKET BASKET



STAR MARKET PORTER



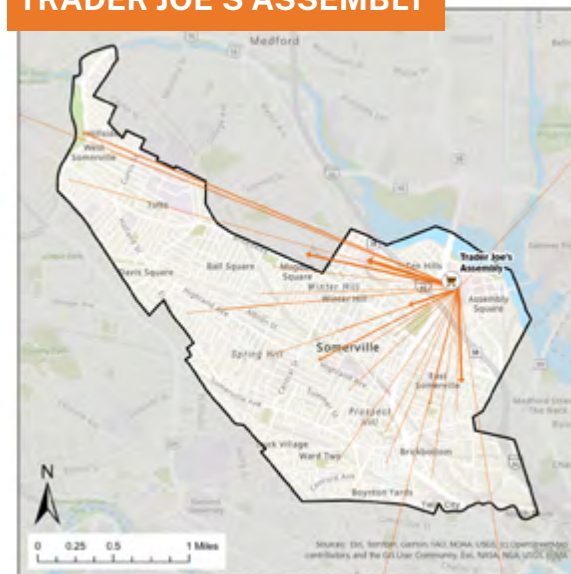
STAR MARKET TWIN CITY



STOP & SHOP MCGRATH



TRADER JOE'S ASSEMBLY



Taxi to Health program use records offer similar insights (see [Call-Out](#) for more information on this program). [Figure 6.10](#) shows the most popular food destinations accessed with the program, as well as where people came from to get there.

The lines connecting the Clarendon Hill area in West Somerville to Market Basket correspond roughly to the 87 bus route. Yet program participants chose to use their limited supply of taxi rides to travel this route by car. There is also a strong line from Mystic Public Housing to Stop & Shop, which is otherwise a 15-minute walk along a highway. However, the map underscores a **lack of north-south bus routes** that would enable residents of Winter Hill and the Mystic Public Housing Complex to get to Market Basket via bus.

Better support for transportation to food helps residents to get free food at local pantries. The Taxi to Health program partnered with one local food pantry – SHC’s Project SOUP – to offer visitors rides home from the pantry. Strong lines in [Figure 6.11](#) connecting the pantry to West Somerville, Winter Hill and the Mystic Housing Complex, and the Union Square area underscore the value of a vehicle to get multiple bags of pantry food home easily.

Many interviewees mention they get rides with friends or pay for taxis and rideshares, which increases their cost burden:

“But then you have to think about the people like myself that don’t have cars, that we rely on taking a cab or Uber. And it’s the wintertime, so you really can’t go anywhere because no one is going to wait on the bus stop for 20 minutes. Buses are late. In cabs, Yeah. And cabs and Ubers and Lyfts, if it’s 15 degrees outside and the wind factor is four below zero, they have the prices go up. There’s a surge, so it’s hard.”

PROJECT SOUP

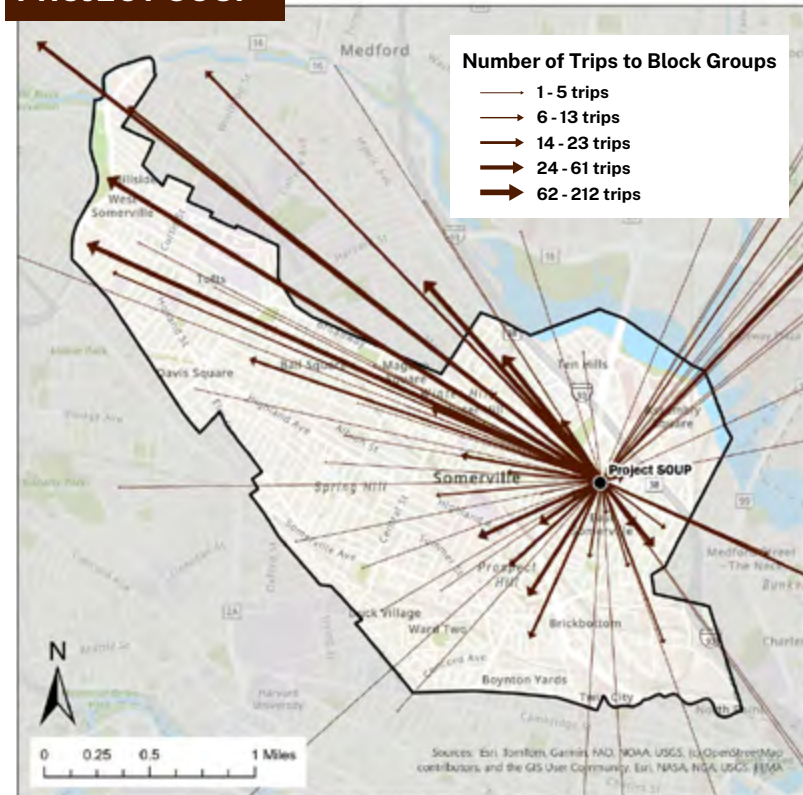


Figure 6.11: Taxi to Health program use shows that transportation support programs can expand access to free food.

Figure 6.11 shows the number of trips from Project SOUP to home addresses. Addresses are grouped by census block groups to protect user privacy. Trips include program ride data from April 2022 to October 2024, a total of 1094 trips from Project SOUP. Source: Taxi to Health Program records, Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities, Somerville HHS.

Surveys administered at the end of the Taxi to Health program emphasize this point and remind us that households with limited incomes are always balancing different expenses. One in 10 respondents specifically mentioned that they could spend more money on food if they could get to the grocery store for free.

One way these transportation challenges have been addressed is to **increase distributions that provide free and reduced cost food near where people live** through the free school markets, box distributions at public housing sites, pantry deliveries, and the availability of the Mobile Farmers Market. These strategies are vital to meeting residents' needs, but they leave many gaps. One public housing resident described how they supplement the Just Eats box distribution they receive at their housing site: *"The food they give here is not going to be enough, one thing, and the other thing, it doesn't have everything that we eat. We go to shopping, to the market to shop, to Market Basket or BJ's or Super 88...Market Basket because it's a little cheaper, for beans, rice. Then at Super 88, meat, and BJ's water, cooking oil, laundry soap."* [translated from Haitian Creole].

They add that: *"[For shopping] sometimes I have a friends who give me a ride. Sometimes, too, I take a bus. I don't go that often to [Project SOUP] because I don't have a car."* [translated from Haitian Creole]

WHO IS USING ONLINE GROCERY SHOPPING WITH SNAP AND WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

The COVID-19 pandemic expedited Massachusetts' investment in IT infrastructure and the development of flexible policies to allow **online grocery shopping with SNAP**² benefits. In May 2021 the number of retailers accepting SNAP online substantially expanded and now includes Instacart, Amazon Fresh, Stop & Shop, Star Market, Aldi, Uber Eats, and DoorDash. Many of these platforms offer half-priced memberships or waive initial delivery fees when a shopper uses SNAP benefits.

The pandemic also quickly **transformed consumer norms** and preferences for online versus in-person grocery shopping. Rates of online grocery shopping are rising among **younger adults, working parents, and urban residents**. From 2020 to 2023, since SNAP was accepted for online grocery shopping, the rate of online shopping increased by approximately 820%, according to the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance.³ [Figure 6.12](#) shows this increase using latest available data.

Saving time, avoiding crowds, bypassing transportation obstacles, easily comparing prices and products, and exploring other grocery stores are all reasons people give for choosing to shop online.

2 Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, "EBT SNAP Online."

3 Walia, "People Turn to Grocery Delivery."

One interviewee, who is a single caregiver for an older parent, noted that online shopping is convenient when weather and transportation are barriers:

“Instacart, I use it like emergencies. If I can’t go outside, if I don’t have transportation, I’ll just do it. But you have to think, when I Instacart, I’m paying cash. Even though now certain stores... I think Instacart now you’re able to use food stamps.”

For an interviewee with a disability who is also a single mom, ordering online was *“... a necessary thing. It’s not just a comfort thing. It’s a necessary thing to have it because I don’t have to pay a taxi to go back and forth. I don’t have to schedule a ride and then be late with groceries, especially if it’s hot outside.”*

Figure 6.12: Total value of online SNAP transactions grew dramatically from 2020 to 2021 and again from 2021 to 2022

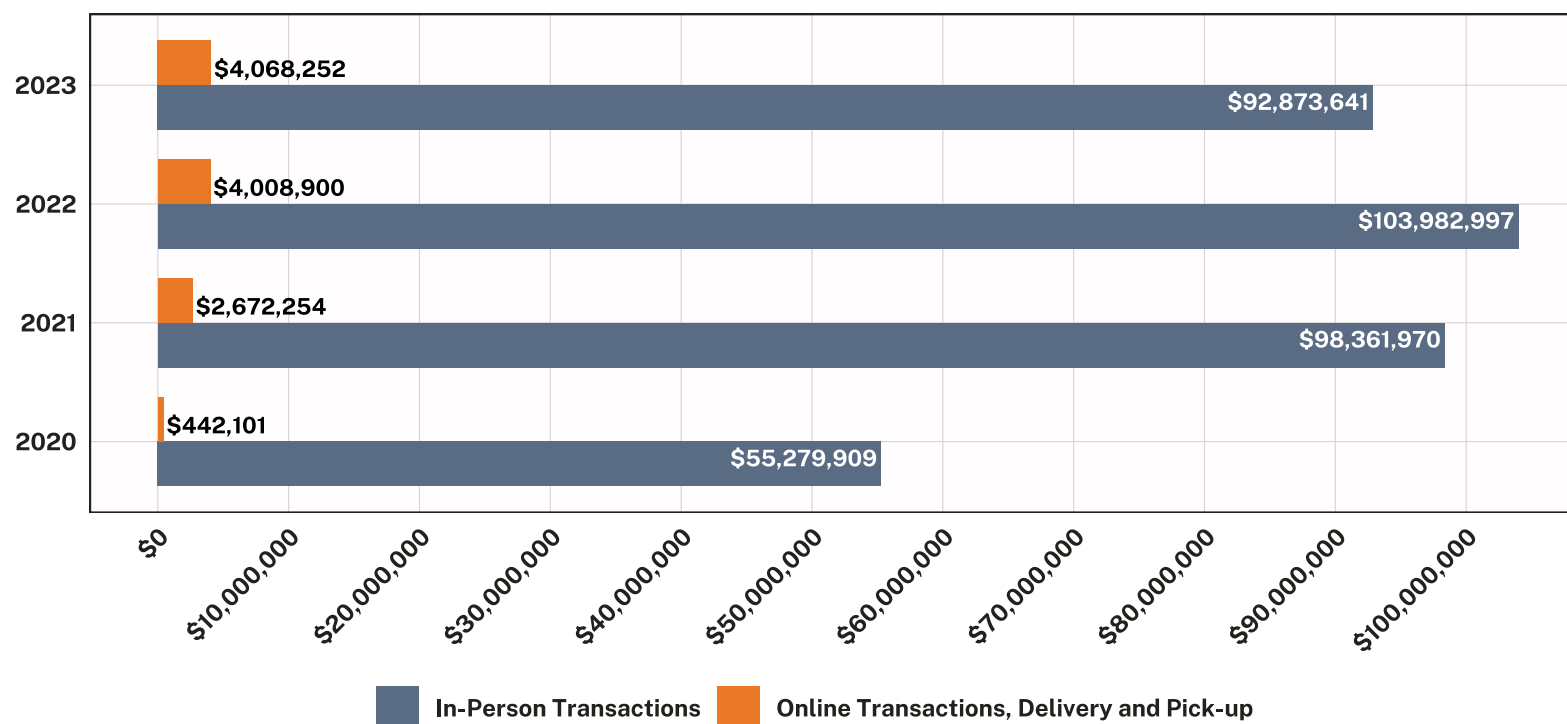


Figure 6.12 shows total SNAP dollars spent online (orange) and in person (blue) from 2020 to 2023. Source: Adapted from Walia 2024, data shared from the DTA to the Boston Globe.

Another mother of three pointed out that convenience and privacy are both advantages of online shopping: *“You get judged by what you’re paying for, right? So, you buy junk food, you’re judged for it. You buy healthy food, you’re judged for it because it’s so expensive. Oh, well, you have money to buy healthy food. Why are you on food stamps in the first place? It doesn’t make any sense. I’m a free person, and I have been giving this I’ve been giving these food stamps to buy food, what I buy with these food stamps that are part of a tax system that I’ve also paid into is nobody’s business. And so, it’s honestly, sometimes it’s just easier to buy it online, like Amazon.... And you can get it ordered the same day. Within hours of you ordering it, it’s amazing..... And then you don’t have to deal with any of the people...It’s actually quite nice.”*

Although online grocery shopping is growing in popularity, there are **still barriers**. Reliable internet access is needed, and people who are less comfortable with technology may find it **challenging to navigate** apps and websites for online grocery shopping. Delivery platforms often include **service and delivery fees** that add unexpected costs to orders, making it more difficult for consumers already facing food insecurity or low food access to use the service. SNAP does not cover these fees, so people using SNAP must pay for them with a credit or debit card.

In addition, **online prices can be higher** to cover operational costs, resulting in a higher grocery bill. One interviewee who is a mother of a teenage daughter noted: *“I’ll order groceries off of Amazon Fresh also, but sometimes things online are just overpriced. So, I try to keep up with getting certain items, especially family-size items. I get stuff like that reasonably priced online or at Trader Joe’s.”*

People also express a **preference for picking out their own groceries**. As one interviewee noted: *“I think a lot of people like to go and pick out their own stuff because you don’t know who your shopper is...”*

Participants in OFAHC’s initial food action plan community meeting had a lukewarm response to the proposed goal of increasing the number of people who use SNAP for online shopping. One participant said: “Not a priority – people who know it, use it”. Although this was the sentiment at this meeting, more should be done to gauge interest in this convenient resource.

HOW DO RESIDENTS CHOOSE TO USE OUR FOOD PANTRIES?

[Chapter 5: The Free Food Supply](#) highlights how pantries and other food distributors get the food they give to residents, including limitations on what they can offer. [Table 6.1](#) shows what these limitations look like in terms of a typical bag or box of food for people who use pantries and distributions. Pantries are key sources of some food items, and many pantries and distributions make a special effort to consistently provide key staples like eggs, milk, frozen meat, potatoes, and bananas in addition to shelf-stable staple items they can easily stock from the food bank. However, they do not provide all the foods needed to feed a household.

Interviews highlighted how people **plan around pantry food**. For example, an interviewee who goes regularly to Project SOUP explained how she goes to the pantry first then buys her remaining groceries: *“When I go to the food pantry, if I have this [at the pantry], I say, Okay, I have this. I don’t need to buy it. If I have the oil, I say, Okay, it’s going to make me [spend] less.”*

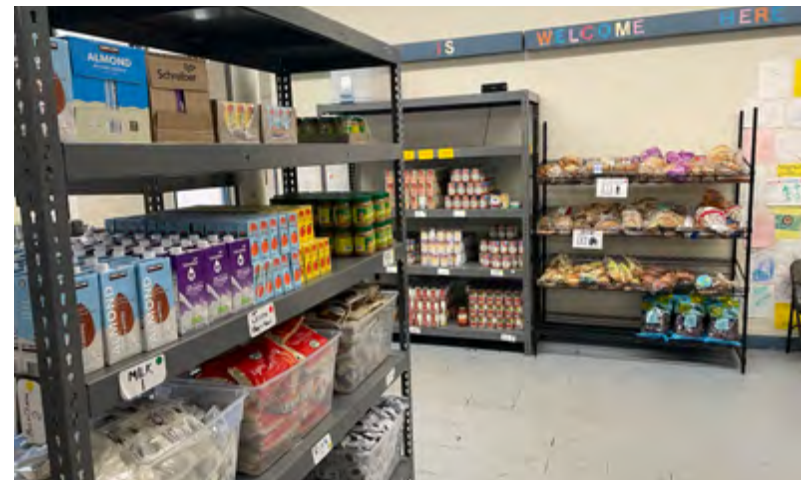
Interviewees were happy with the availability of fresh produce and proteins at pantries and the amount of food in a typical pantry basket. *“They give a lot of food there. So, the first time I went there, I wasn’t prepared...”* [translated from Haitian Creole]

Another immigrant participant remarked on the availability of protein: *“They have fish, but it’s different as the one I bought... Most of them, they have chicken.”*

Interviewees noted, though, that what is available can depend a lot on timing: *“I think it depends on the day you go, because if you go on Tuesday, they give you quite a lot of food. But if you go on Friday or Thursday, as it’s already quite late, as it’s in the afternoon, but it depends if you go in the afternoon, there’s not much left. But if you come early, yes, there’s plenty.”*

The manager of Project SOUP notes it is especially difficult when the **food bank has limited offerings**: *“Because the Food Bank has limited selections, clients often can’t make the exact meal they want to make with what they get here. For example, they might have to go buy onions at the grocery store to make a soup.”*

And while pantries can often be a good source of staple items like potatoes, apples, bananas, beans, pasta, rice, eggs, and milk, there are **many items needed for cooking that visitors cannot get** or can only get rarely. Spices, herbs, garlic, masa corn flour, and cooking oil are some examples of food items that are not often available.



Above: Cases of eggs stocked in the refrigerator at Elizabeth Peabody House’s pantry program. **Below:** Dry goods and bakery items available for pantry visitors at Somerville Homeless Coalition’s Project SOUP.

Table 6.1: What food items do people typically get from pantries?

Pantry Food Items			
	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely or Never
Dry	• Canned vegetables, beans, fruits, soup, and tuna • Rice and pasta • Dry lentils or beans • Oatmeal or cereal • Juice • Peanut butter • Boxed mac & cheese • Nuts or dried fruit	• Condiments, seasoning, or fats (\$, usually) <i>Examples from EPH: jelly, salt and pepper, coffee, oil</i> <i>Examples from SOUP: oil</i> • Masa flour	• Spices • Baking supplies
Produce	• At least 3 staple items (ex. potatoes, onions, oranges, apples, bananas) • 1-5 additional produce items <i>ex: Cabbage, turnips, carrots, packaged salad mix, winter squash (seasonal), green peppers are common</i> <i>Rescued and donated produce – varies widely</i>	• Lemons, plantains, grapes, mangoes, beets, and sweet potatoes • Frozen fruit or vegetable	• Fresh herbs • Garlic • Yucca
Frozen Meat	• Frozen chicken is usually free and often available	• Ground meat (beef, chicken, pork), pork (\$), and fish (\$)	• Beef that is not ground
Dairy and Eggs	• Processed cheese • Eggs • Shelf-stable milk	• Cheddar • Mozzarella (\$) • Fresh milk	• Butter
Bakery & Prepared	• Most pantries received rescued baked goods through a partner organization or business	• Pre-made rescue foods	
Notes	• Pantries go out of their way to secure milk consistently, often purchasing to supplement • Almond milk is usually available, and more so in recent years as the GBFB has sought to accommodate diverse dietary needs. • Pantries may lack the preferred type of a food item. For example, a person looking for black beans might find only red beans or lentils. • Pantry operations sometimes create exceptions to the above, ex: Shepherd's Kitchen does not have a donation or food rescue partner for baked goods. EPH doesn't get juice due to storage constraints.	• Pork and fish are rarely free. Pantries with a food budget may purchase them since these are popular choices, but not every pantry can afford to do so. • Whether prepared foods are available often depends on the day the pantry receives rescue food. • Frozen fruits or vegetables depends on the pantry's storage capacity. • The GBFB has recently been able to offer masa corn flour periodically, whereas 5 years ago it would have been rarely or never available.	• A person going to a pantry will rarely be able to get all the foods they want for a particular dish. • While the GBFB has increased availability of diet- and culture-specific foods, many items are still hard to find at pantries.

\$ = Items marked with \$ must be purchased by the pantry program.

Free School Food Markets		
Almost Always	Sometimes	1-2 times per year
• Shelf stable milk (choice dairy or almond)* • Beans* • Breakfast – cereal or oatmeal* • Peanut butter* • Canned tuna* • Eggs* • Rice • Boxed Mac & Cheese • Bananas, Apples, Carrots, and Onions <i>* = always provided by design</i>	• Lettuce • Peppers • Avocados • Plantains • Oranges • Mandarins • Limes	• Mangoes • Broccoli • Celery • Grapes • Chayote • Yuca • Tomatoes • Squash • Oil • Masa
Note: FFF purchases food items as needed to ensure that staples are always available, and preferred items are occasionally offered. In the 2024-25 School year, for example, FFF purchased bananas, onions, and black or red beans when not available through other sources to ensure these staples are always offered. Funding support from the City of Somerville has helped make this possible.		



Left: Cases of food from Food For Free to be set up for the Free School Market food distribution program at East Somerville Community School. **Right:** Carrots and pears arranged on shelves at Somerville Hispanic Association for Community Development's Food4All pantry.

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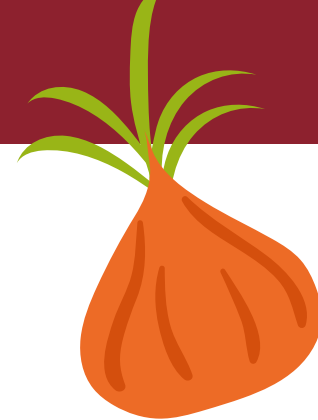
TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS:

- **Transportation remains a barrier** to accessing fresh, culturally-relevant, and cost-effective food options.
 - » Winter Hill, including the city's largest public housing site, does not have a full-service grocery store within a 10-minute walk.
 - » Union Square and far West Somerville are without easy access to a food pantry.
- **Local control over grocery store placement is limited.** Transporting food to people or transporting people to food may be more feasible.
- Emergency food providers function as an **interconnected system**. Food pantries, distributions, and community fridges operate as a de facto network despite differing management structures.
- Pantries and mobile food distribution programs successfully offer alternatives to **address access gaps by bringing food to people**, but gaps remain within this network.
- **Use of emergency food assistance has increased.** Food pantries are experiencing sustained or growing demand, underscoring the need for consistent and predictable financial support to maintain operations and service quality.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE FOOD ACCESS LANDSCAPE:

- Use Taxi to Health data to elevate **transportation access as a key driver** of health with food access an important component.
- Improve permanent, reliable free and affordable food access in the **Union Square** area and **West Somerville**.
- Increase awareness and uptake of **SNAP online shopping**, prioritizing homebound residents.



Food Budgets and Benefits

This chapter looks at how residents manage food costs and other financial barriers, and how public benefits can help. The first section examines the considerable increase in food costs that has occurred since the pandemic and how people are managing their food budgets to make ends meet. The second section offers an overview of public benefits that Somerville residents can use to access food, including how these benefits help and where they fall short.

Cost: How do people afford food?

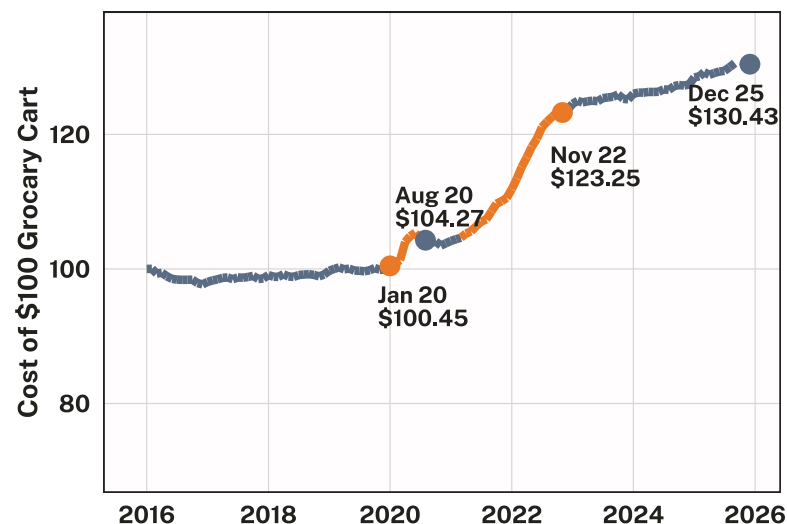
The food people can afford depends on their income, their expenses, and the benefits and other resources they can use to purchase food. This section starts by sharing national data on food costs. It then looks at how people feel about recent food price increases and how they manage their food budgets.

HOW HAVE FOOD COSTS CHANGED RECENTLY?

[Figure 7.1](#) shows how prices for food to cook at home have increased over time, compared to January 2016. A basket of food that cost \$100 in January 2016 cost \$130.43 by December 2025. Over the same time period, the Consumer Price Index for all items had a similar pattern, and at most times increased faster than food prices.¹

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “All Items in U.S. City Average.”

Figure 7.1: US Food Prices Have Increased Since 2016, Including Two Periods of Rapid Increase



Data shown are national Consumer Price Index data that track changes in the cost of food purchased to cook at home for all urban consumers. Data have been adjusted so that January 2016 equals 100. Periods where monthly price increases were in the top quarter of all monthly price increases for a sustained time (7 months) are shown in orange. The gap in data at the end of 2025 is a result of the government shutdown in October 2025. Source: Bureau of Labor Consumer Price Index data, series Food at home in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted.²

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Food At Home in U.S. City.”



Vegetables arranged for sale at the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market's Clarendon Hill Towers location in West Somerville. Market prices are typically at or below wholesale cost because the market is operated as a food access program of the City's Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities.

It's usual for prices to increase a little each year – the government anticipates an average annual increase of 2%. However, 2022 saw an increase of 11%, the largest food price increase since the 1980s.³ The reasons for this increase are complex and global in scale; they include factors such as weather and bird flu, increases in fuel and labor costs, pandemic disruptions to the food system, and turmoil in food producing areas.

The rate of price increases slowed in 2023 and 2024, but food costs continued to increase. There is a lot of variation in price increases among food products, since these products often have very different supply chains. For example, the prices of some produce items have increased slowly, but key staples like eggs and beef, which are fundamental to quality of life for many people, have seen considerable increases or price spikes.⁴ Interviewees and other stakeholders emphasized again and again how expensive grocery shopping feels for people today.

HOW DO PEOPLE STRETCH FOOD DOLLARS?

All the interviewees mentioned high food prices. Some remarked on how they were able to afford food before but are struggling now: *“...food was a lot less expensive, and I had a really good full-time job. And it wasn't like it is now, trying to pay for groceries. It's just shocking.”*

One participant remarked *“I used to go to restaurants more, now I go less. I buy according to what I earn, right? Sometimes, when I work more during a month I can afford to buy something that I don't buy all the time.”* [translated from Portuguese]

Others shared how they had to adapt their diet as prices increased: *“... I haven't eaten anything but chicken, chicken, chicken for a long time. I think red meat is very expensive.”*

Overall, interviewees with limited food resources spent a lot of time and energy planning and strategizing about where and how to get food. Most cooked for themselves or their families. Interviewees relied on coupons or deals from grocery stores, used Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for more expensive produce or proteins, and took advantage of HIP or SNAP matches at farmers markets. They also mentioned planning around foods available regularly at pantries or going to pantries to see what they could get before purchasing items from the grocery store.

One interviewee who is a caregiver for her elderly father explained that her impressive budget stretching and food preparation strategy involves buying food items when they are affordable and then freezing them and looking at grocery circulars to plan her meals. She also uses her culinary skills to ensure nothing is wasted:

“If I buy a whole chicken...I'll bake a whole chicken. My dad loves chicken breasts, so I slice a couple of slices of chicken breasts. My aunt next door, she loves the legs, so I take off the legs. Whatever is left, I take that meat and I make a chicken soup, a chicken noodle soup. So, nothing is wasted. So, I think knowledge of how to prep... It all comes down to one thing. It's planning, prepping, and that's it.”

³ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Sticker Shock at the Grocery.”

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Food Prices and Spending*.

Some interviewees felt well-equipped to budget for food for their families. One caregiver with a disability remarked on how she deals with increased prices: *“Things have gone up, but I don’t have too many complaints. I’m just glad that I can go. Like I said, I can go to the store, and I have the freedom and I have the options to choose. I can order a little. Because we only get so much in SNAP benefits. I can order a little bit. I can go to Market Basket, get some things, and I can go to Trader Joe’s and get the rest.”*

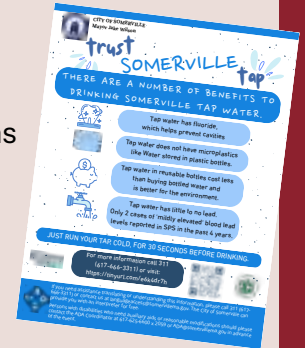
A mom of two felt she had the resources to feed her family: *“A part from the Food [pantry], a part from Food stamps (SNAP), a part from what I’m going to pick up, and a part from WIC, I could say that I live well, I don’t live badly. If it weren’t for the high rent, I could say we’re doing fine.”* [translated from Spanish]

In addition to interview discussions, OFAHC promoted a voluntary survey for community members to share tips on how they stretch their food dollars. Questions were open-ended and focused on shopping habits, meal preparation, food storage, and budgeting. Common themes in the survey responses echoed ideas shared by interviewees, including **meal planning to take advantage of sales, purchasing seasonal produce, maximizing SNAP benefits, and tracking circulars, apps, and sales to find the lowest unit price for an item.** Responses also highlighted connections between sustainability and budgeting by ensuring no food is wasted and opting for more sustainable and cheaper proteins like beans and poultry. OFAHC summarized these tips in a flyer included in [Appendix 5](#).

CALL-OUT

TRUST YOUR TAP CAMPAIGN

Somerville’s Health and Human Services Department (HHS) frequently hears concerns around using home tap water for drinking. At the same time, community members and leaders have shared challenges around the cost, environmental impact, and difficulty of transporting bottled water.



To help people feel secure in choosing tap water as an affordable, convenient, and environmentally sustainable option, HHS’s OFAHC and SomerPromise launched an informational campaign in 2025, including:

- An expert panel discussion in which service providers who work with families could get answers to questions and concerns they hear from community members. The panel included representatives from the Department of Water and Sewer, Somerville Public Schools’s Nursing, and Cambridge Health Alliance.
- Design and dissemination of a [one-page flyer](#) and [four-page guide](#), with input from panel experts.
- OFAHC and SomerPromise staff attendance at partner meetings to share information.



The campaign is ongoing with a particular focus on affordability in a time when everyone is feeling the burden of food and living costs.

Benefits: How do public benefits support food access?

Somerville residents can access several benefits that increase their ability to purchase food at the grocery store or directly from farmers.

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program, and SUN Bucks (formerly Summer EBT) all provide dollars to buy food at grocery stores.
 - » Some MassHealth recipients can receive grocery food dollars through their health insurance.
- Several state and locally-administered benefit programs provide dollars to purchase food directly from farmers, usually at a farmers market. These programs provide key access to fresh foods and at the same time support local farmers.

For someone trying to get enough food for their household, the usefulness of a benefit depends on the **amount of the benefit** and **how easy it is to get and use**. This often creates trade-offs for recipients. For example, SNAP has strict income and immigration status-based eligibility criteria. The application process can be complex and time-consuming. However, once a household is approved for SNAP, they receive a comparatively large and flexible amount of money with which to buy food. By contrast, the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program for older adults has an easier application process, but the coupon benefit amount is comparatively small and can only be used at farmers markets.

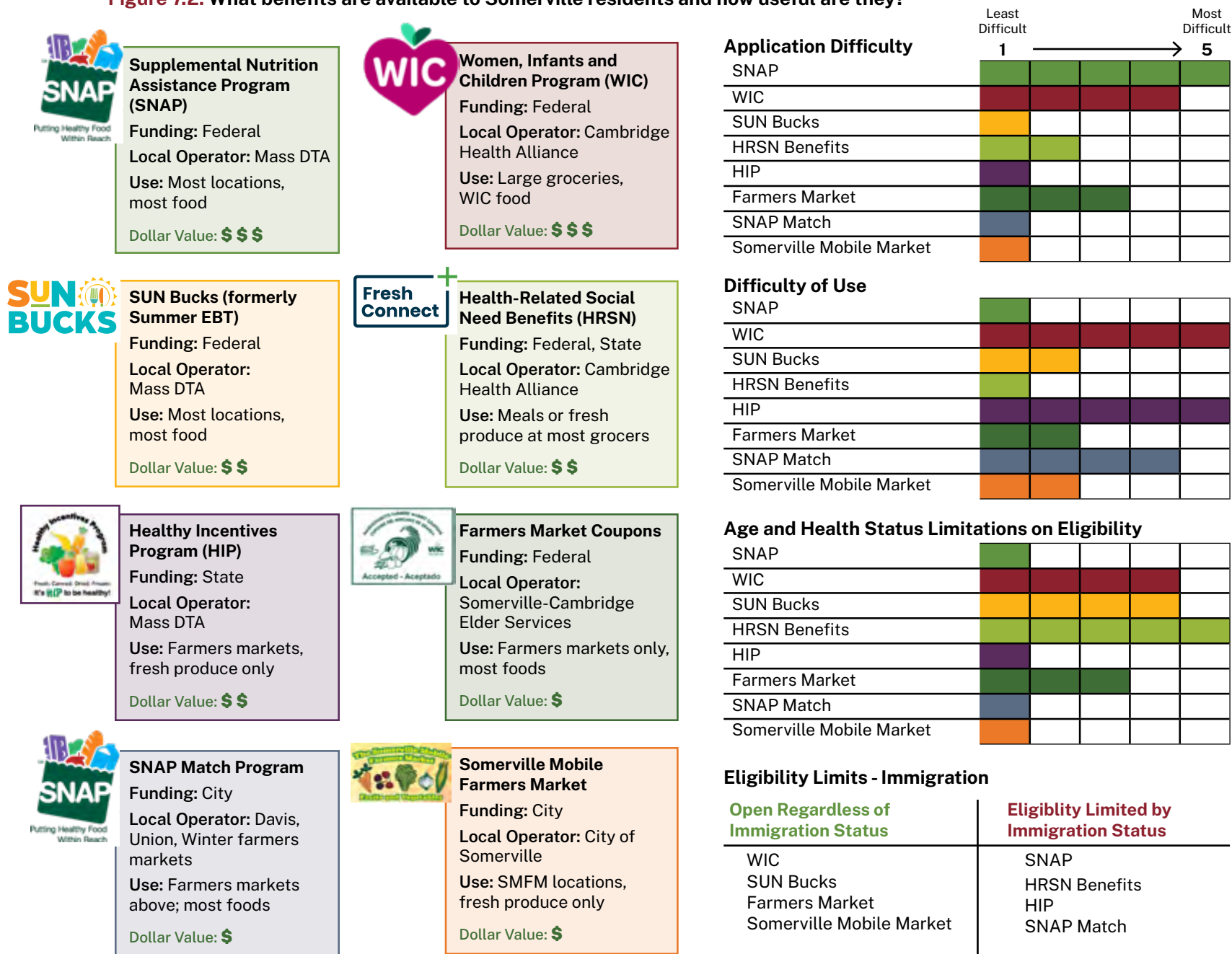
Generally, locally-funded benefits are simpler to get, but smaller since the City has less money. Federally-funded benefits like WIC and SNAP have a greater number of administrative requirements but offer more dollar value once enrolled.

[Figure 7.2](#) looks at how useful benefits are in terms of amount, eligibility restrictions, and use restrictions. The following pages offer a detailed description of each benefit program, including:

- what it is,
- who is eligible, and
- where it can be used.

For more about how benefits are funded and administered, see [Chapter 11: Local, State, and Federal Policies and Funding in the Food System](#).

Figure 7.2: What benefits are available to Somerville residents and how useful are they?



BENEFITS FOR FOOD FROM THE GROCERY STORE: SNAP, WIC, SUN BUCKS, HEALTHCARE-BASED BENEFITS



SNAP: Helping Low-Income Households Get Groceries

What: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) offers a dollar value of benefits that can be spent on groceries at most food retailers. Only foods to cook or heat at home are eligible. Hot, prepared foods, such as rotisserie chickens, cannot be purchased with SNAP, even if they are sold at a grocery store that accepts SNAP. The value and flexibility of the program make it the most important food benefit available to Somerville residents, and to any US resident struggling to afford food.

From October 2023 to September 2024, the average SNAP benefit amount per person in Massachusetts was \$196 a month, or about \$6.44 a day (the latest available statewide data).⁵ The maximum amount for a household of four people was \$973 during this time period.

Apart from the direct benefit SNAP provides, enrollment has added benefits. SNAP enrollment can serve as proof of income for other benefits, such as fuel assistance, a reduced cost MBTA pass, and SUN Bucks (formerly Summer EBT). People

⁵ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *MA SNAP Factsheet*.

CALL-OUT

HOW DO BENEFIT PROGRAMS DETERMINE INCOME ELIGIBILITY?

Income eligibility for most programs is determined by federal poverty measures, either because the program itself is all or partially federally funded or because the program relies on the infrastructure of a federally funded program.

Federal poverty measures are calculated based on the number of people in the household and updated annually in January to reflect inflation. [Table 7.1](#) shows the monthly income limits most used in benefit eligibility for a household of one and a household of four in 2026.¹

Table 7.1: What are the monthly income limits for benefits program as of 2026?

Household Size	Monthly Income Limit	
	185% of the Poverty Line	200% of the Poverty Line
1 person	\$2,460.50	\$2,660.00
4 people	\$5,087.50	\$5,500.00
Programs that use this measure directly:	WIC, SUN Bucks, Senior Farmers Market Coupons	SNAP
Programs that use this measure indirectly:	WIC Farmers Market Coupons	HIP, the Somerville SNAP Match

Note: Health-Related Social Needs income eligibility is determined through MassHealth eligibility. The income limits for MassHealth depend on age and are too complex to list here.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, “2026 Poverty Guidelines.”

2024 HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

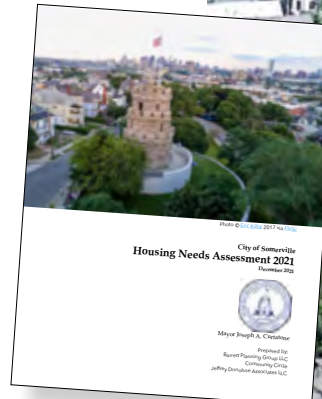
The high cost of other basic needs, especially housing, adds to the challenge of rising food prices. Somerville's Office of Housing produces a Housing Needs Assessment, which examines gaps in housing access.¹ According to 2022 US Census data, 36.9% of renter households and 30% of owner households spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs, defined as being “cost-burdened”. The report highlights housing as a concern for the following specific groups:

- Households earning 50% of the Area Median Income or less. There is a large gap between the available units affordable to this group and the number of households who need them.
- Housing for people with disabilities, especially older adults and currently unhoused people with disabilities. These groups are more likely to have lower incomes and need housing adapted to their health needs.
- Families that need 3+ bedrooms. There are not enough units of this size, making it especially difficult for larger families at the lower end of the income spectrum to stay in Somerville.

The 2024 Housing Needs Assessment raises up many of the same demographic groups highlighted in this assessment, demonstrating the close connection between food and housing as basic human needs.

¹ City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Office of Housing, *Housing Needs Assessment*.

Photo credit: Victor Nascimento, Somerville Public Space and Urban Forestry



with SNAP automatically have advantage of statewide HIP benefits and the Somerville SNAP match, described below.

Who: SNAP eligibility is determined for a household, that is a single person or group of people who typically purchase and prepare food together. The household must have a combined income at or below 200% of the federal poverty line to qualify.⁶ Household members must also be US citizens or have certain federally qualified immigration statuses to receive benefits.

Where: SNAP benefits can be used at almost all grocery stores and neighborhood markets in Somerville, as well as farmers markets and many convenience stores. Starting in Fall 2023, households experiencing homelessness or those with an older adult may use benefits for prepared food at a small number of restaurants and food trucks approved for a state pilot of the Restaurant Meals Program.⁷ At this time, there are no approved restaurants in Somerville.

Administrator: Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA).



WIC: Groceries to Nourish Early Life and Parenthood

What: The Women, Infants and Children program (WIC) supports the health of pregnant and breastfeeding people and children under age five. WIC provides free food and formula support, education for breastfeeding, and healthy eating and referrals to related health services such as mental health counseling or dental care. The stage of pregnancy, post-partum status, or age of the child determines how much food support a caregiver receives in their food package. The package is an approved list of foods that fall into certain categories and meet specific criteria in alignment with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.⁸ WIC participants use a card loaded with electronic benefits and must adhere to the guidance when purchasing food. In June 2024, updates to the food package were approved to allow more flexibility and be more culturally responsive.⁹ Some changes include expanding the types of allowable grains, yogurts, and fish and increasing the cash benefit for fruits and vegetables.

Who: The WIC nutrition benefit is available to income-eligible pregnant and postpartum people, as well as caregivers of children younger than five years old including fathers, grandparents, foster parents, and other legal guardians. Household income must be 185% or less of the federal poverty line to qualify. Households are also eligible if they receive Mass-Health Standard, SNAP, or cash assistance (TAFDC).¹⁰

6 Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.”

7 Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, “Restaurant Meals Program Pilot.”

8 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, “WIC Food Packages.”

9 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, “Revisions in the WIC Food Packages.”

10 Massachusetts Department of Public Health, “WIC Eligibility.”

To receive WIC benefits, participants are required to attend two in-person nutrition visits each year. The closest WIC office for Somerville residents is on the Cambridge-Somerville border at 120 Beacon Street in Somerville and is part of the Cambridge Health Alliance's services. The office re-located from Winter Hill to its current address in 2023. Massachusetts currently has a waiver allowing clients to use the telehealth platform WICsmart for their two visits if they are unable to make it into the office. The waiver that allows this is set to expire September 30, 2026 and these requirements will be revisited at that time.

Where: WIC is accepted at most large grocery stores in Somerville, including Market Basket, two Star Markets, two Stop & Shops, the Somerville Whole Foods, and three Walgreens locations.¹¹ It can be difficult for smaller markets to get approved for WIC benefit use because they must maintain a large inventory to carry all the WIC-approved foods.

Nationally, WIC is working to modernize its program, including a 2023 rule change to allow online grocery shopping using WIC benefits.¹² In April 2025, Massachusetts' WIC program began to allow online shopping with Walmart, joining several other pilots across the country.¹³

Administrator: Cambridge Health Alliance contracts with the state government to administer the program.

11 Massachusetts Department of Public Health, "Buy Good Food with WIC."

12 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, "WIC Online Ordering."

13 Center for Nutrition & Health Impact, "WIC Online Shopping Projects."



SUN Bucks: Funds to Feed Kids During Summer Break

What: SUN Bucks, formerly called Summer EBT, provides \$40 per month for each eligible child from June through August, for a total of \$120 per year.¹⁴ The benefit can be used to purchase any SNAP-eligible food (see above). Unlike SNAP, however, the benefits have a strict time limit. Recipients must use the benefit within 120 days of receiving it.

Who: Any child who is at a school that participates in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and in an income-eligible household receives this benefit. Income-eligible children ages 6-16 at non-NSLP schools can also receive SUN Bucks. The income limit is 185% of the poverty line. Most people who qualify are directly certified because they receive MassHealth or SNAP. This means they do not need to complete an application and will automatically receive the benefit. Households with eligible children who are not directly certified may apply during the school year with self-declared income statements. These households are typically newcomers to the school district who are not yet enrolled in public benefits.

Where: The SUN Bucks benefit can be used at any location that accepts SNAP. In Somerville, SUN Bucks dollars are eligible for the SNAP match at the Union Square, Davis Square, and Winter farmers markets (see more below on the SNAP match).

Administrator: Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA).

14 Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, "SUN Bucks FAQ"



Health Related Social Need (HRSN) Benefits: Funds for People with MassHealth and Complex Medical Needs

What: Some MassHealth members can receive food benefits to support their health. Examples of these benefits in Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA), Somerville's largest primary care provider, are:

- grocery gift cards of \$100 per month, called Fresh Connect, or
- 10 medically tailored meals per week.

Recipients are authorized to receive benefits for six months, with possible extension if the member is still eligible. The program used to offer medically tailor grocery deliveries as an alternative to prepared medically tailored meals but discontinued this option in 2026.

Who: MassHealth members must be part of an Accountable Care Organization plan, which also means they must have MassHealth Standard. MassHealth Standard is available for low-income people who are citizens or have certain qualified non-citizen statuses. In addition, they must be experiencing food insecurity and have a complex health need. Complex health needs include some physical health conditions, behavioral health needs, a high-risk pregnancy, high emergency department utilization, or challenges with basic activities of daily life (IADL/ADL needs).

Where: Recipients can use food cards at participating retailers, for example Stop & Shop, Walmart, and the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market. Benefits are limited to the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Administrator: Certain health insurance plans that work with the state's MassHealth program.



Left: Shoppers at the Somerville Mobile Market's Council on Aging location in West Somerville.



Right: The produce section of Somerville's Market Basket location.

BENEFITS FOR FOOD AT FARMERS MARKETS: HIP, FARMERS MARKET COUPONS, SNAP MATCH, SMFM



HIP: Extra Funds for SNAP Users at Farmers Markets

What: The Massachusetts Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) provides state residents who already receive SNAP benefits with additional money each month to buy produce directly from Massachusetts farmers. Any fresh, canned, dried, or frozen fruits or vegetables sold by approved vendors are HIP-eligible if they do not contain added salt, sugar, fat, or oil. SNAP households comprised of one to two people get \$40/month, households of three to five get \$60/month, and households of six or more get \$80/month.¹⁵

Who: Residents must have a non-zero SNAP balance to be able to use HIP—transactions are processed by deducting and immediately returning the cost of the produce to a resident's SNAP balance. This means that transactions using HIP do not deduct from a resident's monthly SNAP benefit but do require residents to be enrolled in the SNAP program and have at least a cent on their EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) card.

Where: HIP-approved vendors can include farmers markets, farm stands, mobile farmers markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. In Somerville, there are HIP vendors at each of the three farmers markets, and all items at the Somerville Mobile

¹⁵ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, "HIP FAQ."



Langwater Farm's stand at the Davis Square Farmers Market displaying their HIP accepted sign.

Farmers Market are HIP-eligible. There are also several CSAs in Somerville that accept HIP.¹⁶

Administrator: Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA).



WIC and Senior Farmers Market Coupons

What: WIC and Senior Farmers Market Coupons provide money for eligible participants, including WIC recipients and low-income adults aged 60 and older, to spend at farmers markets. Coupons come in paper booklets. Senior coupon booklets total \$25 as of 2025. The amount increased to \$50 in 2023 and 2024 with ARPA funding, but it has now been lowered to the pre-ARPA value. WIC coupons come in booklets of \$30. Starting in 2025, each WIC household may only

¹⁶ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, "DTA Finder."

receive one \$30 booklet. In previous years, each eligible family member could receive a booklet, meaning some households got \$60, \$90, or more in benefits.

Who: To qualify for senior coupons, residents must be 60 years of age or older or disabled and living in senior housing and earn an income that is lower than the established income limit of 185% of the federal poverty line.¹⁷ Participants must show proof of age with ID and verbally attest that they are income-eligible.

To qualify for WIC coupons, WIC recipients must be over four months old. Because WIC recipients now get one booklet per household instead of per individual, this eligibility criterion no longer applies in practice since most mothers with children under four months are eligible.

Where: Coupon booklet distributions happen at various sites throughout the state and residents can spend them at approved farmers markets and farm stands in Massachusetts. Somerville's coupon-approved farmers markets are the Davis Square Farmers Market, Union Square Farmers Market, and all four sites of the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market. Recipients cannot use the coupons at the Winter Farmers Market because the coupons are distributed in summer and expire in October.

Administrator: Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services is agency designated to administer coupons for Somerville by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR).

¹⁷ Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, "Farmers Market Nutrition Program."



The Somerville SNAP Match

What: The SNAP match doubles the purchasing power for someone with SNAP, turning \$15 into \$30 to spend on SNAP-eligible items. It supports both the shopper and the farmer since it enables users to purchase more items. Shoppers can use up to \$15 each week at each Somerville market.

Who and Where: Anyone who is using SNAP at the Davis Square, Union Square, or Winter Farmers Market can get the SNAP match. The City-run Somerville Mobile Farmers Market does not operate a SNAP match because it uses City funds to ensure that all foods are low-cost for all shoppers.

Administrator: The Union Square, Davis Square, and Winter Farmers Markets administer the program.



The Somerville Mobile Farmers Market

What: The City of Somerville has long supported improved food access to farm fresh, seasonal produce through its Somerville Mobile Farmers Market (SMFM). The market purchases produce directly from local farms and sells it weekly at four consistent locations from July through October. Through City and grant support, the sale price is kept low so that everyone can purchase locally-grown products.

As of 2025, the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market sources produce from five vendors; a small, family-owned and operated farm, a regional farm produce distributor, and three non-profit farm aggregator organizations. Partnering with multiple local farms allows the market to have access to a

wider variety of produce and ensure greater availability of popular items. Partnerships with non-profit food aggregators have become extremely important, due to their mission of training and supporting new small farmers. Many of those small growers focus on culturally relevant produce items that have proven to be both very popular with SMFM shoppers and difficult to source through conventional distributors.

Who: The market is open to everyone. It accepts payment in cash, credit, debit, Farmers Market Coupons (WIC and Senior), FreshConnect, and nutrition benefits, such as SNAP/HIP. The SMFM serves an average of 200 shoppers per week and draws a diverse crowd across income levels and cultural backgrounds. Many people have built shopping at the market into their weekly, seasonal routine. Shoppers find not only affordable produce, but also community by regularly connecting with their neighbors and swapping food stories and recipes.

Where: The SMFM operates once a week in each of four locations: Clarendon Hill Towers and the Council on Aging/SCALE in West Somerville, Mystic Public Housing in Winter Hill, and in front of the Somerville Public Library in East Somerville.

Administrator: The City of Somerville's Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities.

How do residents use benefits?

SNAP is the largest dollar value benefit received by Somerville residents. SNAP recipients spent \$16,314,078 of their benefits at Somerville food retailers from June 2023 through May 2024, the latest local data available. The average spending per Somerville recipient was \$203 per month for this period.¹⁸

Enrollment in SNAP varies month to month because receipt of benefits depends on both continued eligibility and on completing the administrative steps needed to stay enrolled. [Figure 7.3](#) shows monthly enrollment in SNAP from 2018-2025.

The **number of SNAP recipients** in Somerville had been declining before the pandemic but began to **increase steadily from mid-2020 to mid-2023** and remained high through much of 2024.

During this period, states were allowed to waive some procedural requirements for applying and maintaining benefits, making it easier to get and keep SNAP. The city also grew its capacity to help residents apply for benefits. Since 2020, three Somerville organizations have become SNAP Outreach Partners: the Somerville Homeless Coalition, Elizabeth Peabody House, and the City of Somerville's Health and Human Services Department. These partners work directly with a dedicated liaison at the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the state agency that administers SNAP. Partners also have access to DTA records to see client status.

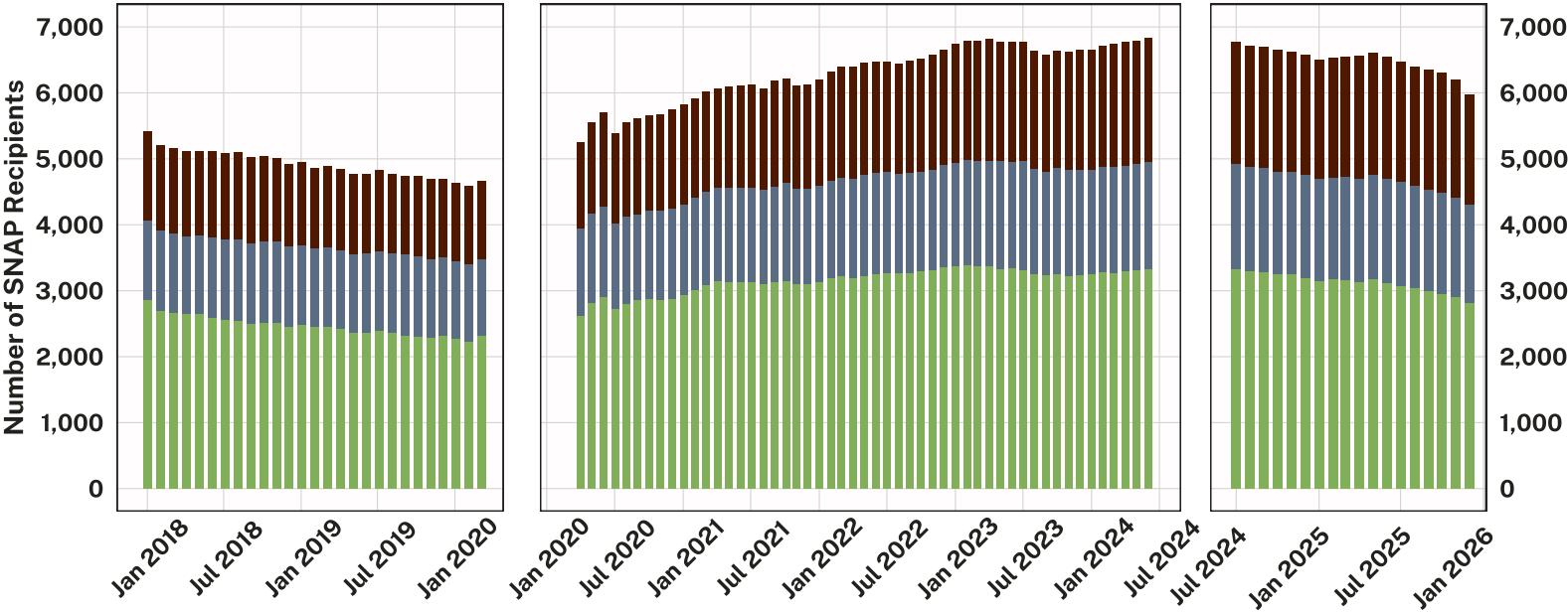
¹⁸ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, *SNAP Purchases by Zip Code*.

Through easier applications and added local social service provider support, Somerville increased SNAP enrollment in recent years even as the number of eligible residents has likely declined.

US Census data indicate the percentage of Somerville residents at or below the income limit for SNAP declined from 23.9% in 2018 to 19.6% in 2024, the latest available data. During the same period, the percentage of SNAP recipients

as a share of total population increased from about 6.4% in 2018 to 8.3% in 2024, on average, as shown in [Figure 7.4](#). These measures do not align exactly, since some people below the SNAP income limit are not eligible for SNAP and the data come from different sources. However, the general trend from 2020-2024 is a promising indication that service providers and other community connectors are successfully helping eligible people access this key nutrition security benefit.

Figure 7.3: Number of SNAP recipients in Somerville increased from 2020-2024, but has declined more recently



Data show number of people in Somerville who receive SNAP benefits by month and zip code, from January 2018 to December 2025. Colors correspond to the three zip codes in Somerville. Source: MA DTA Caseload by Zip Code Reports.¹

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¹ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, “Caseload by Zip Code Reports.”

In mid-2024, SNAP enrollment began to decline again in Somerville and throughout Massachusetts. Evidence strongly suggests this is due to a lack of capacity at DTA rather than a decrease in need. In 2025, between two thirds and three quarters of callers trying to reach a caseworker could not connect due to high call volume. This means that people cannot get case issues resolved in a timely manner and lose benefits (see the section *What are barriers to getting and using benefits?* below for more details on issues accessing SNAP).¹⁹

For households with children, **WIC and SUN Bucks** provide dollars for groceries to keep the family nourished.

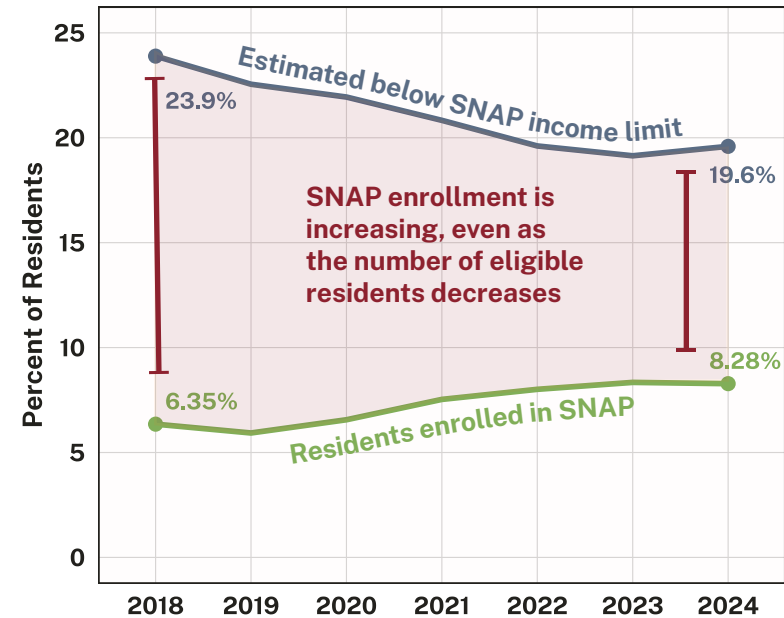
In Somerville, 787 individuals were enrolled in WIC in 2025. This is about 73% of eligible individuals. WIC has experienced a trend similar to SNAP: while the number of people estimated to be eligible has either decreased or remained the same in recent years, the percentage of eligible people enrolled has increased during that time. [Figure 7.5](#) shows a 21.5 percentage point increase in WIC participation from 2019 to 2025. During this period, the number of eligible people declined by 600.

An interviewee using WIC said they valued both the food benefits and program support: “I like it [WIC], not because they give me food, but because when I take my daughter to her appointment, I see how the nutritionist is monitoring her progress, her diet, everything.”

As children enter school, families can access summer SUN Bucks. In a typical year, **nearly all SPS students who qualify**

¹⁹ Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, “Investing in DTA and SNAP.”

Figure 7.4: Number of people enrolled in SNAP has increased relative to number of people who may be eligible



Data in blue show the percentage of people in Somerville below 200% of the federal poverty line according to US Census data.

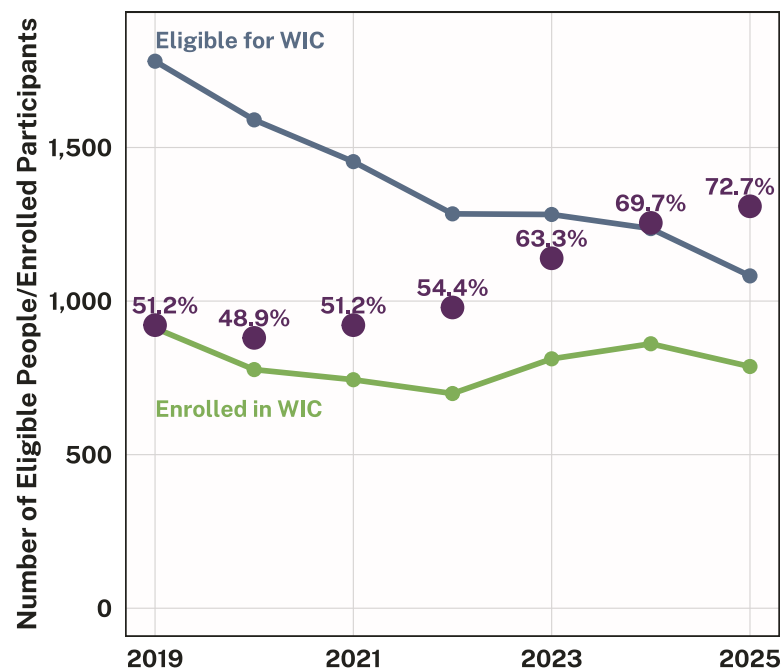
Data in green show the average number of people enrolled in SNAP from DTA monthly caseload reports.

These data come from different sources and should be read as an overall trend, not an exact measure. 200% approximates the eligibility limit for SNAP in Massachusetts, however some people below this income level are ineligible or do not receive benefits due to immigration status or complexities in the income thresholds and benefit calculation math. Source: American Community Survey and DTA Caseload by Zipcode.^{1,2}

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months.”

² Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, “Caseload by Zip Code Reports.”

Figure 7.5: Somerville WIC participation rates have increased while the number of total eligible people has decreased



Data show the number of people in Somerville enrolled in WIC in **green**, the number of people eligible for WIC in **blue**, and the percentage of eligible people participating in **purple**. Source: WIC Data accessed through the Population Health Information Tool.¹

¹ Massachusetts Department of Public Health, “PHIT WIC Data.”

for SUN Bucks receive the benefit automatically through direct certification. In the 2024-25 school year, 2,432 students, or about 48% of enrolled students, were directly certified. This number is very similar to the proportion of low-income students in the district, which was reported at 45.6% for the 2024-25 school year.²⁰

Although directly certified students automatically receive the benefit, many families struggle to use it because they must receive the card in the mail and then activate it by creating a PIN. Since 2025, families can manage their benefit through DTA connect, the DTA’s online portal. SPS and the City’s Health and Human Services Department have partnered to inform eligible families about the SUN Bucks benefit and help them to access it. This partnership is especially valuable in the summer when fewer school service providers are available to support families.

Health Related Social Need food benefits through Tufts Health Together, CHA’s Accountable Care Organization (ACO) plan, offer significant support to a small number of residents with complex health needs.

- In 2024: 185 Somerville residents received a social benefit – 139 for food and 46 for housing.
- In 2025: 218 Somerville residents received a social benefit – 213 for food and 5 for housing.

These numbers reflect the reality that food support programs are easier to fund and sustain, compared with more costly housing support programs like rental assistance.

²⁰ Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Selected Populations.”

HIP and the SNAP Match jointly extend SNAP dollars at Somerville farmers markets, while farmers market coupons provide extra dollars for older adults and WIC recipients.

In 2024, the latest available data, **912 unique Somerville SNAP recipients used HIP**. During this time, there was an average of 6,709 SNAP recipients, meaning that a little less than one in six SNAP recipients used HIP benefits. Although this is a minority of SNAP recipients, the HIP program is very important to those who use it regularly.

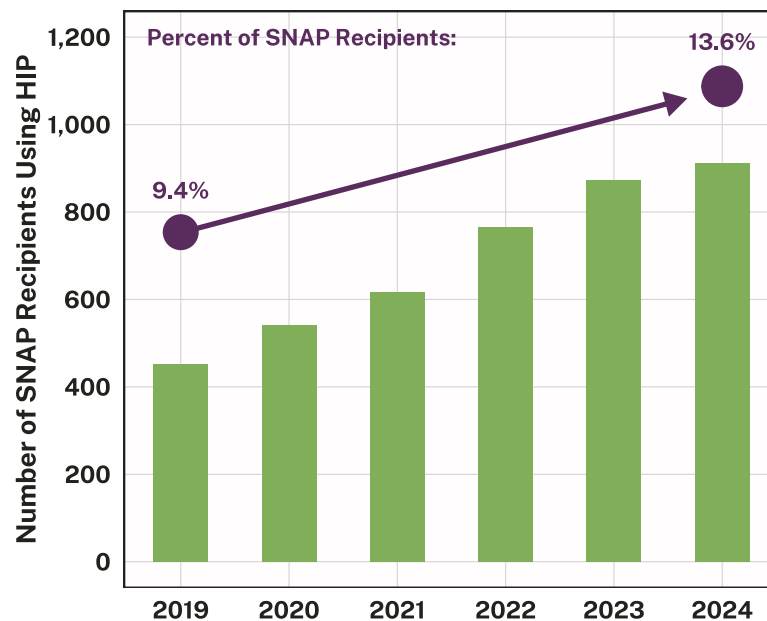
One interviewee, a parent who used SNAP intermittently depending on her income, commented about HIP:

“It was so helpful because it is really hard to get fruits and vegetables on a budget. And so the fact that I could go to the Union Square Farmers Market and get this lettuce that was picked that morning, my son even ate some produce. He would eat the corn on the cob. He would eat some of the berries. He’s such a picky eater...So that was amazing.” This interviewee was getting the minimum SNAP benefit at the time and she noted: *“But then that \$23, I can use to get the full HIP match. So, I was getting the full \$40.”*

HIP use increased from 2019 to 2024. This increase was likely supported by increased capacity to promote and explain the program at our local markets:

- The Somerville Winter Farmers Market has offered Mandarin and Cantonese interpretation since 2020.
- The Union Square Farmers Market has employed two Multilingual SNAP Facilitators since 2021, typically one who is fluent in Spanish and/or Portuguese and another who is fluent in Mandarin and/or Cantonese.

Figure 7.6: HIP use has increased steadily since 2019, with a more rapid increase after 2021



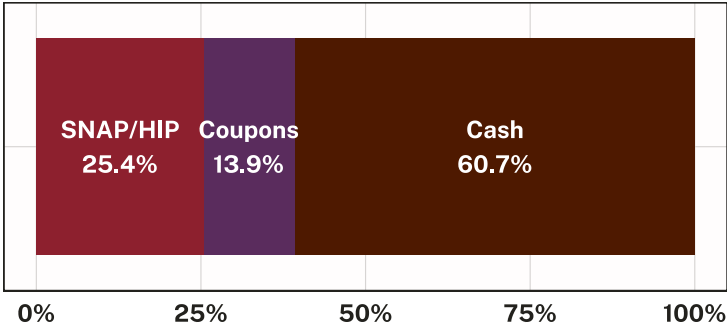
This figure uses the average number of SNAP participants per year and the number of SNAP participants who used HIP each year to calculate the percentage of SNAP recipients using HIP in each year. Source: DTA public records request.¹

¹ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, *HIP Incentives in Somerville*.

The increase also corresponds to a rise in use of the SMFM, which offers all HIP-eligible items and goes to locations with high concentrations of SNAP beneficiaries (see below).

During the 2025 Farmers Market Coupon season (July-November), customers **used a total of \$15,315 in coupons at Somerville farmers markets**. About **two-thirds of these dollars were redeemed by older adults** as part of the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, while **WIC participants redeemed about one third**. Federal funding and additional state funds have a considerable effect on the amount of money that comes to Somerville residents as coupons each year.

Figure 7.7: The SMFM provides an opportunity for people to use their coupons and get extra food with HIP



Data show the percentage of payments from HIP, Senior, and WIC coupons, and cash at the SMFM. Credit and debit card transactions are included as cash. Percentages are an average of 2024 and 2025 data from market transactions. Source: Mobile Farmers Market program data, Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities.

In 2023 and 2024 when more coupons were available, total dollars redeemed were \$34,245 and \$42,650, respectively.

- Use of coupons is split between all three of the spring-fall season farmers markets. On average across the 2023-2025 seasons:
- Union Square saw the highest overall amount of coupon redemptions at about 45% of all coupons.
- 36.5% of coupons were redeemed at Davis Square, with a higher proportion of WIC coupons (43.5% of all WIC coupons).
- Coupon spending at the SMFM is much lower, partly because prices are City-subsidized and shoppers do not need to use as many coupons. About 18.5% of all coupons were redeemed at the Mobile Farmers Market, with a slightly higher proportion of Senior coupons (22% of all Senior coupons).

The WIC program began distributing coupons directly at farmers markets in 2022. This change encouraged participants to connect with farmers markets. It also ensured that WIC participants already going to a market were most likely to receive the coupons. Use was lower in 2022 as people adjusted to the new system, but the change has since led to much higher coupon redemption rates. The rate increased 28% from 2022 to 2023 and is now higher than the state average.

Use of the **SMFM** has increased steadily since 2021 after dropping in 2020 due to the pandemic. In 2019, the market averaged 126 transactions per open week while in 2025 the average was 200. This represents an almost **60% increase in transactions**, which roughly corresponds to the number of shoppers per week.

In addition to providing affordable produce for purchase with cash, the market **makes benefits like HIP and Farmers Market Coupons more accessible** by providing an easy place to use them. Everything at the market is HIP-eligible, so close to 100% of SNAP transactions at the market are effectively free for SNAP users through their HIP reimbursement. On average, about 39% of transactions at the market use a benefit program. In 2025, this amounted to \$15,689 in extra produce for Somerville residents.

Shoppers appreciate that the SMFM comes to a place convenient to them and creates a friendly, welcoming atmosphere:

- A Clarendon Hill Towers resident explained: *“It’s a farmers market, direct, localized way of shopping. I just walk into the courtyard and there’s friendly people all around.”*
- From a Council on Aging shopper: *“Vegetables are great, selection is great, prices are good, people are friendly, I’m up here a lot anyway.”*
- From a Mystic Housing shopper: *“Cheaper, fresh, nice people, products I like.”*



Above: Union Square Farmers Market’s Multilingual SNAP Facilitators Claudia Chung (speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, and English) and Rafael Vieira (speaks Portuguese, Spanish, and English). Photo credit: Lizzie McCarty, Union Square Main Streets

Below: Shoppers at the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market’s Clarendon Hill Towers location in West Somerville.

Table 7.2: SNAP Matches have increased at the Winter and Davis Square Farmers Markets

Season	Total Matches	Total Match Value	Average Match
May 2021-Apr 2022	2,079	\$29,244.70	\$14.07
May 2022-Apr 2023	2,691	\$40,441.50	\$15.03
May 2023-Apr 2024	2,875	\$41,450.00	\$14.42
May 2024-Apr 2025	3,119	\$43,233.00	\$13.86

Note: Table 7.2 show the the combined number of matches and match value for the Winter Farmers Market and the Union Square Farmers Market. he average value of the match is calculated using the total dollar value of the matches and the total matches processed.The Union Square Market runs May-October and the Winter Market runs November-April. Data from the Davis Square market are omitted because it is not available for all years, but for the years in which data are available the trends are similar. In the 2024-25 season, Davis Square processed \$13,707 in SNAP matches. Source: Data provided by market operators.

Use of **the SNAP Match** increased by about 48% between the 2021-2022 and the 2024-2025 market seasons, as measured by the number of SNAP matches made across all markets. In the May 2024-April 2025 season, **4,611 matches were made for a total of \$56,940 in farm fresh food provided to SNAP households.** The total benefit to Somerville residents has grown over time with increased funding from the City of Somerville as well as increased outreach and use of the program.

The Winter Farmers market processes the most SNAP matches, with an average of 76 per open day in 2024-25. Union Square and Davis Square markets processed an average of 60 and 55 matches per open day, respectively, during their 2024-25 seasons.

[Table 7.2](#) shows the total number and value of matches at the Union Square and Winter markets, which have consistently available data from 2021-2024.

Winter market staff note growth in the program may be slower since the 2022-23 season because SNAP emergency allotments ended in February 2023.²¹ These allotments gave SNAP recipients more dollars to spend, allowing more flexibility to take advantage of the SNAP match. This is reinforced by the average amount of SNAP matched each year. The dollar amount SNAP users choose to spend and match at markets is likely affected more by financial circumstances than outreach and awareness. Higher SNAP benefits in the 2022-23 season

²¹ “SNAP COVID-19 Emergency Allotments Guidance | Food and Nutrition Service.”

allowed people to use more dollars for fresh local produce, whereas affordability concerns in subsequent years likely contributed to people spending a little less in 2023-24 and 2024-25.

WHAT ARE BARRIERS TO GETTING AND USING BENEFITS?

The application process for a benefit program, the ease and flexibility of benefit use, and the background of the benefit user all influence people's ability to take advantage of a benefit program. Some programs have complex application processes, such as SNAP. Others, like WIC or HIP, require navigating what is covered to understand how to spend the benefit. Others, like the farmers market-based benefits described above, require getting to a farmers market during the hours when it is open.

The circumstances of the person applying for a benefit are also important. Someone who works multiple jobs with seasonally variable hours will have more difficulty proving their monthly income. A household with mixed immigrant statuses will have more difficulty applying for a benefit whose eligibility is determined partly by immigration status, as is the case with SNAP. Someone who does not already seek out farmers markets will have a harder time learning about and using HIP. Consequently, there can be a large gap between who is eligible for a benefit and who uses the benefit. This section looks more closely at the barriers people face in applying for and using benefits.

It's too difficult to apply or use

One of the most frequently cited barriers to receiving SNAP is the difficulty of applying. The SNAP application process is complex. It includes: 1) an initial application, 2) a phone interview, and 3) request for and submission of documents proving eligibility, such as pay stubs, proof of address, and proof of immigration status. If people cannot complete these steps, their case is denied. Applicants must also complete follow-up paperwork to keep their benefits.

Some of these requirements were adjusted or waived during the pandemic. In 2023-2025, these waivers began to expire, and policies reverted to more stringent requirements, creating more work for both DTA caseworkers and applicants. This was exacerbated by 2025 federal changes that:

- expand work requirements, and the added paperwork that goes with meeting them, and,
- threaten to make states pay more if they do not reduce payment errors, leading the DTA to demand more documentation from clients.

Since the pandemic, the DTA has also struggled with a growing caseload and inadequate staffing. The caseload per DTA worker has risen approximately 50% compared to pre-pandemic caseloads.²²

²² Make Hunger History Coalition, "DTA Staff Capacity to Increase SNAP Access."

All of this had led to significant and worsening challenges for new SNAP applicants and existing recipients, including long hold times or inability to connect for people calling to request help, DTA failures to connect with clients for mandatory interviews, and delays in processing submitted documents.

Application data shared by the DTA for October 2022-September 2023 showed:

- One in two applications were denied (52%).
- Of the denied applications,
 - » 31% of denials were due to missing verifications (that is, documents proving eligibility).
 - » 25% of denials were due to missing the application interview call.

This means that for every four applications, two were denied and one of those two was denied **because the applicant could not successfully complete the application process.**²³ A year later, from October 2023-April 2024, the percentage of denied applications caused by challenges with the interview had risen to 30% as pandemic era interview waiters ended. As of early 2026, three in four calls to the DTA were blocked due to high call volume and not enough staff to support people.²⁴

Community advisory members frequently mentioned the difficulty of applying for benefits, especially when it comes to providing proof of income:

²³ Mass Law Reform Institute, *SNAP Case Denials & Closures*.

²⁴ Make Hunger History Coalition, “DTA Staff Capacity to Increase SNAP Access.”

- “Many clients say it is more helpful to go in person but even then it may take several visits as one may have the wrong month of proof for something.”
- “Some clients say that it is too complicated to apply when it comes to reporting their income and sending their verifications because it could be that they worked weeks ago in a day job and then require a letter from the employer, which can get complicated.”



Racks of discounted produce at Somerville's Market Basket location. The store offers discounts on produce that is nearing the end of its shelf-life.

Federally determined non-citizen eligibility for SNAP is so complex that it is difficult for the understaffed DTA to ensure all workers can accurately assess cases. This creates an additional barrier for eligible applicants, as one interviewee describes:

“...it took a little while for them to help me... about three years. I went to the Chelsea offices and the men there told me that I had to be here five years and that I had to have a work permit, or I had to finish my asylum process or obtain asylum or residency.” [translated from Spanish]

This client was eligible at the time as an asylee, but there was a significant delay in updating her status in DTA systems, leading to a prolonged application process for her and her case manager.

The complex application process can also lead to disappointment if approvals change as documents are processed. An advisor reported one client’s experience:

“After the initial application for SNAP, they sent in the requested documents and have been at first approved, only to receive a couple of weeks later a notification that their application had been denied. The lack of clarity about possible transitional approval generated disappointment in the clients who reported to base some important financial decisions on the approved benefits, and the impact of the consequent denial had been great in their lives.”

Experiences like the one above add instability for people are often already dealing with uncertainty and challenges. This has been exacerbated through 2025 as reaching the DTA has become harder and verification requests have become more numerous.

An advisor who works with SNAP cases described the recent experience of a domestic violence survivor who fled another state and landed in a shelter in Somerville. It took her over a month to get benefits issued at a time when she desperately needed support for herself and her two children. As an Outreach Partner to the DTA, the advisor was able to assist the client to complete her interview and submit all her verifications, without which the case might have taken much longer, or the client might have given up on the application.

Communication and process around accessing a benefit is another complexity that can prevent people from applying for or receiving the benefit. For example, HIP does not require an application, but you must know that it is available and understand how and where to use it in order to do so. Similarly, Farmers Market Coupons require awareness of when and where they can be obtained. Local agencies and service providers work hard to share information, but there are still gaps in connection. All of these barriers are magnified when there is an additional language, literacy, or technological capacity barrier.

I don’t feel safe applying for public benefits

Fear of applying can also be a significant barrier to non-citizens who are eligible for federal programs. Community advisory members mentioned many residents do not feel safe sharing personal information on benefit applications.

An interviewee described this fear in more detail: She learned about SNAP from a friend and signed up for it. Although it was “*very good for [her] and [her] family,*” she decided to discontinue it because she feared the government would use her SNAP information “*to take my daughters away from me.*” However, a case manager from the Somerville Office of

Housing Stability was able to assuage her concerns, and she signed up for SNAP again.

Now, she encourages other moms to sign up for SNAP. As she said, *“some people are misinformed about food stamps. Food stamps is for everyone, anyone who is low-income qualifies. And people say, ‘No...that the city is going to take them away, that the country is going to take our children away.’ That’s wrong information. So I say, ‘No, that’s not right, I can give them better information’”* So I try to inform people because, as I said, some are a little misinformed and others aren’t informed at all.”

This can also be a barrier for WIC, which is open to any applicant regardless of immigration status. Since the beginning of 2025, the Trump Administration has proposed several policy changes that have intensified immigrants’ fears about using public benefits. The federal government has sought to extract state benefit records to track down immigrants and use the receipt of food benefits to deny residency applications. Service providers, community leaders, and legal advisors in Somerville are working to help residents navigate these concerns by assessing the risks and benefits of applying in the current climate.

I’m embarrassed, I feel people will judge me for using benefits, I feel like I am taking something away from others who need it more

There is stigma around receiving and using benefits for some people. One community advisory member noted:

“People are embarrassed to apply because they don’t want their friends and family to know they are receiving assistance.”

Another noted: *“[They] feel embarrassed, especially when it’s food, to have to admit they don’t have enough food at home. It’s more difficult for them to apply for food benefits than it is for other assistance.”*

An interviewee described this feeling firsthand: *“They’ve told me that I’m entitled to it [SNAP], but I don’t want to use any of it... For several reasons. I don’t want to be begging... I mean, I don’t want to inspire pity, I’d rather put up with things.”*

Another interviewee talked about how they feel using SNAP at a grocery store: *“People who see your card or when you’re at the register getting ready to pay... ‘Oh, it’s EBT.’ I don’t need you to tell everybody...just let me buy my stuff and leave. It’s aggravating, and it’s a guilty feeling. You feel guilty that you have to have help... But that’s the way that I feel, typically, every time that I use it, every time. It’s embarrassing. In fact, people...judge you because of what you’re buying.”*

Community advisory members also noted people sometimes worry that if they apply for assistance, then others will get less. An older adult, for example, might say *“Oh, I am a small household, people with kids need this more than me.”*

It’s not worth it because you don’t get very much money/It doesn’t meet my needs

Interviewees also said the support that benefits provided did not always meet their needs:

An interviewee with a larger family remarked that SNAP only went so far: “[With] Food Stamps, they give me five something. It’s gone the same day. For fish and the rice, it’s gone. Fish and rice.”

“I think it’s been increased [SNAP] maybe about 100 bucks over the last five years. That’s income based. So, if I make \$10 more at work, they’re taking \$10 off of my food stamps. So, then I’m not really getting extra because they’re taking it away from me. And that comes out of pocket anyway. Now I have less cash to buy things that we need, pay bills that I’m spending on food. So, the system is messed up.”

And although SNAP does allow a lot of flexibility for people to buy what they want compared with other food benefits, there are still cases where it falls short. This may be especially true for people who lack kitchen access or cannot cook easily.

One former unhoused interviewee shared their frustration with the ban on purchasing hot prepared food with SNAP benefits: *“That’s something that we cannot solve by talking about it, but it bothers me because that’s food. Whether cold, hot, warm, whatever. The whole thing right there is FOOD. So why are you going to tell me I can’t buy a hot meal with my SNAP?”*

An interviewee living in a temporary shelter echoed this point, underscoring how arbitrary the rules can feel to participants:

“So say you wanted to have a rotisserie chicken, put it on the salad, you can’t do it because it’s a prepared hot item. Right. Right. But if it’s next day and they put it in the refrigerator thing there, it’s that price, then you [can use] your food stamps.”



Vegetables arranged for sale at the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market’s Clarendon Hill Towers location in West Somerville.

HOW DO PEOPLE LEARN ABOUT BENEFITS AND OTHER RESOURCES?

The diverse array of benefits and resources available to Somerville residents creates an ongoing need to keep people well-informed about these resources. Somerville has a high rate of population turnover; in 2024, about one in four residents had moved in the last year, according to US Census data. There are also many City offices and community based organizations that need up to date information to help residents navigate resources and benefits. Consistent, reliable information about resources for residents and service providers is an important component of food access in this environment.

Interview participants primarily learned about food-related resources through social service or municipal agencies and word-of-mouth. They highlighted Head Start, Cambridge Health Alliance, Community Action Agency of Somerville, Somerville Council on Aging, City of Somerville service providers, and schools as connectors of residents to resources such as WIC, SNAP, Project Soup, and the Carrot Card. Caregivers noted, however, that schools become a less reliable source of information once a child is in high school. Elementary-aged students routinely pass on forms to their caregivers, while this is less common for high school students, who do not transmit information as readily or consistently.

Word-of-mouth was a particularly common source of information for interviewees who represented immigrant communities. When asked how they learned of a resource, such as Project Soup or the SMFM, a recurring answer was a “friend told me about it.” Interview participants also discussed learning about resources through observation: *“The name of the pantry is Elizabeth Peabody. How did I find out about it? Because I live nearby. I walk by there every single day. It’s my daily routine.”*

Interview participants also mentioned flyers, social media, and television as sources of information. One participant highlighted Padres Latinos de las Escuelas Públicas de Somerville (Latino Parents of the Somerville Public Schools) as an important source of information. Padres Latinos is a mutual aid group comprised of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking parents who share information about the schools and other topics. The participant said, *“I invite [moms to Padres Latinos] because I know that Padres Latinos encourages people to share the best information. I love it.”* Interviewees and Community Advisory Group members were also familiar with Food Coalition-produced flyers that provide summaries of resources. Advisory group members highlighted Coalition meetings as avenues to learn firsthand about a resource they could then share with clients or neighbors.

Portuguese and Spanish-speaking participants discussed the importance of social service or municipal agencies having a resource navigator who spoke their language. One participant praised a Somerville case manager who speaks Portuguese and helped her sign up for SNAP. As that individual noted, *“I told her when I could [meet], and she met me around her schedule. So, she made a difference.”* The case manager’s fluency in Portuguese and flexibility helped gain the participant’s trust and connect them with the appropriate resources.

Interviews also brought to light instances where people did not know about a resource or had been given incomplete information about it. Groups and coalitions like the Somerville Food Coalition and Padres Latinos are important ways to keep both residents and professionals informed. Meetings provide an opportunity to hear about resources and communications from groups via distribution lists, flyers, WhatsApp and other means that help keep people up to date.

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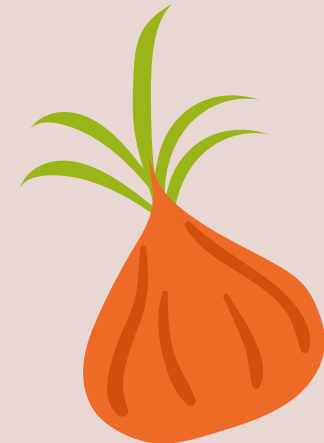
TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS:

- **SNAP is a key food benefit for many food-insecure residents** and provides an important platform for state and local food benefits. It can be difficult to enroll in the program and maintain benefits.
 - » This is especially true in recent years as **applications have gotten more complex** and state capacity to process applications has not increased to meet the need.
- **Options for stretching food budgets are limited for residents without nutrition benefits.** For individuals who are ineligible for or not enrolled in food assistance programs, few intermediate supports exist between market food and emergency food assistance.
- **Food benefits and resources can be complex to navigate** both for residents and service providers.
- Food resources and policies change frequently, making **ongoing communications and Coalition work with partners and the public important** so they can stay coordinated and up-to-date.
- Use of some programs has increased despite complex applications and rising incomes in Somerville. This suggests **efforts to help residents navigate resources have been successful** in recent years.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE ECONOMIC ACCESS TO FOOD:

- Extend the **SNAP match to other nutrition benefits at farmers markets** such as WIC and Senior Farmers Market coupons.
- Expand City-led efforts to **connect and inform service providers** by strengthening the City's capacity to help residents navigate increasingly complex applications and maximize benefit use.
- Expand the **Somerville mobile farmers market** by adding a location in a higher need neighborhood or extending the season.





Getting Food at Different Life Stages

This chapter looks at aspects of food access for three specific populations:

- school meals for all school-aged youth,
- food during out-of-school time for high-school aged youth, and
- food resources for older adults and adults with disabilities.

Community conversations about topics for inclusion in the assessment highlighted these three populations as areas of interest.

School and Summer Meals for School-Aged Youth

Every SPS student regardless of income can receive free breakfast, lunch, and a snack throughout the school year. Starting July 2023, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed Universal School Meals, approving \$170 million to support free lunch, or **universal free school meals**, for all Massachusetts students. This was the result of a successful, multi-year Feed Kids campaign led by Project Bread to pass a “School Meals for All” bill making free school meals permanent in Massachusetts.

Simultaneously, in school year 2023-2024, Somerville’s Food and Nutrition Services Department (FNS) adopted the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) across the district. In simple terms, this means that each school can offer free meals to all students and receive a fixed federal reimbursement rate for those meals. Reimbursement rates are based on the number of students receiving certain income-restricted benefits that directly certify them for free school lunch. As a result, FNS receives both federal and state meal reimbursements. The federal government reimburses based on number of identified income-eligible students and the state government makes up the difference to ensure meals can be offered free.

Why free school meals? There are many advantages:

- Ensures kids have the nourishment they need to thrive during the school day and improve academic, health, and social emotional outcomes.¹
- Increases participation rates among all students. When a mix of students across income levels eat school meals, it reduces stigma by blurring who is “low-income” as observed by who is in the lunch line. Previously, students in this category reported skipping lunch to avoid this attention.

¹ Project Bread, “Ending Student Hunger.”



Students in the Kennedy School cafeteria, picking up their lunches. *Photo credit: Somerville Public Schools*

- Reduces the administrative burden on school staff to process paperwork and check eligibility of students every year since everyone qualifies.
- Eliminates payment processing for students and debts incurred by students and their households who fall behind in their payments. In the past, when a student's household was not up-to-date on their school lunch payments, it was the school's responsibility to get the family to pay the bill, find funding within the school budget to cover the meal debt, or deny the student a hot meal going forward. Includes students who are income-eligible for free lunch but face barriers to getting the enrollment paperwork submitted on time and therefore have to bring their own lunch, pay full price for the school lunch, or go without.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS?

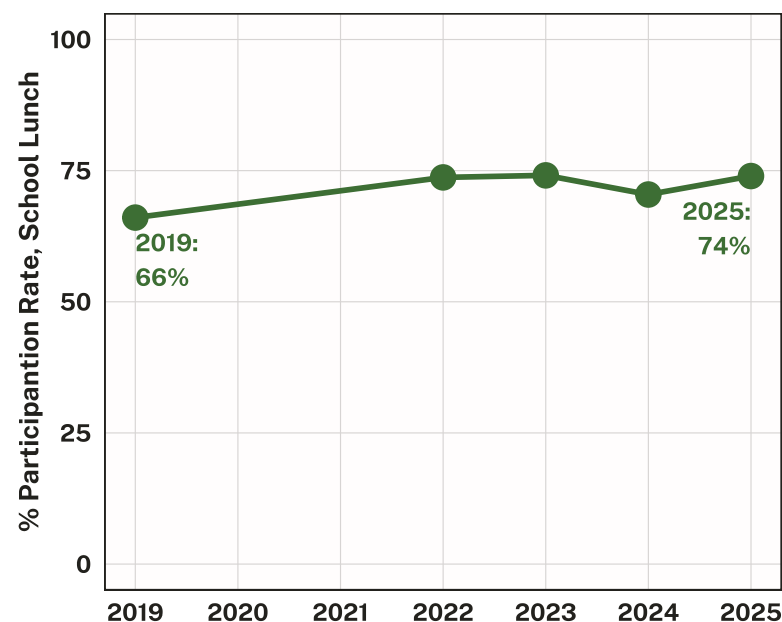
Universal free meals have **increased meal participation across the state** with Somerville mirroring the trend. [Figure 8.1](#) shows an 8-percentage point increase in SPS student lunch participation rates from before universal school meals in March of the 2018-2019 school year to March of the 2024-2025 school year. In recent years about one in four SPS students have chosen school lunch, which translates to ~ **3,750 being fed per day through the Food and Nutrition Services program.**

More students eating lunch during the school day is a win. As promotion of school meals continues to increase utilization of these meals across the state, the extra storage, staff, and time (both for food preparation and serving the students

going through a line) must be factored into school funding. As shown in [Table 8.1](#), school meal participation rates correspond to the income level of the neighborhood in which the school is located, meaning **schools in the district with a larger portion of students from lower income households have higher school meal participation rates.**

The rate of lunch participation may also depend on the school environment. The pre-K through kindergarten Capuano school has high rates of school meal utilization

Figure 8.1: School meal participation rates among all Somerville students have increased over time



Data shown compare lunch participation rates in March across available years. Data were not collected in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 pandemic school closures.

Source: Somerville Public Schools, Food and Nutrition Services.

because paraprofessionals at this school take steps to familiarize young learners with the meals. This includes walking them through the cafeteria lunch lines and helping them navigate the cafeteria and the foods offered. This early and personalized engagement in school meals ensures all students get food without an option to skip.

At the High School, by contrast, students are able to leave campus for lunch. The school also allows food delivery services, such as Uber Eats or Door Dash during the school

day. This is relatively new policy and directly competes with school lunch. The expense of food delivery also creates new channels of inequity in food access that stand in opposition to normalizing free food through universal school meals.

[Table 8.1](#) also highlights the increase in lunch participation rates at schools in higher income areas that did not offer free meals for all before the pandemic. Following the introduction of Universal Free School Meals during the pandemic and the passage of legislation making the program permanent, the

Table 8.1: Participation in School Lunch varies by school

School	School Lunch Participation (%)					Change: 2019-2025 (percentage points)	CEP (Community Eligibility Provision) School			Average % Low Income Students (2019-2025)
	2019	2022	2023	2024	2025		2019	2022	2023	
Argenziano	64.5	78.8	77.0	81.9	80.0	15.5		Yes	Yes	39.1%
Healey	83.5	79.9	77.9	82.9	82.1	-1.4	Yes	Yes	Yes	62.3%
Brown	45.3	76.8	53.6	56.8	61.0	15.7			Yes	13.9%
Capuano	67.1	90.8	76.9	75.6	97.3	30.2			Yes	38.6%
East	79.5	73.4	71.6	77.1	77.7	-1.8	Yes	Yes	Yes	55.9%
Full Circle	100.0	99.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	Yes	Yes	Yes	78.0%
Kennedy	53.9	61.9	62.9	65.8	68.8	14.9			Yes	26.1%
Next Wave	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	Yes	Yes	Yes	84.1%
SHS	49.3	66.4	75.9	60.9	66.6	17.3		Yes	Yes	50.6%
West	63.0	73.3	61.3	60.5	65.2	2.2			Yes	36.3%
Winter Hill	95.6	80.1	91.0	71.5	76.8	-18.8	Yes	Yes	Yes	56.1%

This table show the percent of students participating in school lunch at each school from 2019-25 and percentage point change in participation during the period. CEP (Community Eligibility Provision) certification and average percent low income students are also shown for this period.

Brown and Kennedy schools saw considerable increases in participation. This suggests that **free meals are achieving the goal of normalizing free food** and are involving families who may not have filed paperwork to qualify or are just over income for pre-pandemic free lunch.

WHAT'S OFFERED FOR SCHOOL LUNCH IN SOMERVILLE?

Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) plans and prepares meals for all 11 Somerville Public schools each day. Most preparation takes place in a central kitchen, and the meals are then distributed to the other schools via three FNS vehicles. Prior to 2021, the production kitchen was in the Winter Hill Community Innovation School. Due to the school's emergency closure in Spring 2023, FNS had to create several satellite kitchens to continue operating at capacity. Some popular dishes, such as veggie chili, pasta and meat sauce, and beef tacos temporarily came off the SPS menu due to limited space for large batch cooking. As of 2025, they prepare all meals in the renovated Argenziano School kitchen, which is about a third of the size of the kitchen in the Winter Hill school.

Each day, the menu includes a hot entrée, a deli option, a packaged "power pack" consisting of a grain, protein fruit and vegetable and a "to go" salad option along with milk and fruit to make it a **complete meal**. At least one vegetarian option is offered each day. Students have asked for more vegan options, which FNS has been able to recently increase. In addition to meeting student preferences, the vegetarian and vegan options support students with religious restrictions, such as following a kosher or halal diet.

Several people interviewed mentioned that the free meals at their children's schools help support food access. A high school student who was interviewed shared that the fruits and vegetables that accompany the hot meals make the lunch filling.

A 10th grader at SHS shared: *"I'm pretty impressed with the lunches here.... they have a lot of stuff. You can get, I don't know, you can get vegetables, you can get lettuce, you can get fruits..... I like the way that every day is a different lunch. There's three items. You got the pizza, which is always going to be pizza every day. Then you got sandwiches, which could be like a cheeseburger, which during Friday, it's hot dogs. Then you got the main entrees, which is different meals every day. So that's a pretty nice part.... I always like when there's given some orange chicken, I always wait for those days..... When you're getting your hot meal during lunch, after that, you can still add sides. You can add peppers, you can add lettuce, you can add tomatoes. So, you can get a pretty full-size meal during lunch."*

FNS works with their food vendors to **track the ingredients in each menu item so they can be listed and searched by allergen**. Online menus allow families and students to filter offerings based on nine allergens². The online platform also makes it possible for FNS staff to provide accurate, real-time menus that reflect necessary adjustments, an ongoing concern since supply chain challenges still arise. Caregivers are encouraged to review the online menu weekly to help their student plan accordingly in the lunchroom. Breakfast, lunch, and an afterschool snack are posted.

2 Somerville Public Schools, "Food and Nutrition Services."

Federal, state, and local government all have a role in determining school lunch offerings. The SPS Director of Food and Nutrition Services follows the district wellness policy,³ as well as US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) guidelines. The FNS Director also advises on the district wellness policy to ensure it is accurate and is feasible to implement. Changes to this wellness policy, including modifications to school meals, are made by the School Committee.

Looking Ahead

Direct and indirect cuts to SNAP and Medicaid resulting from passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act in July 2025 equate to fewer households receiving these benefits. Fewer students with these benefits will mean fewer directly certified students, in other words students automatically eligible for free lunch without the need to fill out a school lunch application. A smaller share of students automatically certified as lower income will reduce the federal reimbursement rate and increase the amount of money the state will need to provide to ensure meals stay free for all students.

3 Somerville Public School Committee, “Wellness Policy.”

CALL-OUT

HOW DO SCHOOL MEALS WORK TOWARD THE CITY’S CLIMATE ACTION GOALS?

The City’s 2023 consumption-based emissions inventory found that food is responsible for a significant portion of the City of Somerville’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.¹ As the primary handler of food within the City government, FNS takes a number of steps to minimize discarded food and reduce GHG emissions. It uses meal participation data trends at each school to forecast meal needs and often repurposes leftover food to create other dishes. For example, bread is turned into croutons, and extra chicken patties are sliced and added to salads. These practices help to control costs and significantly reduce food waste in the school kitchens. FNS has also recently increased vegetarian and vegan meal offerings to align with Somerville Climate Forward goals, which recommend putting plant-based products on the menu.

For a more in-depth discussion of food waste and its impact on climate, turn to [Chapter 10: Rescue, Recycling, and Prevention](#).



1 EcoDataLab and AECOM, “Consumption-Based Emissions Inventory Technical Report.”

WHAT'S OFFERED IN THE SUMMER?

The **Summer Meals Program** is designed to continue feeding students when school is out for summer break. **Free meals** are served to students in Somerville-sponsored programming, as well as sites throughout Massachusetts, and are available to **anyone 18 years and younger**. In partnership with USDA and DESE, site hosts can be reimbursed for meals served. The program runs for six weeks in July and August.

Through Summer 2022, FNS prepared and served meals at several park locations throughout the city, in addition to school-based programs such as summer school and the Community Schools camps. However, when the Winter Hill School building abruptly closed due to safety concerns in Spring 2023, FNS no longer had the space to prepare and package meals for off-site consumption. FNS continues to serve students enrolled in summer programs at school sites, such as camps and summer educational programs. In the Summer 2025, it provided thousands of breakfasts and lunches over 25 days of programming at seven schools, including Healey, East Somerville Community School, Argenziano, Kennedy, West Somerville Neighborhood School, Capuano, and the High School.

To continue offering summer meals to youth in off-site programs after the closure of Winter Hill school, in 2023 the City's Parks and Recreation Department partnered with OFAHC to arrange for an outside vendor to prepare and distribute summer meals. In 2025, meals were delivered to locations where Parks and Recreation programming was being offered and were available to participating children, as well as anyone 18 and younger who asked for a meal.

The vendor also delivered lunch at Foss Park, targeting walk-in users of the state-run pool and park. However, the **walk-in option has not been well utilized** at this location likely due to variable pool hours as a Department of Conservation and Recreation facility and an inability to regularly have city staff there to promote the program.

The 2018-2019 Food System Assessment recommended providing a nutrition benefit to students during summer break as a more flexible and easier way to support food security. During the COVID-19 outbreak, Pandemic EBT or P-EBT was provided nationally to K-12 students to cover meals missed while schools were closed. This proved successful and became a **permanent federal benefit – called SUN Bucks – that states could opt into starting in Summer 2024**. Families with students directly certified as income eligible for the National School Lunch program receive a card in the mail loaded with \$120 for each K-12 student. Families who are not directly certified through receipt of SNAP, MassHealth, or another qualifying circumstance can still apply to receive SUN Bucks through the DTA. For more on this program, see [Chapter 07 Access: Budgets and Benefits](#).



Children enjoy playing at the Healey School playground during summer break. Photo credit: Ed Wonsek

Food Needs During Out-of-School Time for High School-Aged Students

Improving food access for school-aged children during out-of-school time was identified as a priority in the 2018 Food Assessment. In recent years, food support aimed at caregivers of younger children has expanded through the Free School Markets, the Carrot Card program, and SUN Bucks, a permanent summer food benefit for income-eligible youth. **High-school (HS) aged youth, however, have different needs that are not as well met by these programs.** Students in high school have a range of responsibilities and activities after school that make it harder to narrow down one high-impact and affordable approach. This report builds on the previous assessment by:

- 1. looking more closely at the specific needs of this population,
- 2. assessing how they use existing programs, and
- 3. suggesting directions for future, alternative approaches to support HS-aged youth.

Although Somerville’s median income has increased significantly in recent years, the Somerville Public School district has a high proportion of low-income students – 48.3% in 2024-25 school year. At the high school, more than half of all students are low income.

Table 8.2: Somerville High School is majority low-income⁴:

School Year	Total Enrolled	% Low Income
2022-23	1,304	58.5%
2023-24	1,310	55.3%
2024-25	1,373	53.5%

Accessing enough, good food is a concern for many HS students and their families. For students, getting healthy, prepared foods to sustain them after school is a particular concern, especially since there are limited places to purchase affordable food near the high school building.

What does Carrot Card use by HS families tell us about youth food needs?

Data from the Carrot Card program highlight different needs and habits among HS students. For households that only had HS students, the Carrot Card was given to the student, not the caregiver. Overall spending was similar to other Carrot Card users, that is, most spending was at local grocery stores. However, as shown in [Figure 8.2](#), a number of convenience

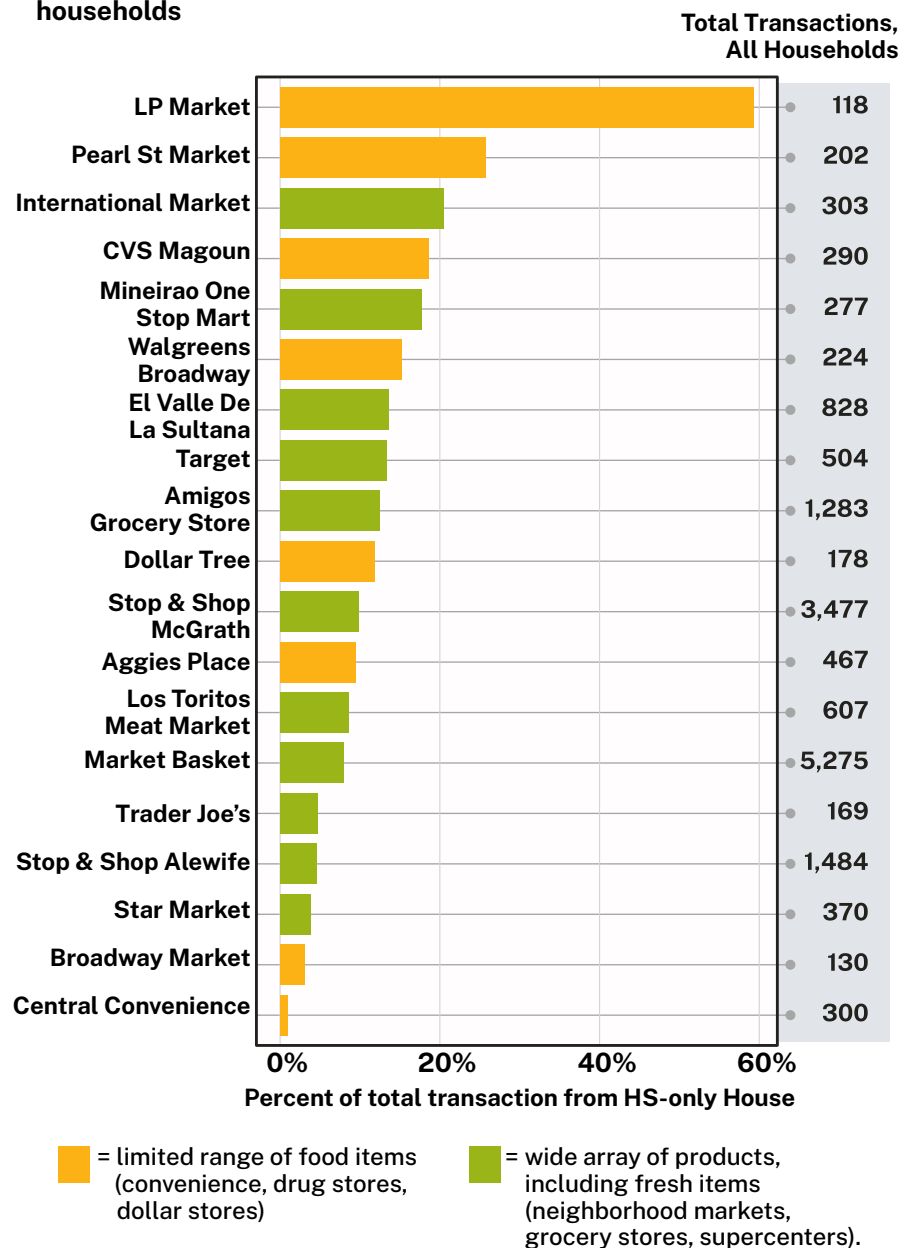
⁴ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Report Cards.”

stores and neighborhood markets near the High School had a higher share of transactions from families with only HS students. Use patterns and anecdotal evidence from school staff suggest this is due to students purchasing food during lunch and after school.

Additionally, the use rate for families with only HS students was lower than the overall use rate, suggesting that HS students are less consistent users of the Carrot Card program. Family liaisons who connect people program explain that a **HS student's individual food security situation could vary widely from month to month** and be more acute for them than for their younger counterparts. Thus, a recurring monthly debit card of \$25-35 assigned to select students may not be a good fit. Having liaisons and counselors equipped with grocery cards for one-time use would better suit the circumstances of older students.

This figure shows stores with 100+ transactions and 20+ unique shoppers. Data show the percentage of transactions made by households with only HS students. In these households, the Carrot Card was given to the student, not the caregiver. Grocery stores like Market Basket and Stop & Shop were still the top spending destination for these households. This figure, however, highlights some of the other places where the card was used by HS students.

Figure 8.2: Households with only HS students used Carrot Cards at convenience stores more frequently compared with other households



What do HS students have to say about food access?

With the goal of hearing directly from students, OFAHC designed a brief survey and distributed it through guidance counselors and athletic team coaches, as well as leaflets on High School cafeteria tables.

The survey asked seven questions and had 23 responses. The answers proved helpful in thinking about next steps to support HS students, despite the small number of responses.

Anyone with a student in the public schools, including the High School, can go to one of the three free school markets. Conversations during youth-centered meetings and in the interviews affirmed that providing fresh and staple groceries at the High School as a free school market is not an ideal approach. In one interview, the parent of a HS student suggested that an on-site intervention **should include prepared, ready-to-eat foods** and not put the burden or stigma on the student to carry ingredients home for the household:

“So then to be like, oh, here’s some food to bring home because you’re having trouble making ends meet would really blow their whole reputation. So, there’s that bit of stigma, I think, or even if your mom came, it would almost be better to have it be like, families could continue to go to the school that their child went to for elementary school, because then you don’t have to worry about your kid’s cover being blown or whatever.”

Pantry-style food programs can stigmatize and put a heavy literal and figurative burden on youth who carry home groceries for the household. Programs on site at the High School should instead focus on providing prepared, ready-

WHAT IS A TYPICAL SCHOOL DAY OF FOOD FOR HIGH SCHOOL-AGED STUDENTS?

School Breakfast

Free school breakfast is served from 7:15 a.m. - 7:45 a.m.

School Lunch

Daily lunch times (except early release Wednesdays) are:

- L1: 11:04 a.m. - 11:34 a.m.
- L2: 11:34 a.m. - 12:04 p.m.
- L3: 12:04 p.m. - 12:34 p.m.



A screen at the High School displaying a message about the school lunch menu, June 2025.

Students in every grade are allowed to leave the premises for lunch. School staff have reported a growth in food delivery via Grub Hub or Door Dash with 15-20 deliveries observed per day.

After-school

After-school snacks are provided to students at the 2:32 p.m. dismissal and the Wednesday early release at 1:33 p.m.

to-eat foods in combination with food distributions like the Free School Markets, which are aimed at caregivers.

A 2025 Youth Panel at the Youth Workers Network echoed the need for programs that reduce stigma:

*“What’s the best way to support youth facing food insecurity? Food pantries, soup kitchens, free lunch, programs that allow teens to get food **without scrutiny or feeling awkward.**”*

Interviews and conversations also shed light on how HS students and their families receive information. Students in younger grades more often receive multilingual flyers that are put into folders in their backpacks and brought home to be checked by caregivers. By contrast, HS students shared that they receive information through their house counselors, x-block, the screens throughout the school, flyers in bathrooms, and family liaisons.

This report highlights the investments made in supporting the food needs of youth and their positive impact when an adult caregiver is the primary recipient of information about these resources, such as Carrot Cards, school markets, and other free food resources. For older, more independent youth, however, different food needs, social pressures, and communication modes highlight the need for more targeted solutions.

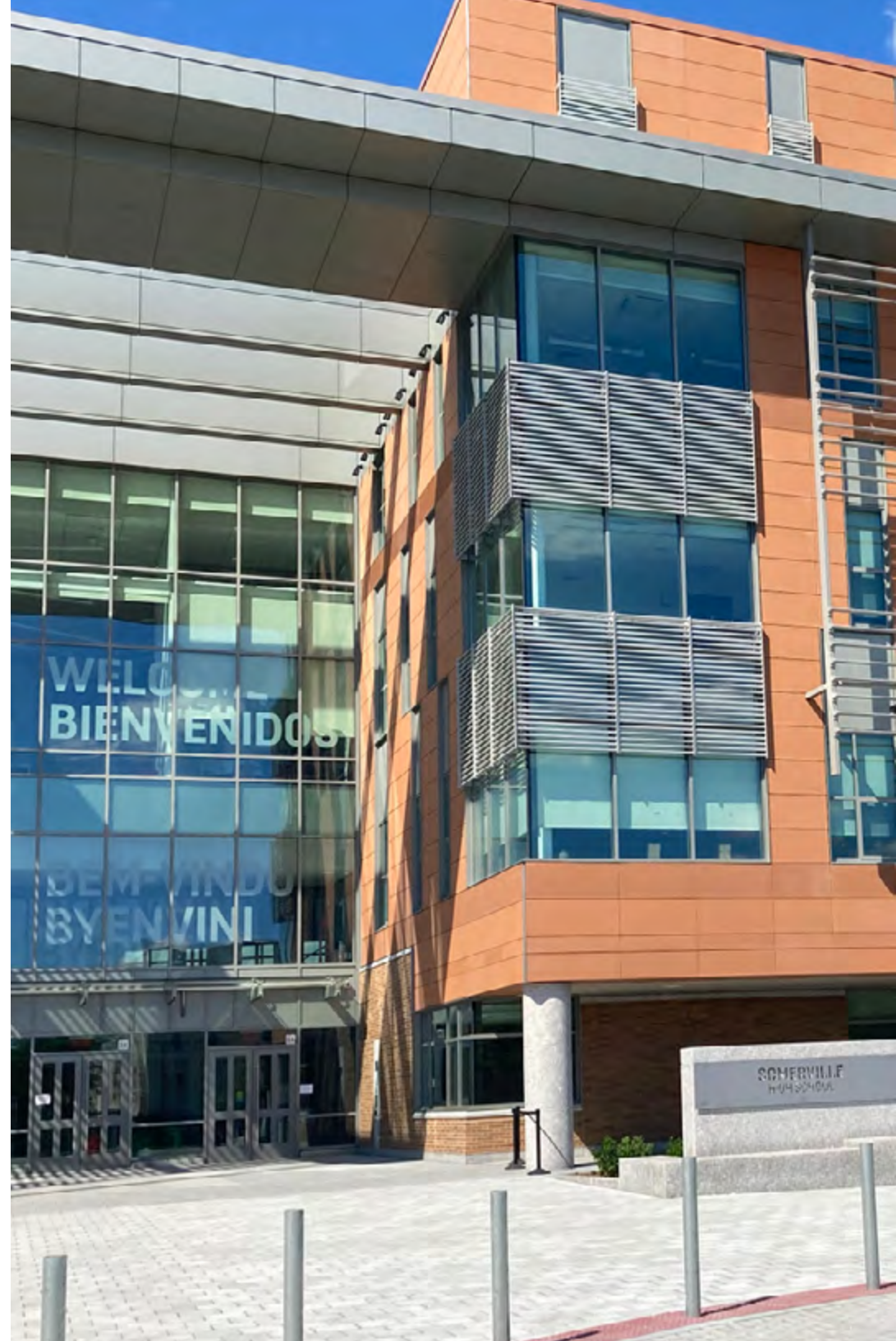
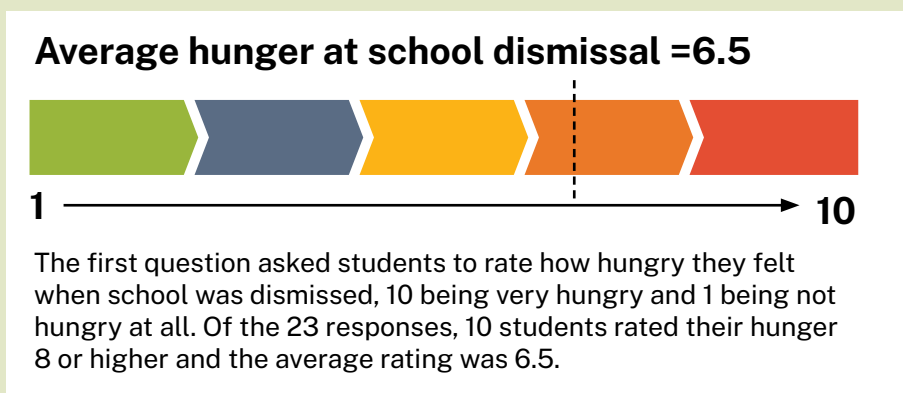


Figure 8.3: High Schoolers' Thoughts on Food Access After School



Most respondents ate at home or at friend's house after school

Another question asked students to name some places they go after school for food. Home or a friend's house was the most common response, followed by a store, then fast food. Only 3 people noted they get food from an afterschool program, with comments noting this is more common for middle-school aged students.

Common stores and restaurants that were named included Gaya, LP's, Dunkin Donuts, Mobile, and Pearl St Market, indicating that **time and walk-ability play a role in where students purchase food.**

When asked about a **comfortable price point** for purchasing food, 9 respondents said between \$1-\$4 and only 7 respondents offered \$10-\$20 range, with the remainder falling in the middle.



The flyer used to promote a survey of high-school students.

Credit: Florencia Reiche Blanco

The survey concluded with an open-ended question about how to improve food access:

“What are some realistic ideas you have for the Mayor, who is interested in improving access to affordable food after school?”

“ Increase places to get food near the high school, such as vending machines or opening more convenience stores.

“ More programs where you can access affordable food especially during summer. I know a lot of families that have bigger expenses during summer and can't fully provide to their kids. At the same time many jobs are lower during summer, making it harder to provide food for their family.

“ Food programs at all the public schools and libraries with free/discounted food and more different types of foods

Some respondents requested bigger portions in the cafeteria. This is a common request, but cannot be addressed at the local level because school meal portion sizes are limited by USDA guidelines.

Proximity & price influence High Schoolers' after school food purchases

2024 YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In 2024, the City of Somerville's Health and Human Services Department worked with a consultant to develop a Youth Needs Assessment.¹ The Assessment included two youth focus groups as well as interviews with adult youth service providers. Findings highlighted the following food needs:

Basic Needs. Stakeholders articulated the importance of meeting young peoples' basic survival needs, a minimum requirement for them to thrive. These basic needs included access to nutritious and culturally-relevant meals through food assistance, community kitchens, or shared meals at youth centers and other events. Youth interviewed for the assessment noted that the food received through food banks or school programs was often either insufficient to meet their needs or mismatched to their family's food choices.

Existing Youth and Teen Programming. Many young people spoke positively about the programs in which they currently participate. These spaces not only provided a significant number of youth with food but also offer semi-structured and self-structured opportunities and access to trustworthy adults. Young people called for more spaces like this, particularly ones that are consistently open and dedicated youth spaces. Stakeholders noted programming works best when it is in a consistent

place, after school (2:30 p.m. – 6 p.m.) or on weekends, and easily accessible (e.g., close to school or transit).

Lack of Culturally Relevant, Accessible Services/ Programs. Stakeholders consistently named a need for linguistically and culturally-relevant services and programming. For immigrant and first-generation youth especially, language and cultural barriers prevented equitable access to information and services, particularly when parental permission was required. Youth also spoke about the need for culturally-relevant foods and arts spaces, and the importance of having community members and youth workers who represent one's own identity. Finally, stakeholders spoke about a lack of programming for youth with disabilities.



Somerville Positive Forces youth present the results of the 2025 Youth Health Survey. The Survey is carried out every other year by the Office of Prevention and, alongside the 2024 Youth Needs Assessment, guides youth-focused work in the City. Photo credit: Tina Los, Somerville Office of Prevention.

¹ Hania Marien and Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Enhancing Youth Services.

Food Resources for Adults 60 and Older and Adults under 60 with Disabilities

WHAT RESOURCES EXIST FOR OLDER ADULTS?

Older adults can access food support through the Council on Aging (CoA), Somerville Cambridge Elder Services (SCES), and other local programs summarized below.

Grocery Access/Fresh Ingredients

Somerville older adults are eligible for **Massachusetts Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program coupons**, which can be spent at any of the six spring to fall farmers market locations in the city (for more information about these locations, see [Chapter 07: Budgets and Benefits](#)). SCES coordinates coupon distribution each year. They ensure that higher-need populations have access by working with Somerville Housing Authority and other subsidized housing sites. CoA supports this effort by ensuring the program is promoted through the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs and by hosting a coupon distribution site. One of the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market (SMFM) locations is the Holland Street Senior Center, giving older adults easy access to this city-subsidized farmers market. SCES also offers a one-time farm fresh produce delivery box each year for homebound residents who cannot get to a farmers market. In 2025, they were able to offer a second box through a partnership with New Entry Sustainable Foods.



Somerville older adults at the Council on Aging's Thanksgiving luncheon at the Dilboy VFW Post. The Council on Aging regularly offers programming that includes a hot meal.

Photo credit: Debra Higgins, Somerville Council on Aging

Home care services are available to Massachusetts residents aged 60+ through the Home Care Program. Eligible older adults can receive help with grocery shopping and grocery delivery by service aides.⁵

COA and SCES offer a monthly **Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) box** in collaboration with the Greater Boston Food Bank for Massachusetts. The program is for residents aged 60 and older whose income is below 150% of the federal poverty line, or \$22,590 for a one-person household in 2024.⁶ Residents must confirm age and income eligibility when they register, but they do not need to provide documentary proof, making the registration a comparatively easy lift. The box is about 40 pounds of groceries, including pantry staples, cheese, a fruit, and a vegetable. SCES offers delivery of these boxes to their clients or pickup at the Somerville Armory in Central

⁵ Massachusetts Executive Office of Aging & Independence, "Home Care Program."

⁶ Feeding America, "Commodity Supplemental Food Program."

Somerville. COA hosts a pickup from the Ralph and Jenny Center in East Somerville. As of late 2025, SCES serves 50-60 individuals per month and CoA serves about 70 individuals per month. SCES's distribution is currently limited because the majority of recipients request delivery, and it is difficult to recruit volunteer drivers. Residents may only receive one of the two programs, not both.

Older adults and younger adults with disabilities living in some Somerville Public Housing residences can receive **Food For Free-sponsored Just Eats grocery boxes**. These are delivered every two weeks and include mostly fresh produce with one or two staple pantry items. In 2024, 155 boxes were delivered every other week to residents of senior and disability housing. For more on this program, see Chapter 06 Access: Landscapes and Preferences.

Prepared meals

Hot congregate meals are available to older residents who are looking for opportunities to socialize while they eat. Daily breakfast is provided at Properzi Manor, Tuesday lunch at the Ralph & Jenny Senior Center, and Thursday lunch at the CoA building on Holland Street. These meals are sponsored by SCES, coordinated and hosted by CoA, catered by City Fresh Foods, a Boston-based vendor that specializes in fresh and nutritious food. They often accompany events and activities at the centers.

Residents must call CoA to sign up every week. The meals are free for older adult guests, although a \$3 donation is appreciated. Younger family members or caregivers who do not live in supporting or elderly housing are usually asked to pay \$5.

Grab and Go lunches are also offered for those not interested in sitting down to a meal.

To complement the congregate breakfasts and lunches, older adults may also attend any of the **weekly community meals** throughout the city. Homebound older adults who are unable to attend congregate meals can instead participate **in home-delivered meals through Meals on Wheels**. SCES delivers cold breakfasts, lunches, and supper for re-heating Monday-Friday, catered by City Fresh Foods. Recipients can get extra frozen meals to use over the weekend.

Meals on Wheels also delivers medically tailored-meals customized for a range of medical conditions, such as pre-diabetes, heart conditions, lactose intolerance, renal conditions, and difficulty swallowing.⁷ Meals cost \$3 each, and clients must choose between receiving home-delivered meals or going to congregate meals on a given day. While they cannot receive both, they can combine the programs by, for example, going to a congregate meal twice a week and getting a Meals on Wheels delivery once a week.

Beyond prepared meals, SCES offers Ensure supplement drinks at a low cost for those who need additional nutrition supplements or meal replacements. Drinks are available for pickup or delivery, and delivery cost is covered by health insurance for those receiving SCES services.

Older adults in Massachusetts, along with adults with disabilities and homeless adults, may use the **SNAP Restaurant Meals Program**. This program allows them to use their SNAP benefits at restaurants and food trucks to buy hot prepared

⁷ Feeding America, "Commodity Supplemental Food Program."

foods, recognizing that older adults may face challenges in preparing meals at home. As of 2025, Massachusetts is still in a pilot phase of this program and, unfortunately, none of the restaurants or trucks selected for the pilot operate in Somerville.⁸

Transportation to Food

CoA's Senior Transportation program provides older adults who need transportation support with **free rides** to grocery stores, farmers markets, or pharmacies in Somerville. Rides are available with advance booking and tailored to the individual's schedule. Through a federally-funded partnership, SCES has provided free rides to transit-dependent adults enrolled in Home Care who choose to participate in congregate meals. As of January 2026, the City of Somerville will sponsor the program with added support from state funding sources due to federal funding cuts in 2025. The **MBTA offers a reduced cost pass** for adults 65+, regardless of income. Bus fares cost \$0.85 per ride, and an unlimited bus and subway pass costs \$30/month.⁹

Older adults and adults with disabilities may also use the **Door to Door program**, which provides transportation to medical appointments, food, and other needs. The service operates both pre-scheduled shuttles and individually scheduled rides:

- Registered clients can take weekly grocery shopping shuttles. The shuttle day of the week is assigned by neighborhood, and the grocery store can vary by

8 Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, "Restaurant Meals Program Pilot."

9 Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, "Reduced Fares."

week, depending on which stores are nearby and the preferences of the people who usually take that shuttle.

» For example: A shuttle from one elderly/disabled building in East Somerville goes to Market Basket each Friday at the request of residents. A shuttle from another building on the border of East and Central Somerville alternates trips to Market Basket and the Stop & Shop on McGrath Highway every Thursday.

- The service also brings people from home to their destination at the time they need it. Rides can be booked as early as 14 days in advance or up to 2 days prior. These on-demand rides are limited in number by Door-to-Door's capacity and funding, so participants typically need to book early to get a ride. Most rides are for medical purposes, but the program has some funding for rides to address other needs, such as obtaining food at a specific grocery store, going to the hairdresser, or doing Christmas shopping.

Food Education/SNAP

CoA provides weekly nutrition classes on Mondays both in person at the Ralph & Jenny Center and over Zoom. Topic-specific nutrition classes are offered on Wednesday mornings at the Holland Street Center. In addition to structured classes, social workers at CoA are available to provide information about nutrition assistance programs, register residents for the center's various food support offerings, and support mental and physical well-being.

The DTA offers several **accommodations for older adult households to get and maintain SNAP benefits**. It has a SNAP Senior Assistance Office, which is often easier to

reach than the main DTA line. Older adult and disabled adult households have fewer reporting and recertification requirements than other households.¹⁰ They are also able to claim deductions from their SNAP reported income for medical expenses over \$35/month.¹¹

WHICH OF THESE RESOURCES CAN ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES UNDER 60 ACCESS?

Because older adults and adults under 60 with disabilities may face similar challenges, services are often combined for these populations. [Table 8.3](#) is a summary of which services are available only for older adults and which are also open to adults under 60 with disabilities:

KEY NUMBERS Residents with disabilities

What percent of residents live with a disability?

- Among all people:
 - » 8.5% in Somerville and 12.3% in MA
- Among people under 18:
 - » 3.6% in Somerville and 5.0% in MA
- Among people 65 and older:
 - » 33.2% in Somerville and 30.1% in MA

The proportion of residents with a disability is lower in Somerville compared to Massachusetts, but it still represents

¹⁰ Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, “EDSAP Reporting.”

¹¹ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, “Medical Expense Deduction.”

Table 8.3: Services for Older Adults and Adults with Disabilities

	Older Adults	Adults with Disabilities
Grocery Access and Fresh Food:		
MA Home Care	yes	yes
Just Eats grocery boxes*	yes	yes
Farmers market coupons	yes	–
CSFP grocery boxes	yes	–
Prepared Meals:		
COA congregate meals/pickup meals	yes	yes
SCES Ensure Drinks	yes	yes
SCES home delivery meals	yes	available to people under 60 that live in elderly/ supportive housing
SCES congregate meals	yes	free to people under 60 that live in the building
Transportation to Food:		
COA taxi rides to grocery stores	yes	yes
Door to Door Shuttle Service and Scheduled Rides	yes	yes
Reduced Cost Bus and T Fare	yes	yes
Transport to congregate meals	yes	–
SNAP Assistance & Nutrition Education		
COA nutrition classes	yes	yes
Extra support getting and keeping SNAP	yes	yes
SNAP medical deduction	yes	yes

*service of Food For Free

8.5% of residents or around 6,860 people.¹² The number of older adults with disabilities is proportionally higher in Somerville than in Massachusetts as a whole.

WHAT GAPS REMAIN FOR ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES UNDER 60?

Although people with disabilities can access many of the services listed above for older adults, there are a few key gaps in accessing **free groceries and home delivery of meals**. As noted in [Chapter 1: Introduction](#), adults with disabilities are disproportionately represented in the population at or under the federal poverty line. Overall, the median income of a household with a person who has a disability is 60% of the income in a household where no one has a disability,¹³ and many people with disabilities have fixed incomes tied to disability-based benefits. One Taxi to Health program participant with a disability valued the cost-savings benefit of the program given their tight budget: *“I could buy extra groceries; living on disability benefits and with rent that does not leave much left for groceries.”*

Service providers also regularly note the lack of home-delivered groceries and meals for younger disabled clients. Physical mobility, as well as

12 U.S. Census Bureau, “Selected Social Characteristics in the United States.”

13 City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Office of Housing, *Housing Needs Assessment*.

PARTNER REPORT CALL-OUT

AGING IN SOMERVILLE

In 2024, the Somerville Council on Aging commissioned a community needs assessment for Somerville older adults, that is adults 60 or older. The report highlighted the many programs that exist to support older residents and explored areas where more is needed.

Knowledge about available programs is a challenge for Somerville older adults. And, while there is a lot of help available, some older adults’ food needs are still not being met. CoA staff note that their congregate meal may be the only hot meal of the day for some participants. **Thirty-six percent of participants in the needs assessment identified lunch or other food offerings as a priority area for expansion.** Three percent of participants responded that it was “often true” and 12% that it was “sometimes true” that they worry whether their food will run out before they have money to buy more. One participant noted that “having a food pantry/fridge at each Senior facility would help those with food insecurity.”¹

1 Somerville and Coyle, Aging in Somerville.



Grocery boxes waiting for pickup as part of the Somerville Council on Aging’s Commodity Supplemental Food Program distribution at the Ralph and Jenny Center in south-east Somerville.

Photo credit: Somerville Council on Aging

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TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- **Universal Free School Meals are a major policy win** from the last few years, improving school food by:
 - » ensuring kids are fed,
 - » destigmatizing and increasing participation in free lunch, and
 - » reducing the paperwork burden for SPS FNS.
- Recent summer meals programming has been under-utilized.
- **Food options for high-school students during out-of-school time are limited**, and less nourishing convenience foods are currently the most accessible option.
- Older adults have access to several prepared meal, grocery, and transportation support programs, although **many older adults still worry about food access**.
- **Adults under 60 with disabilities** can access many of the resources aimed at older adults, but there is a **gap in access** to free or affordable food to prepare at home and delivered prepared meals.

- **Certain populations, such as high-school aged students and people with disabilities, have unique needs.** Current programming does not always meet these needs, especially when it is targeted at a broader population.
 - » These populations are not well represented at meetings where gaps in food access are discussed.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE FOOD ACCESS AT ALL AGES

- Increase **summer meals utilization** by moving locations of open sites and increasing the time window to longer than 15 minutes.
- Further explore the **best approach** to improving food access for **high-school students**: enabling food trucks, supporting food businesses around the High School, or piloting a fresh vending machine in the building.
- Partner with the Youth Workers' Network to determine the best way to **ensure youth representation** in the Somerville Food Coalition.
- Collaborate with the **Disability Commission and Human Rights Commission to join the Somerville Food Coalition** and center people living with disability when making food access decisions..



Food Literacy & Healthcare Initiatives

The City and community-based partners work hard to improve access to food through programs that support environmental changes, funding, and policies. Certain programs must follow more specific guidelines to ensure more healthful food choices while others may provide incentives or nudges to make the healthy choice, the easy choice. These guard rails coupled with food literacy aim to set a person up to have enough to eat and to choose nourishing foods. This chapter describes programs that can influence people's food consumption and health and help us assess where there is room to expand education for consumers across the age spectrum.

Food Literacy: What food literacy programs exist in Somerville and are they enough?

IN THE SOMERVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (SPS)

SPS has had a longstanding partnership with UMass Extension to teach nutrition education in most K-8 public schools through **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's education funding (SNAP-Ed)**. This program is aligned

with SNAP to target **nutrition education for lower income students and families**. During the 2024-2025 school year, nutrition educators visited every first through fourth grade classroom, except for those at the Brown and Kennedy schools, which are over the collective income eligibility level and do not qualify. The program was also extended to some of the Pre-K and Kindergarten classrooms at the Capuano.

Each classroom worked with SNAP-Ed educators for four weeks. Lessons included learning about the food groups and what a balanced plate looks like. **The One Big Beautiful Bill Act passed in July 2025 cut the SNAP-Ed program across the nation**. While UMass Extension leveraged FY2025 funding to continue their service through the 2025-2026 school year, they will **not continue after June 2026**. SPS students will continue to have general health and physical education as part of their curriculum.¹

SPS **hosts school gardens at every school**, but there is **no formal curriculum** or group that maintains them (see [Chapter 03: The Urban Agriculture Landscape](#) for more details). To enhance and expand district gardening programming and local food production, SPS applied for and received a two-year Massachusetts FRESH grant of \$32,000 per year

¹ Somerville Public Schools, "Health and Phys Ed."



Library patrons attending and participating in gardening workshops with farmers from Green City Growers.

Photo credit: Kerry O'Donnell, Somerville Public Library



during the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years². The aim of the grant was to enhance students' understanding of and access to local, fresh food. Using these funds, SPS was able to:

- Equip each school garden with tools and materials so students could actively participate in gardening.
- Provide the garden beds with desperately needed soil and compost for healthy and productive plant growth.
- Purchase two Flex Farm hydroponic grow towers, which are housed in the Culinary department at Somerville High School. The towers are maintained and harvested in collaboration with Green City Growers.
- Offer field trips to Groundwork Somerville's South Street Farm, the only urban farm in Somerville. Students learned about the importance of pollinators in food production and were able to help with the daily tasks on the farm, such as planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting.

This grant wrapped up June 2024. Due to limited staff capacity for grant writing and management at the schools, SPS does not currently have other related grants. To ensure access to school gardens for every student going forward, Somerville would need to invest significant additional funds for an outside vendor with dedicated time and expertise to continue garden programming.

2 Mass Farm to School, *MA Fresh Grant FY2023*.

FOOD LITERACY OUTSIDE THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Community cooking demonstrations and class offerings have decreased over time in Somerville. Several years ago, the national Cooking Matters program regularly offered a six-week cooking and nutrition series, but it was permanently discontinued in Fall 2022 by the parent organization, Share our Strength³. **Demand for this type of program remains high**, as demonstrated by rapid enrollment in past Parks and Recreation-supported teen cooking classes. Due to building space constraints in Somerville, however, appropriate places to host additional classes have not been identified.

Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA) offers some group cooking classes, but they are limited to a **specific audience or patients with chronic medical conditions**, such as diabetes. For example, last year CHA launched a Cooking Across Cultures medical group class for patients who speak Haitian-Creole and want to learn ways to modify traditional dishes to meet their health needs. CHA also offers a program called Shop with a Doc in which a medical provider leads a group grocery shopping trip for patients with hypertension. The provider points out strategies for purchasing heart healthy foods and encourages participants to share ideas and recipes that are low in sodium and high in fiber.

The **Somerville Public Libraries play an important role in celebrating food and supporting food literacy**. The teen room at the Central Library has held food demonstrations – called Bite Club – which are popular with high school students. The libraries hold a variety of workshops for adults that encompass food, learning, and community. Topics include

3 Cooking Matters, "Important Update."

Somerville Public Library Food Programming

Programming is held at all three branches with a adults of various ages in attendance. Topics vary month to month. Below is a sample of spring Library calendar events:

April 2025

- **Learn to Make Bengali Ghugni with Chef Afruza:** In-Person Cooking Demonstration & Sampling at East Branch
- **Local Farms, MA – Produce, Meats, Dairy, Oh My!:** Virtual Farmer Panel Discussion
- **April Supper Club: Monthly Cookbook Club & Potluck** hosted at Remnant Brewing in Unions Square, Third Tuesday of Each Month
- **April Gardening Workshops with Green City Growers:** In-Person Saturday Series, April-October at Central Library
- **Medicinal Plant Walk:** In Person at West Branch

May 2025

- **Seed Saving How-To:** In-Person at Central Library, with Somerville Office of Sustainability and Environment
- **May Supper Club:** Monthly Cookbook Club & Potluck hosted at Remnant Brewing in Unions Square, Third Tuesday of Each Month
- **May Gardening Workshop with Green City Growers:** In-Person Saturday Series, 10 dates, April-October at Central Library

June 2025

- **June Gardening Workshops with Green City Growers:** In-Person Saturday Series, April-October at Central Library
- **May Supper Club:** Monthly Cookbook Club & Potluck hosted at Remnant Brewing in Unions Square, Third Tuesday of Each Month
- **Learn to Make Brazilian Brigadeiro with Junior:** In-Person Cooking Demonstration & Sampling at East Branch
- **Somerville Arbor Day:** In-Person Workshop/ Celebration of Trees at West Branch



Library patrons learned to make traditional Brazilian Brigadeiro with Chef Junior. Photo credit: Brigid Pigott

a popular monthly supper club, a hands-on gardening workshops series from April-October with Green City Growers, and other cooking demonstrations, often focusing on international dishes.

The Assessment's June 2025 Food Action Planning open house included many votes for hosting more food-related programs in partnership with the library. Suggestions included:

- Saving money on food,
- eating with the seasons,
- meal planning and using up weekly ingredients,
- cooking healthy on a tight budget, and
- additional gardening workshops.

Some of these topics are suitable for online programs, but in-person is much better for those involving food. However, the library has limited space that is suitable for food-based programming; **they would benefit from access to a community kitchen to better support food literacy and access.**



Healthcare: How are healthcare institutions supporting food and nutrition access?

Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA), the safety net provider for the communities of Somerville, Cambridge, Medford, Malden, Everett, Revere, Chelsea, and Winthrop, is Somerville's largest healthcare provider. As of July 2025, CHA has served more than 18,000 primary care patients who are Somerville residents.

CHA has incorporated a health-related social needs (HRSN) screening tool into primary care visits for all patients. The tool is a 10-question survey that assesses food security, housing security, transportation access, financial stress, internet access, and safety, among other drivers of health. Patients fill out the multilingual tool in the waiting room so it can be reviewed and addressed with their provider during their visit. If a patient screens positive, indicating they are at high risk of any instability, then they are referred to a patient resource coordinator (PRC) who guides them to appropriate community programs and services.

Anyone identified as being at risk for food insecurity is connected to Project Bread for follow-up on local food resources. If the patient lives in Somerville, the provider or PRC may give them the latest version of Somerville's multilingual food resource flyer, which aggregates all of the city's free food resources in one place.

CHA is also part of Tufts Health Together with CHA, a Mass-Health Accountable Care Partnership Plan that can test **new approaches to improving care and health outcomes** under the

state's 1115 Demonstration Waiver.^{4,5} There are 17 Accountable Care Partnerships Plans or Accountable Care Organizations (collectively, ACOs) in the state, which together cover just over half of all MassHealth members. ACOs aim to improve health outcomes and lower the cost of care by addressing social determinants of health like housing and food security.⁶ Through the waiver, an ACO **can provide contracted social services to offer food access benefits** and housing support.

The CHA ACO plan provides food access benefits through fresh produce prescriptions with a monthly debit card, medically tailored meals, or medically tailored food boxes for enrolled individuals who are food insecure and have a complex medical condition.

- Members with one of eight specific medical conditions can receive **medically tailored meal delivery** if they cannot prepare meals. Community Servings contracts with CHA to provide these services. Examples of qualifying medical conditions are diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and high-risk pregnancy.
- Members with a wider array of medical conditions, including any pregnancy, high emergency department use, or a behavioral health challenge may receive a **\$100 monthly debit card to purchase fruits and vegetables** at qualifying stores. The program is called **Fresh Connect** and the non-profit About Fresh contracts with CHA to provide this service.

4 Camb. Health Alliance, "Tufts Health Together with CHA."

5 Seifert, *MassHealth ACOs*.

6 Center For Health Law and Policy Innovation and Community Servings, *FIM State Plan*.

The plan previously offered medically tailored grocery boxes for people able prepare meals at home as an alternative to medically tailored meals. This option was discontinued at CHA starting in 2026. The Tufts Health Together plan also offers incentives for any member using the ACO to access preventative care, regardless of whether they are food insecure or have a complex medical condition. For example, patients who receive all their recommended immunizations and screenings before age two get a \$25 grocery card, and children who get their annual check-ups between three and nine years old also receive a \$25 grocery card.⁷

FOOD IS MEDICINE INITIATIVES

Massachusetts is a **national leader in the Food is Medicine (FIM) movement**. Since 2018, Massachusetts has used the 1115 Demonstration Waiver authority to cover food support for Medicaid populations. FIM programs are a covered service in all 17 MassHealth Accountable Care Organization/Accountable Care Partnership Plans and include meal and grocery delivery, grocery prescriptions or food vouchers, and connections to food assistance programs, among other interventions⁸. A strong research and advocacy community around FIM approaches, led by Tufts University's Food is Medicine Institute and the Massachusetts Food is Medicine Coalition, chaired by Harvard Law School's Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation and the non-profit medically tailored meal provider Community Servings, help to drive state policy forward.

7 Point32Health, "Tufts Health Together Extras."

8 Hager et al., "Medicaid Nutrition."



PARTNER REPORT CALL-OUT

THE CHA REGIONAL WELLBEING REPORT



Cambridge Health Alliance's 2025 Well-being Report provides a community health needs assessment for the cities and towns the health safety net provider organization serves, including Somerville. The report discusses food access as part of an 'equitable economy' and focuses on how lack of access to food and other basic needs affects health: "When people do not have enough

money to meet their basic needs, it takes a serious toll on their physical and mental health. Research shows that money, jobs, food security, and caregiving are closely interconnected – and differences in access to opportunity shape health disparities along lines of race, socioeconomic status, and gender."¹

The assessment included a survey and focus groups to gather information from residents about this issue. Some highlights include:

- 21.2% of Somerville survey respondents named better access to healthy food as one of the most important things they would like to improve about their community.
- 24.2% of Somerville survey respondents said they had trouble paying for or accessing food or groceries in the past 12 months.
- In one participant's words: "We're constantly worried about something, whether it be 'Where am I going to eat?' or 'Am I in a safe place?' or 'How can I get to my next meal?' **There's always worrying and it causes sickness.**"

1 Cambridge Health Alliance, *CHA Wellbeing Report*.

The concept of Food is Medicine uses **food as an integral part of a patient's treatment plan** to prevent, manage, or treat chronic diseases, accentuating the connection between diet and health. Sixty percent of the US adult population has a diet-related chronic disease, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some types of cancer.⁹ FIM is a holistic, evidence-based approach to addressing these diseases and associated conditions.^{10,11} For example, patients with prediabetes and/or hypertension receive produce prescriptions, medically tailored groceries, medically tailored meals, and nutrition education, among other interventions. The approach works to address a common root cause of chronic disease: inequitable systems that create economic disparities and barriers to accessing affordable and nourishing food.

The growing trend of framing food access as a medical service presents an opportunity to transition community-based nutrition efforts into officially recognized FIM programs, leading to healthier food consumption, lower rates of diet-related diseases, and increased sustainable funding sources for food access non-profits. Organizations in Somerville, such as food pantries, mobile farmers markets, and other food providers, have programs that meet the functional definition of FIM by offering fresh produce, healthy food, and education. None of them, however, are currently integrated into healthcare through referrals or healthcare funding streams.

9 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, FIM Landscape.

10 Bhat et al., "Prescription Programs."

11 Hager et al., "Medically Tailored Meals."

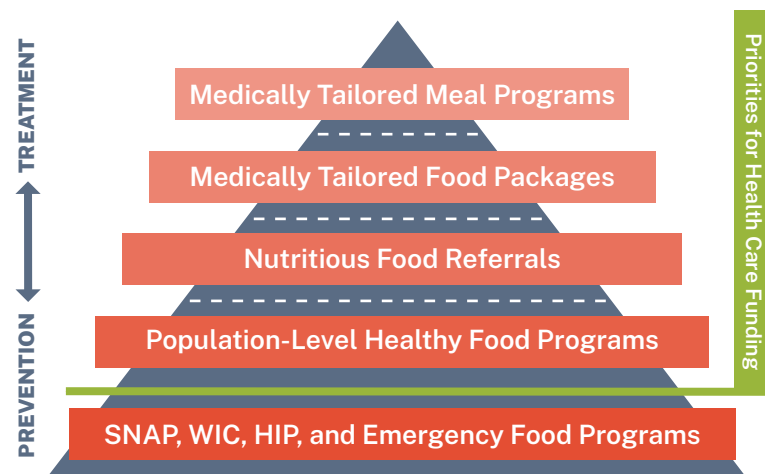
Somerville and Food is Medicine

Somerville's food access programs embody the principles of **Food is Medicine**. For example, Somerville has several food pantries and other free food programs that supply fresh produce, along with staple pantry items. Most pantries provide a choice model in which the client can choose their own products. This model can easily be adapted to offer medically tailored groceries, and clients can use a prescribed checklist of foods to select from what is available. In addition to food pantries and free food programs, people can access a variety of local low-cost, fresh, and nutrient-dense produce at the Somerville Mobile Farmer's Market (SMFM) whose purpose is similar to that of a produce prescription program, particularly when shoppers hear about it from their health-care provider.

Figure 9.1 shows the Massachusetts Food is Medicine Coalition's visualization of FIM approaches from prevention to treatment.¹² Advocates in Massachusetts prioritize program funding on a spectrum from generalized preventative approaches targeted treatment programs. Programs that support food and nutrition security, like food pantries and food benefits, are an important component of preventative health. At the other end of the spectrum, medically tailored meals and food packages are offered as treatment for specific diet-related conditions and are the highest priority for healthcare funding. **Figure 9.1** also provides a summary of how Somerville's food access programs incorporate these approaches.

¹² Khan, "In Support: A Food and Health Pilot."

Figure 9.1: The Food is Medicine Pyramid: Prevention to Treatment



Source: Adapted from Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation's [Food is Medicine Pyramid](#).

Carrots and zucchini for sale at City-subsidized prices through the Somerville Mobile Farmers Market program.





Left: Mangoes stocked at Somerville Hispanic Association for Community Development's Food4All pantry. Right: The contents of a Food For Free Just Eats box.

SOMERVILLE HAS MANY PROGRAMS THAT FIT INTO THE FOOD IS MEDICINE FRAMEWORK

Medically Tailored Meals

Somerville offers a **minimum of two community meals per week** at which people can get a **free, balanced hot meal**. Although these meals are not nutritionally analyzed and therefore cannot be medically tailored, they are balanced and portion-controlled, providing healthful energy and nutrient-dense food to people at high risk for food insecurity.

Medically Tailored Groceries

Somerville has several **food pantries**, all of which offer some level of food choice. Clients may bring a shopping **list of preferred foods to support their health conditions**, although there is no formal communication among the healthcare

team, pantry, and patient/client. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Amy Smith, a CHA physician, established the Feed to Heal initiative, a software platform to securely connect healthcare providers and food pantries.¹³ Positive outcomes from the early roll-out of the platform included a 75% connection rate with 93% of patients connecting to food resources within 48 hours of a referral by CHA. The initiative offers one path to facilitate more direct referrals from healthcare organizations to food programs.

Produce Prescription Programs

In addition to pantries and free food programs, people can **stretch their benefits to buy more fresh food at farmers markets** and mobile farmers markets around the city. At the long-running, city-funded SMFM, farm fresh produce is priced affordably, and all nutrition benefits are accepted.

¹³ Feed Heal, "Our Story."

In 2024, SMFM began accepting Fresh Connect, the Mass-Health-funded food card for select patients at CHA. While neither the SMFM nor the other Somerville farmers markets receive formal produce prescriptions, OFAHC conducts outreach to CHA providers so they can refer their patients to locations in Somerville with affordable, healthy food.

Nutrition Security Programs

To enhance the accessibility of nutrition security programs such as SNAP, WIC, and school meals, Somerville has a **network of social service providers** at non-profits, the schools, CHA, and the City's Health and Human Services Department. Providers regularly screen and help enroll people in SNAP and other benefit programs. A group of SNAP providers meets monthly through a Somerville SNAP Practice Group to share up-to-date information on policies or systems that may impact their ability to support clients during enrollment.



Left: Volunteers at the Market Manager's Booth at Union Square Farmers Market ready to assist with benefit transactions. *Photo credit: Carlos Ly for Union Square Main Streets* **Right:** Chef Afruza teaches a cooking workshop at the Somerville Public Library's East Branch. *Photo credit: Brigid Pigott, Somerville Public Library*

Population-Level Healthy Food Policies and Programs

This level of the Food is Medicine model includes programs and policies that **remove barriers to equitable access to food**. The Taxi to Health program achieved this by providing transportation to social service and healthcare providers (for more on the program see [Chapter 06: Food Landscape and Preferences](#)). The SMFM offers a seasonal change in the food environment by setting up in the same locations on a predictable, consistent schedule for 17 weeks out of the year. In doing so, it alters the food access landscape and shopping behaviors in generally low access/affordable food neighborhoods.

Nutrition education, including cooking classes and information about low-cost healthy foods, is identified in this assessment as another way Somerville can address this level of the Food is Medicine framework.



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TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- **Food literacy and nutrition education have declined in recent years in Somerville.** Food literacy is a critical component of long-term nutrition security.
- CHA is Somerville's largest healthcare provider and **offers several food-related incentives, benefits, and educational programs.** However, there is room to improve coordination between these initiatives and local food assistance programs.
- Funders, policymakers, and professionals are increasingly interested in **connecting food access and healthcare system outcomes** under the Food is Medicine framework.
- Massachusetts is a leader in the Food is Medicine space with a strong coalition and funding opportunities for food programs in the Medicaid 1115 Waiver Health-Related Social Needs programming.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE FOOD LITERACY

- Elevate information about the **federal elimination of SNAP-Ed** and how SPS will be impacted starting in the '26-27 school year.
- Collaborate with the **Somerville Public Library** to integrate relevant food and nutrition topics into public programming.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTEGRATE FOOD ACCESS INTO HEALTHCARE

- Strengthen the collaboration between the **City, the school district, and Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA)** to provide a coordinated package of food resources and benefits for Somerville constituents and patients.
- Ensure social service providers are **aware of the incentives available through Tufts Health Together with CHA** and other Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs).
- Pursue **grants** that align with the **Food is Medicine** framework.
- Support **increased Health-Related Social Need funding** in the upcoming Medicaid 1115 waiver to open up more programming for residents and additional contracting opportunities for community organizations.



Rescue, Recycling, and Waste Prevention

What leads to food waste, and how does waste connect to access?

WHERE DOES WASTE HAPPEN IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN AND WHAT ARE ITS COSTS?

An estimated 30-40% of food that is produced in the US is eventually wasted.¹ Food waste happens at **every point along the food supply chain**. About half of the waste happens before food gets to homes, including at farms, during processing and distribution, and at retailers like grocery stores and restaurants. About 48% happens at individual homes.²

Waste at the retail and restaurant level is also tied to individual consumers. Retailers overstock items to create a feeling of abundance and ensure Americans can access the wide array of produce which they are accustomed to finding at their local grocery store. A large portion of food wasted at restaurants is plate waste, that is, food that customers do not eat or take home with them.

An inefficient food system has **environmental and climate impacts**. Most planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions from the food system come from nitrogen-based fertilizers



Volunteers gleaning leafy greens from a farm partner's field.

Photo credit: Boston Area Gleaners

used in agriculture and the digestive systems of certain animals like cows, sheep, and goats. Other sources of greenhouse gas emissions include agricultural equipment and facilities, transport and sale of food, and the decomposition of organic waste in landfills. When food is wasted at any point in this cycle, it increases the climate pollution associated with all food consumption.

In addition to the climate cost of food waste, there is a direct financial cost to food waste. Experts estimate that in 2023 about \$261 billion was spent on food that was not consumed, which is about \$780 per person per year.³ This represents a considerable cost to households, especially for lower-income households who spend a larger portion of their income on food.⁴

1 EcoDataLab and AECOM, *Emissions Inventory*.

2 ReFED, *2025 Food Waste Report*.

3 ReFED, *2025 Food Waste Report*.

4 Sweitzer and Davidenko, "Food Spending and Income."



Boston Area Gleaners volunteers sorting and packing gleaned carrots at Stonefield Farm. *Photo credit: Boston Area Gleaners*

PARTNER REPORT CALL-OUT

SOMERVILLE'S CONSUMPTION-BASED EMISSIONS INVENTORY

In 2023, Somerville published its first Consumption-Based Emissions Inventory (CBEI), an estimate of the greenhouse gas emissions associated with the activity of all residents of a geographic area (sometimes explained as a “community carbon footprint”).¹ In 2019, Somerville's average per-household emissions from food accounted for 8.2 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, or 25% of the average household's total consumption-based emissions. Despite being only a small fraction of overall calories consumed, meat and dairy had an outsized impact on the typical household's emissions associated with food, suggesting that waste of those foods is especially costly from a climate and environmental perspective.

1 EcoDataLab and AECOM, *Emissions Inventory*.



WHAT ARE THE BEST SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS FOOD WASTE, AND HOW DO THEY CONNECT TO FOOD ACCESS?

Efforts focused on **preventing food waste** and **recovering excess food** are the most **cost-effective and impactful** solutions because so many resources go into our food. Figure 8.2 shows the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Wasted Food Scale, which identifies the prevention of wasted food as the best solution, followed by donating or upcycling food to feed people or animals. **Recycling excess food** as compost or through anaerobic digestion is less cost effective but **more easily scalable**, making it an important complement to higher-impact approaches.^{5,6}

Figure 10.1: The EPA Wasted Food Scale
The US Environmental Protection Agency's guide for how to use excess food most sustainably.

Source: US Environmental Protection Agency, 2025.⁷

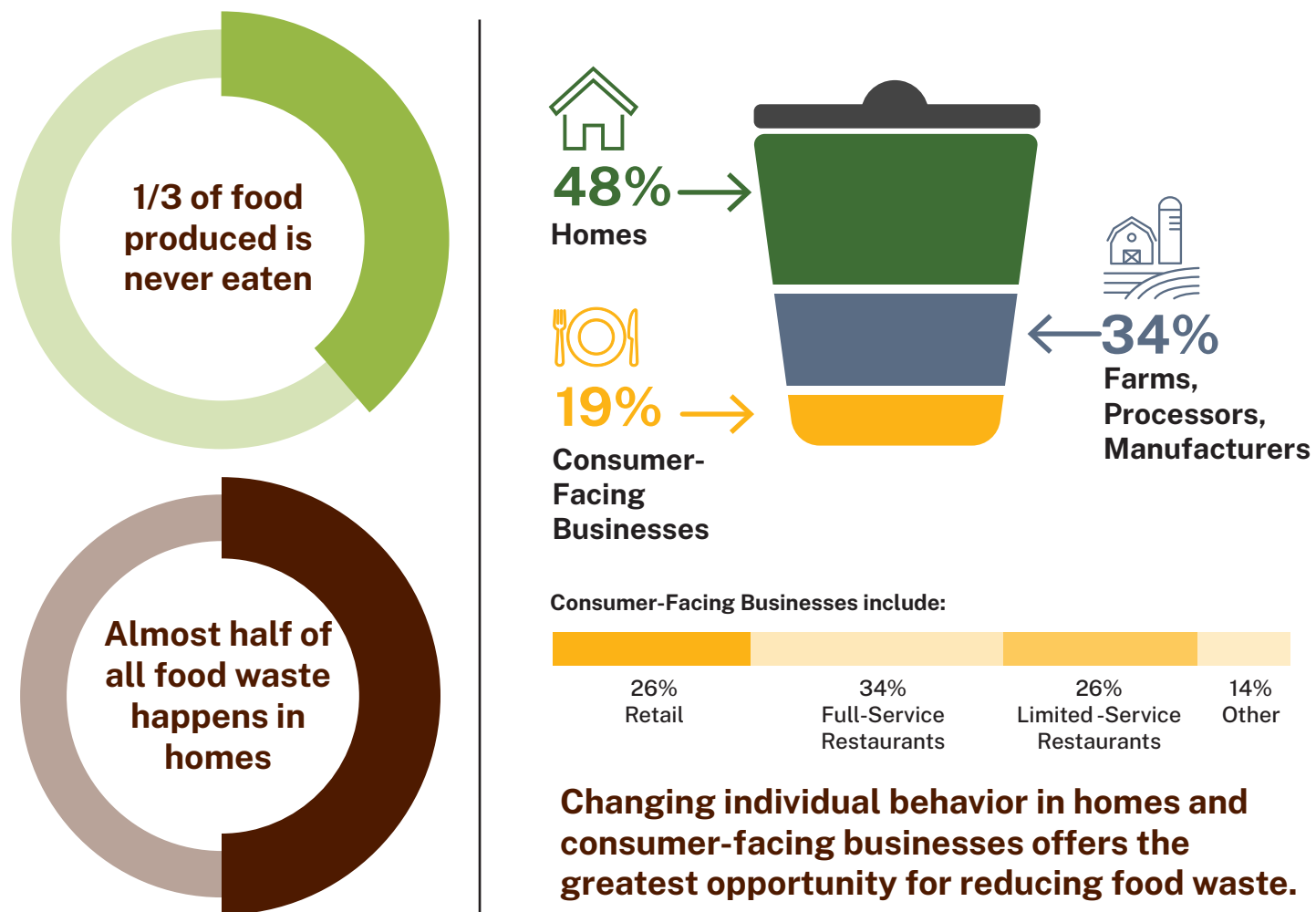


5 ReFED, *2025 Food Waste Report*.

6 ReFED, “Solutions.”

7 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Food Waste Scale.”

Figure 10.2: Where does food waste happen in the food system?



Local Solutions: How are Somerville and Massachusetts addressing food waste?

Many efforts to recover and recycle excess food are already underway in Somerville. Four large food rescue organizations bring unsold food from local producers and retailers to Somerville food pantries. This work is supported by state-level policies that both require and assist large retailers to donate food instead of disposing of it. Somerville is also following the lead of other Massachusetts communities by piloting municipal composting initiatives.



Food For Free staff picking up excess grocery items from Whole Foods for distribution to emergency food programs.

Photo credit: Food For Free

FOOD RECOVERY IN SOMERVILLE AND MASSACHUSETTS:

Strategies to address unsold or uneaten food by recovering usable surplus food include supporting transportation of donations, education for businesses on what can be donated, matching food donors with rescue organizations and/or recipients, and value-added processing to extend the life of donated food.

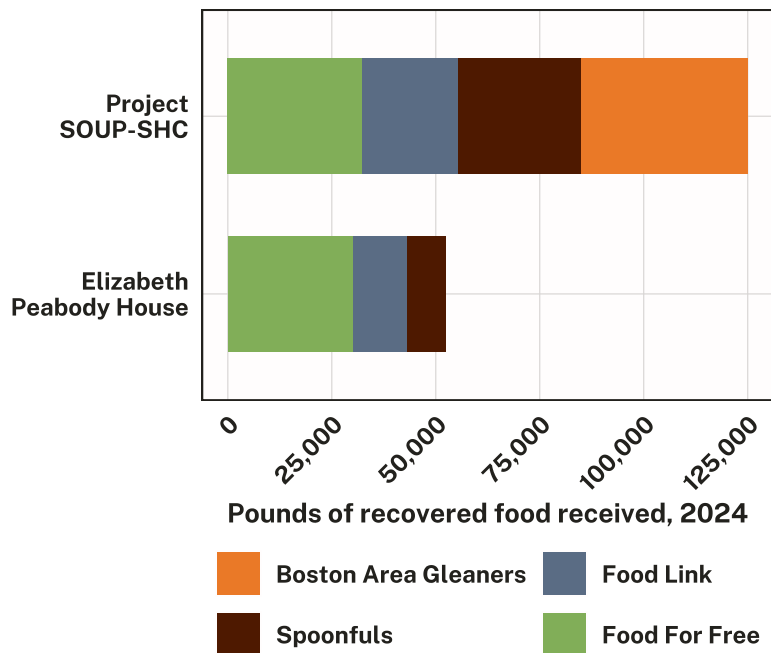
Food Recovery Organizations

Three local non-profit organizations – **Food For Free, Spoonfuls, and Food Link** – **rescue and distribute excess retail food**. They work with regional grocers to pick up food for donation and transport it to local non-profits who can then distribute it to people for consumption.

A fourth non-profit – the **Boston Area Gleaners** – **recovers food from farms and produce wholesale markets**. Gleaners' volunteers help harvest (or 'glean') food at farms if the farm does not have the capacity to harvest produce they cannot sell. They also recover excess harvested produce from local farms and wholesale produce shipments that are rejected for technical reasons and would otherwise go uneaten.

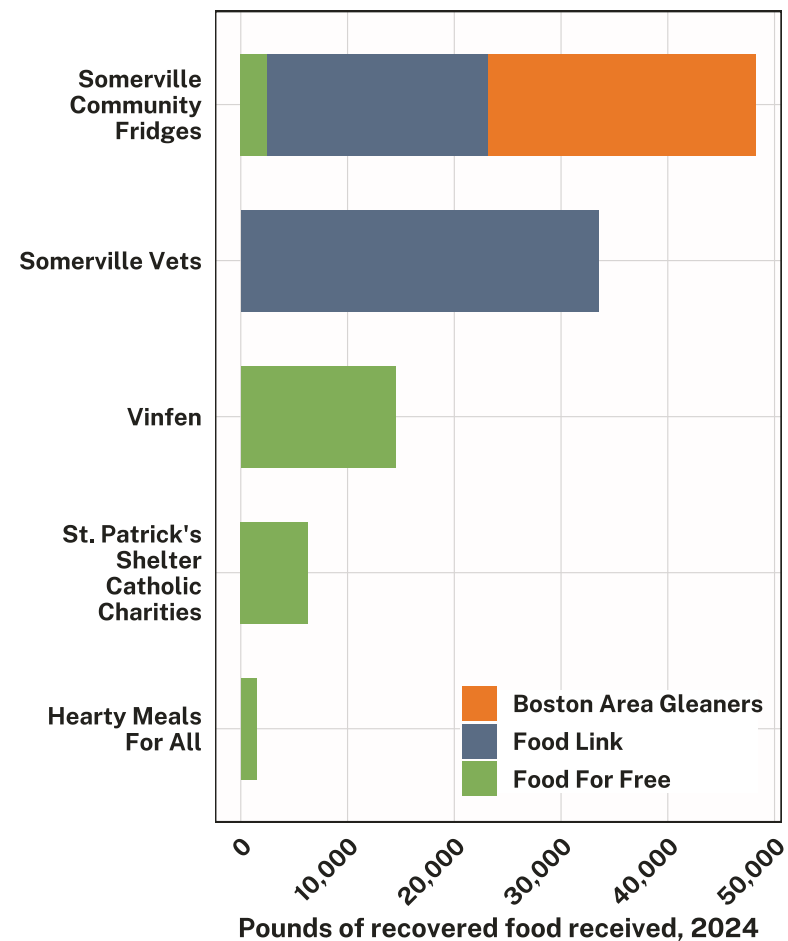
[Figures 10.3a](#) and [10.3b](#) show food recovered from these four organizations and distributed to Somerville food assistance programs. Food is measured in total pounds and aggregated over 2024. The pantries, shown in [Figure 10.3a](#), are the largest recipients of rescued food, which includes baked goods, fresh produce, prepared foods, and other grocery items. As detailed in [Chapter 5: The Free Food Supply](#),

Figure 10.3a: Project SOUP and Elizabeth Peabody House receive recovered food in Somerville



Figures 10.3a-b show organizations that receive rescued food from Somerville's main food rescue organizations. The horizontal axis shows total pounds of food received in 2024.

Figure 10.3b: Meals, Residential Facilities, and Community Fridges also use recovered food



CALL-OUT

THE FOOD FOR FREE HEAT-N-EATS COLLABORATION WITH HARVARD & ROXBURY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Food For Free partners with Harvard University and Roxbury Community College to repurpose the university's dining hall food into frozen prepared meals for community college students. Harvard University culinary staff portion, package, and freeze the meals on site, and Roxbury Community College receives, stores, and distributes the meals to students who benefit from food support to continue their studies and improve their general well-being.

Food For Free picks up the meals and delivers them to Roxbury Community College. They also provide technical assistance to Harvard, such as helping to procure a package sealer and ensuring the printing of correct labels. In addition, they coordinate the three partners and track overall program metrics.

Food For Free used to provide similar meals to Somerville's Health and Human Services Department and the Somerville High School. In 2024, over 4,000 meals were distributed to families and HS students. Although the program was valuable to recipients, it was not sustainable for Food For Free and deliveries stopped in 2025. A key difference between the meals for Roxbury Community College and the ones provided to the High School is the presence of Harvard as a strong partner that can package and freeze food on site. Additional strong institutional partners might allow the program to expand sustainably.

pantries get most of their food from the Greater Boston Food Bank. Rescued food, however, is an important food source and adds variety to pantry offerings. Project SOUP distributed an average of about **nine pounds of rescued food per visit in 2024**, and Elizabeth Peabody House distributed an average of about **four pounds of rescued food per visit**. As of 2025, Elizabeth Peabody also has a Boston Area Gleaners subscription and received about 9,000 pounds of rescued produce from them in 2025.

[Figure 10.3b](#) shows food received by residential programs (Somerville Veteran's Center, St. Patrick's Shelter), meals (Hearty Meals for All), daytime service provider programs (Vinfen), and the Somerville Community Fridges. The amount of food is proportional to the number of people served by these organizations. In addition to recovered food received by organizations that give food directly to residents, Food For



Boxes of produce from the Boston Area Gleaners in storage at Food For Free's walk-in refrigerator for the Somerville Community Fridges. Food For Free shares space so that the weekly Gleaners delivery can be stored for distribution over several days to the Community Fridges.

Photo credit: Todd Kaplan, Somerville Community Fridges

Free received over 200,000 pounds of rescued produce from the Gleaners. As a Partner-to-Partner distributor, Food For Free uses this produce for their Free School Market partnership with the Somerville Public Schools and their Just Eats partnership program with Somerville Housing Authority, among other partners.

While Somerville does not currently have a program that rescues food and extends its life by repackaging or repurposing it into value added products, the [Call-Out on Food For Free's collaboration with Harvard & Roxbury Community College](#) provides an example of this type of food recovery.

Massachusetts Waste Ban and Technical Assistance

Massachusetts has been a leader in **implementing an organic waste ban** and supporting businesses and other entities to comply with it. Since October 2014, the state has prohibited businesses and institutions generating one ton or more of organic waste weekly from disposing of this waste as trash. The ban grew out of a voluntary program in which the state worked with retailers to donate or compost food waste. Retailers realized that composting or donating saved trash hauling fees and donating offered federal tax breaks, both meaningful savings in a tight-margin business. After gaining industry buy-in and demonstrating cost savings, the state introduced a formal ban on organic waste disposal accompanied by resources to help all food waste generators comply. Businesses and institutions subject to this prohibition must contract to compost, recycle, reuse, or convert organic waste, largely generated through food. In November 2022, the threshold was lowered to ½ ton or 1,000 pounds.⁸

⁸ Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, “Commercial Food Material Disposal Ban.”



Food Link volunteers rescue excess Factor meals for distribution to Somerville Community Fridges and other partners. Photo credit: Food Link

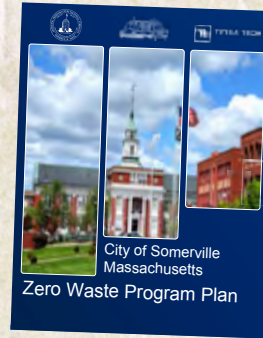
The initial voluntary program and waste ban have encouraged food retailers to connect with food rescue organizations and have increased the amount of food rescued, according to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.⁹ **Food recovery, however, remains the smallest segment of the food waste management industry** compared with waste processors like composting companies. Recovery requires **more logistics**, as food must be sorted by the donor, stored safely, and picked up and distributed by a rescue organization in a timely manner. An estimated 81% of rescued food comes from retailers, which offer large quantities of packaged food

⁹ ICF, *MA Commercial Waste Ban*.

SOMERVILLE'S ZERO WASTE PLAN

In 2023, the City of Somerville published a zero-waste plan with the goal of achieving a 30% reduction in the amount of waste generated in the city by 2030 and a 90% reduction by 2050.¹ The plan recommends:

- Strengthening partnerships with food recovery groups and creating policies to promote food donation and recovery.
- Diverting organic material that makes up about 30% of total municipal solid waste by implementing municipal food waste collection services and drop-off locations.
- Conducting outreach to commercial businesses and institutions to ensure they are aware of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection's Food Waste Ban and provide them with resources for compliance.



This plan is part of the City's larger climate action plan, Climate Forward, originally released in 2018 and updated in 2024. Climate Forward aims to create a "strong, healthy community in the face of climate change while simultaneously reducing climate pollution, also referred to as greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and our dependence on fossil fuels."²

¹ TETRA TECH, *Zero Waste Plan*.

² City of Somerville, "Climate Forward."

that is easy to redistribute to emergency food assistance operations like pantries. Entities that produce less usable excess food or have variable supplies of usable excess, such as restaurants, are harder for food rescue organizations to work with. For this reason, the change in waste ban threshold in 2022 did not have a large effect on food recovery statewide.

Somerville organizations confirm this trend. Spoonfuls staff noted that the organizations they work with are all large food retailers who were already subject to the 2014-level ban. Food Link staff also suggested that businesses and institutions interested in food rescue were likely motivated to donate before the ban or threshold change, thus the impact may have been less for food rescue compared to other disposal options for excess food.

WASTE PREVENTION IN SOMERVILLE:

Many prevention strategies require **state or national advocacy** since they involve systems beyond local control. For example, changing standards for date labelling would help reduce consumer confusion and waste. However, this would require the passage of legislation at the state level as recently happened in California.¹⁰ At the local level, **consumer education** about waste is an attainable goal, including education about interpreting the information on food labels, using leftovers, minimizing spoilage, and understanding the impact of food waste.

¹⁰ Buta, "California Bans 'Sell By' Dates."

WASTE RECYCLING IN SOMERVILLE:

The City of Somerville incinerates its trash, reducing the direct generation of greenhouse gases from food waste. However, food that is not edible for people or animals should still ideally be diverted from incineration through composting or other means. Composting promotes **zero waste principles by raising awareness of consumer consumption** and giving residents an opportunity to foster a culture of climate action. Composting also turns nutrients from food scraps back into usable soil and reduces rat activity with proper closed compost bins.¹¹ Somerville has made composting an administrative and community priority by:

1. **Allocating \$350,000 towards a curbside food waste collection pilot in East Somerville.**¹² Up to 1,200 households living in the designated pilot area can participate in a weekly curbside, food waste pick-up by the vendor Garbage to Garden. To be eligible, households must live in a building with six units or fewer and not already use a private composting service. The pilot program will continue through mid-2027.
2. **Voting for Public Community Composting in the second round of Participatory Budgeting.**¹³ Install, contract, and maintain community composting drop-off bins at high-impact, public locations. Funds for this program would also support coordination with community food rescue applications, transport of compost to community gardens, and the continuation of Somerville's food system.

¹¹ TETRA TECH, *Zero Waste Plan*.

¹² City of Somerville, "Food Waste Program."

¹³ City of Somerville, "Participatory Budget."



Left: Curbside food waste bin for the East Somerville pilot program, fall 2025.

Above: Pumpkins awaiting composting following a post-Halloween collection.

Photo credit: Kate Bossingham, Somerville Office of Sustainability and Environment

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TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS:

- **Diversion of excess retail food is well established**, while consumer-level food waste remains less well documented and addressed.
 - » Systems exist to redirect surplus food from retailers to emergency food providers, including several non-profit food rescue organizations and technical support and collaboration from the state government.
 - » Household food waste reduction efforts are less developed. Somerville has two composting programs in progress but lacks waste prevention and rescue campaigns directed towards individuals.
- **Food rescue operations are a growing part of food waste management but remain less common** than other types of processing because rescue is more logistically challenging.
- Somerville currently **does not** have food rescue programming that **extends or adds value** to rescued food.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO PREVENT FOOD WASTE:

- Support **expanded partnerships and funding for Somerville's food rescue operations** consistent with Somerville's Zero Waste Plan goals.
- Develop a **city-wide messaging campaign** to reduce **household food waste**.
- Identify institutional partners who can **support successful reuse** programs for **prepared foods**.



Local, State, and Federal Policies and Funding in the Food System

Federal, state, and local policies all shape the range of possibilities for food access initiatives in Somerville. 'Policies' can include:

- rules determining how initiatives must operate and
- funding that allows initiatives to start or continue.

At the national level, policy creates foundational rules for key food access initiatives like SNAP, WIC, and the National School Lunch Program, among others. These large benefit programs are heavily reliant on federal support to be financially feasible and would be very difficult to fund at the state or local level.

National policies are established in law by Congress and in regulations and guidance by federal executive agencies. While Congress determines broad guidelines, agencies develop the detailed rules and regulations with which initiatives must comply.

- Key laws that affect food access are the **Farm Bill, Child Nutrition Reauthorization Bills, and annual appropriations**, that is, annual decisions on how to spend money.

- The key federal agency for food-related programming is the **US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service**.

States are often in charge of administering federally funded programs. As a result, state **administrative funding** and **state agency procedures** influence the way in which federal programs are implemented. Additionally, states can create and fund their own initiatives, like Massachusetts' Healthy Incentives Program (HIP).

Municipalities make policies through ordinances, planning, and budgets. Somerville's zoning ordinance sets rules around how space can be used while planning documents provide visions and goals for city development.

The City's budget can fund small but impactful food programs like the Carrot Card cash benefit that are independent of state and federal funding and reporting requirements. The municipal budget is also a key means by which the City interacts with federal and state policies and programs. The budget determines the extent to which the City invests in the use of federal and state programs by, for example, funding



Advocates at the Massachusetts State House for HIP lobby day, Spring 2026. *Photo credit: Becca Miller, Mass Food System Collaborative.*



Food Coalition member and Somerville Homeless Coalition case manager with Senator Pat Jehlen to advocate for improved access to SNAP for immigrant residents at 2023's Immigrant's Day at the State House.



Food Coalition Steering Committee Members doing outreach at the Council on Aging Wellness Fair.



Health and Human Services Department staff doing outreach at 2025's Haitian Flag Raising Festival outside Somerville City Hall.
Photo credit: Emmanuel Louis Charles, Somerville Community Health Worker



City staff and community partners with former Mayor Ballantyne following City Council approval of the allocation of almost \$1 million in Community Benefit Funds to food access programming.
Photo credit: Nikki Spencer, Somerville Chief of Staff (former)

case managers who help with SNAP navigation or providing a SNAP match for shoppers at farmers markets. Finally, the City administers certain federal funds, such as Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

This chapter offers several resources for understanding and engaging in advocacy around food policy. The first section provides a summary of how food programs are funded as a key indicator of government policy at the local, state, and federal levels. The second section highlights active areas of advocacy on federal and state policies and funding decisions that have significant implications for Somerville residents. The final section considers how local policies are developed through city planning.

Policy through budgets: How are food programs funded?

The **federal government** provides the majority of funding for many food benefits and programs, including SNAP, WIC, SUN Bucks, Medicaid-covered food benefits, Farmers Market Coupons for WIC and older adults, and Meals on Wheels, Congregate Meals, and Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) grocery boxes for older adults. Federal funding also provides significant support to:

- local emergency food through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and local purchasing grants (when available – see Call-Out on following page);
- school meals through federal reimbursements based on the number of students identified as low income.

Finally, the federal government provides annual Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and one-time American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) money to states and municipalities, which funded or continue to fund many of the programs discussed in this assessment.

The state provides an additional layer of funding for programs, including:

- covering some of the administrative costs of federally-funded programs;
- fully funding and administering the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP);
- providing funds to make school meals free for all students; and
- supplementing funding for food banks and pantries through the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP).

Appendix 6 includes a table detailing how key food assistance programs rely on federal and state funding.

 CALL-OUT

CITY OF SOMERVILLE FLEXIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) uses a formula incorporating several metrics of community need to provide CDBG funding to municipalities. Each year, the City of Somerville sets aside a portion of these funds for public services. In 2025-2026, for example, \$384,570 was set aside for this purpose.¹ Community organizations can apply for these dollars, which are awarded by a committee through a competitive grant process. **CDBG funds are a longstanding resource**, allowing the City to flexibly address the built environment and other social determinants of health. Although relatively stable as a funding source, the program has some challenges. There is little flexibility in the amount of funds, and the program has a significant reporting burden to HUD.

¹ City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, *OSPCD 2025-26 Action Plan*.

In recent years, the City of Somerville has been awarded or made available additional and even more flexible sources of funding:

- In 2022, the City received \$77 million in **ARPA funds**.
- Also in 2022, the City implemented **Participatory Budgeting**, allowing residents to vote on how to spend \$1 million of the City's budget.
- Through increased private development in Somerville, the City has received **funds earmarked for Community Benefit** to offset challenges caused by new developments. In December 2025, the City allocated almost \$1 million of these funds for food security, largely to non-profit partners.

The City has channeled funds from all these sources into food access, providing a local cash benefit in the Carrot Card program, increased availability of prepared meals, and additional support for local food pantries.

However, these funds are less stable than CDBG. ARPA funding was temporary and created a challenging funding cliff for many programs. Community Benefit and Participatory Budgeted funds depend heavily on the interest and priorities of residents and policy-makers. Community Benefit Funds additionally depend on the pace of development and interest from developers in negotiating for sites in the city.

Local governments can fund food access by providing staff to help residents navigate state and federal resources, and by funding local programs. Table 11.x summarizes City investment in food access programming as of fiscal year (FY) 2026 and the history of this investment. The City's general operating budget includes key food access expenditures, like the SMFM, the Somerville SNAP Match, and grants of CDBG funds to food programs. [Table 11.1](#) captures the funding amount for the most recent fiscal year, July 2025-June 2026. As more flexible sources of funding have become available, the City has prioritized further investment in food access.

CALL-OUT

FEDERAL DIVESTMENT IN SOCIAL SAFETY NET PROGRAMS, 2025-PRESENT

Starting in 2025, the federal government has significantly decreased support for food system programs like SNAP, Emergency Food Assistance, and local procurement.

- **Unprecedented cuts to SNAP** passed in July 2025 have questioned long-held convictions that the federal government is responsible for providing a safety net to the most vulnerable. These cuts shift costs to states and reduce the number of SNAP recipients by increasing the complexity of applications.
- In early 2025 the federal government reclaimed money that had already been allocated to emergency food assistance leading to **delays and confusion in the national food bank supply system.**¹
- Cuts have also **ended programs** designed to support resilience and long-term recovery from the pandemic, such as grants for institutions and emergency food providers to **purchase from local farmers.**²

These cuts in the food system are echoed in other areas of social services such as Medicaid, threatening low-income households from multiple angles. At the time of writing this report, the permanence of this federal shift is uncertain. The section below on Key Policy Areas summarizes progress up to 2025 and threats to this work as a result of federal changes.

¹ Brown, "USDA Halts Millions of Dollars."

² Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, "Trump Takes Food Away."

Table 11.1: City of Somerville Investment in Food Access Programming

Program	Funding Source	Amount	Context
Food Pantries and Community Fridges	CDBG	\$150,000	Some pantries received or still receive CDBG funds, and some received ARPA funds, ending in 2024. In December 2025, the City recognized the vital importance of these programs by awarding Community Benefit funds to four Somerville pantries. Also in 2025, Somerville residents voted to provide added cold storage and food for local food distributions. The 2023 round of Participatory Budgeting included funds to support infrastructure and produce for Somerville's Community Fridges.
	Community Benefit Funds	\$348,000	
	Participatory Budgeting 2	\$220,000	
	Participatory Budgeting 1	\$25,000	
Free School Markets	City Budget ¹	\$45,596	Food For Free received ARPA funds from the City to operate other programs. When that support ended, the City contributed to the School Market program to support Food For Free, which continues to be a key food assistance provider in the city.
	Community Benefit Funds	\$45,000	
Community Meals and Prepared Meals	City Budget	\$8,500	For the past three years, the City has budgeted funds to ensure a stable community meal program in East Somerville. This support was expanded with Community Benefit funds in 2025, which included funds for the Come to the Table community meal and the East Somerville Main Streets-operated restaurant meal voucher program.
	Participatory Budgeting 1	\$55,000	
	Community Benefit Funds	\$155,000	In 2023, the City voted to provide Participatory Budgeting funds to the High School to make prepared packaged meals for distribution to Community Fridges and service centers. Community Benefit funds will augment this program by securing a steady source of prepared frozen meals for service providers to distribute at City Hall Annex and community-based organizations.

¹ City of Somerville, "City of Somerville FY26 Budget."

Program	Funding Source	Amount	Context
Winter Season Grocery Gift Cards	Mayor's Special Funds	\$18,750	Each winter since 2022, the Mayor's office provides grocery gift cards for direct service providers to give to clients facing financial challenges.
Carrot Card Program	Community Benefit Funds	\$275,000	In 2022, the City began funding a \$25-35 monthly food benefit for children in the Somerville Public Schools. Formerly funded through ARPA and managed through Food For Free, the Carrot Card program shrunk in September 2024 and temporarily ended in June 2025. Community Benefit funds allowed it to restart in early 2026.
Somerville Mobile Farmers Market (SMFM)	City Budget	\$28,000	The SMFM uses sales revenue and CDGB grant funds to subsidize the cost of its produce and City funds to pay for seasonal staff to run the market. In addition to these funds, OFAHC and HHS administration staff and budget provide capacity to operate and manage the market. Much of this funding is reinvested in the food system when the SMFM purchases food from local farms.
	CDBG, FY2026	\$18,500	
SNAP Match at Somerville Farmers Markets	City Budget	\$80,500	An identified goal in the 2018 Food System Assessment was to find a way for all three farmers markets to have a universal SNAP Match so that the shopper experience and support was the same across markets. In 2020, the three non-profits that run these markets partnered with OFAHC to form the Somerville Farmers Market Coalition. The Coalition successfully applied for and received CDBG funds to follow up on this goal. In the same year, the City of Somerville re-allocated general funds to further support the SNAP Match and ensure the weekly \$15 allowance could last the entirety of each market's season. A few years later, increased City support made CDBG funds unnecessary to sustain the SNAP Match. While City funds provide the largest portion of support to the markets, both Union Square Main Streets and the Center for the Arts at the Armory (operators of the Winter Farmers Market) seek additional funds to support the SNAP Match.
Garden Education	City Budget	\$4,200	City funds support garden programming for Career and Technical Education Culinary students at Somerville High School.

What are the active areas of state and federal advocacy, how has Somerville engaged, and how do these advocacy efforts impact Somerville?



Food Coalition members and other Somerville advocates meeting with Representative Christine Barber at 2025's Immigrants Day at the State House.

Somerville and Massachusetts have strong advocacy communities working to improve food access through policy and funding. Funding advocacy follows the state fiscal year budgeting process, including brainstorming in the fall, the gubernatorial budget proposal in January, the House and Senate budget proposals in April-May, and the addressing of differences and final passage in June or July. Legislative advocacy happens on an ongoing basis over two-year legislative cycles, with the goal of having initiatives both codified in law and funded in the budget. Advocates work to bring priorities to their state Representatives and Senators, as well as to House and Senate leadership and the Governor's Office.

This section looks at several active areas of advocacy to:

- provide a summary of recent changes,
- consider threats to future progress, and
- point to specific policy actions readers can take to move food access forward.

Actions are focused on state-level advocacy with local and federal changes and challenges as context. These actions are a summary of general campaigns as of early 2026. [Appendix 6](#) contains a list of the bills, laws, and regulations from 2026 and earlier that are referenced in this section. The Somerville Food Coalition website, managed by OFAHC, provides the most up-to-date information on state-level policies and advocacy activities.

SNAP and Related Programs

✓ Actions

- **Support ongoing efforts to reverse or delay the federal cuts to SNAP.**
- **Codify HIP in Massachusetts law** to ensure it continues. HIP has been continuously funded since 2018 through the Massachusetts state budget, but there is no law that formally authorizes the program. As of publication, such a law is being considered in the 2026 state FARM bill.
- **Bring back a state-funded SNAP program.** This is especially important after non-citizen eligibility was further limited by the federal government in 2025.

⚠ Threats

- Case managers will see an increased workload due to added federal rules.
- The state must fill the gap created by reduced federal funding, including covering an additional 25% of the administrative cost of the SNAP program.
- The state must reduce its payment error rate, that is number of over or underpayments due to mistakes in SNAP applications. This is necessary to avoid paying a portion of the SNAP benefit amount starting in FY2028.
- The federal government is seeking to reduce accurate data collection on food insecurity by ending the Food Insecurity Survey and reducing the quality of economic well-being metrics, making it more difficult to assess needs and get funding.

🕒 History

Local Steps	State Steps	Federal Steps
2021-2024: The City, SHC's Project SOUP, and Elizabeth Peabody House became SNAP Outreach Partners, increasing support for DTA program navigation. 2020-2026: The City increases investment in the SNAP Match and the SMFM, providing more opportunities for people to use SNAP and HIP to purchase fresh foods and increasing revenue for local farmers. See Table 11.1 for more details. 2023-2026: The Food Coalition advocates for HIP, state SNAP to support more categories of lawfully present immigrants, and increased funding for the DTA to handle SNAP cases more efficiently.	2022: The state began a Restaurant Meals Program, a federal SNAP option that allows older adults, people with disabilities, and people who are homeless to use SNAP at approved restaurants and food trucks.² 2023: The state supplemental budget funded a temporary SNAP program to give access to more categories of lawfully present immigrants. 2025: HIP advocates successfully restored full funding after the program was reduced in December 2024.³ 2025: HIP implemented improvements to transactions and language around remaining benefit balance.	2020-2024: The USDA allowed states to waive several requirements to make it easier for people to get and keep SNAP. July 2025: Congress passed cuts to the SNAP program, including: • Shifting more administrative costs to states and threatening to shift some of the benefits to states if they do not bring down their payment error rate. • Further limiting SNAP eligibility for non-citizens. • Increasing the number of people subject to work rules. Work rules are not an effective tool and primarily serve to increase the paperwork burden on state agencies and SNAP applicants.

² Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, "Restaurant Meals Program."

³ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, "Updates to HIP."

Emergency Food, Local Food Purchasing, and Waste Diversion

✓ Actions

- Support “An Act **encouraging donation of food** to persons in need” in the Massachusetts legislature to establish a tax credit to Massachusetts farmers for up to \$25,000 per year of donated food. Build on the governor’s FY2027 budget proposal for a \$5,000 food donation tax credit to farmers.
- Work with the Governor’s Anti-Hunger Task Force to create **state funding opportunities** for purchasing local food.
- Continue to advocate for **increased MEFAP** funding.

⚠ Threats

- Ongoing federal disinvestment in the emergency food supply and less support for regional food networks through local purchasing.

🕒 History

Local Steps	State Steps	Federal Steps
2010-2026: The Somerville Food Coalition, led by OFAHC with guidance from a steering committee of food assistance professionals and community leaders, connects emergency food system stakeholders so they can share information and collaborate. 2023-2026: The City increases funding to emergency food providers. See Table 11.1 for more details.	MEFAP grants have increased each year in recognition of the fact that need has remained high following the COVID-19 pandemic.	2022: Grant programs introduced as part of long-term pandemic recovery efforts funded emergency food system actors (banks, pantries, distributors) and schools to purchase from local farmers. Programs are renewed in 2024.⁴ 2025: Local purchasing grant programs (LFPA and LFS) were cut by the federal government. Some additional funding sources for the TEFAP program were rolled back. The more established Leahy Farm to School grant program was also cut but was subsequently reinstated⁵.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “\$1.13 Billion for Local Food.”

⁵ Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, “Trump Takes Food Away.”

Child Nutrition and Food Literacy

✓ Actions

- Advocate for **Universal Free Schools Meals to remain a priority** for the Massachusetts budget.
- **Leverage the Somerville District Wellness Policy** and District Wellness Committee to better support food and nutrition education in the schools.⁶ The school district is required to create a revised Wellness Policy in collaboration with a Wellness Committee every three years. The policy is for 2024-2027, but there currently is no committee that meets on the policy.

⚠ Threats

- Federal changes to SNAP and MassHealth eligibility will reduce the number of directly qualified students, that is 'identified students'. This reduces federal support and makes it more difficult for the state to fund Universal Free School Meals.
- The federal government has threatened to raise the percentage of identified students (ISP) again, making it more difficult to qualify for CEP. This would make it more expensive for the state to fund Universal Free School Meals.

🕒 History

Local Steps	State Steps	Federal Steps
2023-2026: The City funds and manages a contractor to offer Summer Eats – free meals in local parks for 6 weeks every summer. 2022-2026: The City funds the Carrot Card program and contributes to the Free School Markets to provide additional grocery assistance for SPS families. See Table 11.1 for more details.	2022: the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative began organizing a campaign to promote food system education in schools. 2023: The state budget awarded \$1 million to support teachers in the implementation of food system education through professional development and field trips. 2024-25: Support for local purchasing and food literacy continues at \$1 million as funding for Fresh Grants for local food purchasing and education, as well as school wellness coaching. 2024: Massachusetts adopted SUN Bucks to offer a flexible summer benefit to feed school-aged kids. 2022: Using funds generated from the newly implemented fair share tax, the state made universal free school meals the law in Massachusetts.^{7,8}	2010s-2020: USDA ran several pilots of a SNAP-like summer benefit for school-aged kids as an alternative to free summer meals. This program was rolled out nationwide as Pandemic EBT in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁹ December 2022: Summer EBT was codified in law as SUN Bucks and became operational with the issuance of federal guidance in December 2023. The program builds on earlier pilots and Pandemic EBT. States can choose to operate the program and must submit a plan for federal approval. 2023: The federal government made it easier to qualify for free school lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Schools or districts qualify based on an identified student percentage (ISP), which is the percentage of students enrolled in a qualifying benefit program, like SNAP. The federal government lowered the required ISP from 40% to 25%. July 2025: The federal government reduced eligibility for SNAP and Medicaid, two programs that qualify identified students to measure eligibility for CEP.

⁶ Somerville Public School Committee, "Wellness Policy."

⁷ Mass. Budget and Policy Center, "Fair Share Amendment."

⁸ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office for Food and Nutrition Programs, "School Lunch Program."

⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Summary of the Evaluation of the USDA Summer EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) Demonstrations: Lessons Learned From More Than a Decade of Research.

Policy Through City Planning

Local food access and the food system are heavily shaped by the built environment, including City planning for new developments, open spaces, and transit. These elements of planning are often guided by comprehensive or neighborhood plans to identify and move towards certain common goals and visions. Planning both influences and is influenced by the funding and policies described above. Planning efforts are vital to the creation of new or expanded programs, such as the inclusion of a state-of-the art kitchen at the new Somerville High School. The kitchen could then be used to prepare and package community meals. The planning process can also surface food system needs for incorporation into City plans.

SomerVision 2040 is the City's Comprehensive Plan, which serves as a roadmap for equitable and sustainable growth.¹⁰ The plan calls out food systems as integral components of a healthy city, including urban agriculture, local food businesses, food affordability, and food waste management.

The City has also produced **seven neighborhood plans** to implement the goals laid out in SomerVision 2040.¹¹ Food systems planning and access are incorporated into all of them. Examples include supporting local businesses and attracting new ones to increase economic activity. For instance, the Union Square Neighborhood Plan addresses urban agriculture, stores, markets, and food trucks. The Winter Hill and

Ball and Magoun Square Plan proposes new grocery stores.¹² Davis Square's plan is not yet finalized but will likely include a Market Hall space to house the farmers market, create small business incubator spaces, and offer community event space, among other possible uses.¹³

The map in [Figure 11.1](#) highlights the food systems planning that is present within each neighborhood plan. Some of these goals have been realized while others remain at the idea stage. The plans are an essential reference point for informing community conversations and interdepartmental collaboration around food systems.

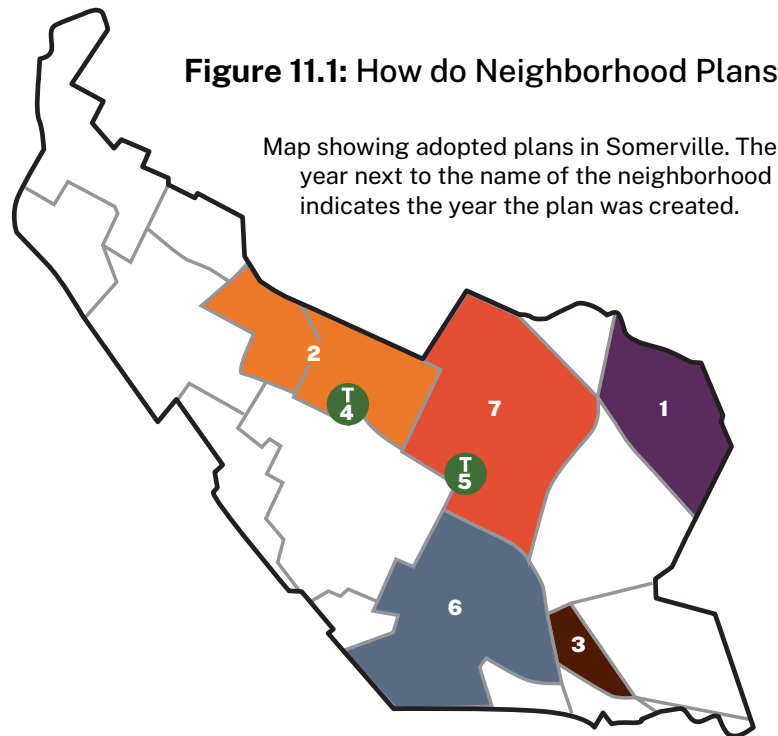
10 City of Somerville, "SomerVision 2040."

11 City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, "Adopted Plans."

12 City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, *Winter Hill Plan*.

13 City of Somerville, Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, "Davis Square Plan."

Figure 11.1: How do Neighborhood Plans incorporate food access?

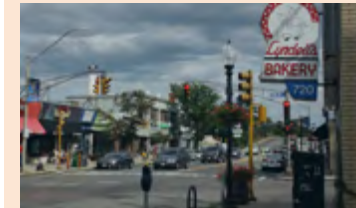


1 Assembly Square Neighborhood Plan (2025)

- Notes potential for farmers markets and food trucks in design of Central Green, civic spaces, as well as in pedestrian-first areas that can be easily closed to vehicle traffic for events.
- Calls for cultivating community by supporting small businesses, food trucks, pushcarts, and temporary sales.

2 Ball Square and Magoun Square (2017)*

- Reserve space for food trucks at the Broadway-facing border of Trum Field.
- Proposes 691 Broadway as a potential development site to address community need for a grocery store.



3 Brickbottom Neighborhood Plan (2025)

- Recommends permitting artisanal food production to increase consumer-facing retail in this area.
- Notes lack of grocery stores.



T4 Gilman Square Station Area Plan (2014)

- Notes lack of “healthy and affordable” grocery stores and domination of convenience food retail in the area.

T5 Lowell Street Station Area (2014)

- Notes lack of grocery stores and high concentration of convenience food retail.
- Highlights local food business.

6 Union Square (2016)*

- Contains a subsection on Local Food & Ethnic Grocers.
- Promotes urban agriculture, international markets, and the local “food web” with specific recommendations
- Recommends establishing business licensing programs for street vendors, food trucks, and micro-retailers.

7 Winter Hill Neighborhood Plan (2016)*

- Provides information on vacant Star Market and suitable alternative grocery store site.
- Held community meetings on food access to inform the plan.



*denotes plans that have a stronger focus on food access and food systems

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TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS:

- **Multiple levels of policy influence food access and the food system in Somerville.**
- **The City has expanded financial support for food access and nutrition-related programs in the past five years.**
 - » Flexible sources of municipal funding have increased in the past five years through Community Benefit funds from rapid local development, newly allocated participatory budgeting funds, and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.
 - » The City of Somerville has prioritized using some of these funds for food access and nutrition-related programs.
- **City-led neighborhood planning efforts all include goals and objectives related to food access.** Some feature these goals more prominently than others.
- The federal government provides the majority of funding for food access benefits, including funding SNAP, SunBucks, WIC, Farmers Market Coupons, and Medicaid funds used for Health-Related Social Needs.
 - » **Federal policy changes** since 2025 have **threatened, reduced, or eliminated many food benefit programs and grants.**

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE FOOD SYSTEM POLICIES:

- **Support advocacy for public assistance benefits and emergency food programs**, such as SNAP, HIP, and MEAP as well as, key issues affecting food access such as immigration status.
- Advocate for the **reinstatement of the SPS Wellness Policy Committee** to guide food and health initiatives.
- Coordinate with the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) to keep **food access innovations prominent in neighborhood development** goals.
- Assess and plan for long-term allocation of the City's **community benefit funds** to support **consistent and longer-term application** for community partner food access programs.



Food Action Plan

Goals & Objectives

The following goals and objectives represent next steps for closing gaps and expanding food access in Somerville. They were generated through a combination of community advisory meetings, interviews, public input, and subject matter expert review and are intended to inform internal planning, partnership development, and external advocacy. These aims vary in level of City control and will be further refined based on leadership priorities, funding availability, and additional community feedback.



Food Coalition members meeting at Connexion Church to discussed shared priorities and goals for the 2026.



GROWING: THE URBAN AGRICULTURE LANDSCAPE

Collective Work: Coalition Partnerships

- Strengthen the connection **between urban agriculture/ growers and the Somerville Food Coalition** to facilitate collaboration and resource sharing.
- Work with stakeholders to determine the best way to tailor **rodent mitigation** strategies for urban gardening.
- Engage **additional community members** in urban gardening conversations.
- Foster **intergenerational mentorship** to share knowledge and strengthen community bonds.
- Collaborate with tenants at **Clarendon Hill housing** to understand the **community garden plans** during and after redevelopment.
- Publicly share City priorities and **engage community-based partners** in refining them to ensure City involvement is balanced and partners can sustain any expansion.



A MAMAS Gardening Collective garden in East Somerville with squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, kale, and scallions. Many MAMAS gardens are open for anyone to harvest food and/or help as they can. *Photo credit: MAMAS Gardening Collective*



City Work: Internal Collaborations

- Use this assessment as a **foundation to engage partners in establishing urban growing priorities** that meet community needs while ensuring City involvement is balanced and community-based partners can sustain any expansion. *Also a Funding goal.*
- Use **community priorities as a roadmap for an updated urban agriculture vision** and a **discussion of financial investment** in staff or direct programmatic funding.
- Highlight **ADA accessible plots** and ensure at least **one per community garden site** to promote equitable participation.

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Increase **public awareness of the urban agriculture network and learning opportunities** starting with City webpages and community outreach materials.
- Honor **cultural and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) knowledge and practices** in gardening stewardship.
- Promote the **many benefits of urban agriculture/gardening**, including mental health, social connection, and supplemental food production.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Hire or designate a coordinator to **centralize efforts and build a cohesive network across gardens, schools, and community organizations.**
- To address space constraints, pilot a **community garden plot using a shared space model** to allow more people to have access. The City should work with a **non-profit or volunteer group** to achieve this goal. *Also a City Work goal.*
- Reinvest in the **Somerville Public Schools (SPS) gardens** to provide proper garden management and a relevant curriculum.
- Provide support for gardeners by increasing access to community garden plots and exploring **stipends or incentives for knowledgeable community members without plots to share expertise.**
- Consider **installing demonstration beds near community gardens** to engage new gardeners and provide hands-on learning opportunities.
- Develop programs that reduce barriers to **container gardening** for residents with limited space or resources.
- Include **culturally relevant seed offerings**, such as jilo, hot pepper, and lalu at the Somerville Public Library's seed library. *Also a City Work goal.*



PRODUCTION: FREE AND LOW-COST PREPARED MEALS

Collective Work: Coalition Partnerships

- Help organizations with **underutilized kitchen space** to identify new opportunities for meal preparation and community gatherings. *Also a Funding goal.*

City Work: Internal Collaborations

- Create, promote, and keep updated **summary guides on how to navigate** the permitting and licensing process to support innovative food access initiatives. *Also an Outreach goal.*
- In collaboration with the City's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, **leverage community benefit negotiations** during the development process to better support food programming.

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Connect the YMCA's **new development and goals around addressing food insecurity** with the SFC.
- Promote the **outcomes from the Small Business Permit Streamlining Initiative** as it relates to food production and access.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Explore the feasibility of **coordinating community-wide Food Protection Manager trainings**, including subsidizing fees to expand food safety capacity.
- Find ways to **replace the discontinued Heat-n-Eats frozen meals** to maintain access to ready-made options.

- Financially support East Somerville Main Streets' **Restaurant Meal Voucher program** to increase access to prepared meals while **boosting local restaurants**.



DISTRIBUTION: THE FREE FOOD SUPPLY

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Coordinate and broaden SFC messaging to **harness the community's desire to volunteer and donate** to food security. *Also a Collective Work goal.*

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Use participatory budget funding to support a fourth community fridge.
- Continue to **leverage the City's participatory budgeting process** to support food security.
- Ensure that **financial support and technical assistance** are provided to food assistance programs to address their **unique operational needs and challenges**.



ACCESS: FOOD LANDSCAPE AND PREFERENCES

Collective Work: Coalition Partnerships

- Convene a **Transit Equity Working Group** to use Taxi to Health data to support equitable food access.
- Support the **food sharing space** at Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH)-managed **Clarendon Hill housing**.

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Use Taxi to Health data to elevate **transportation access as a key driver of health** with food access an important component.
- Increase awareness and uptake of **SNAP online shopping**, prioritizing homebound residents.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Improve permanent, reliable free and affordable food access in the **Union Square** area and **West Somerville**.
- With the Commission for Persons with Disabilities, explore the possibility of **utilizing handicapped parking violation fees to create a food access transportation solution**. *Also a City Work goal.*



ACCESS: FOOD BUDGETS AND BENEFITS

Collective Work: Coalition Partnerships

- Deepen partnerships with **the Somerville Housing Authority (SHA)** and build new connections with **non-SHA public and subsidized housing providers**.
- Expand City-led efforts to **connect and inform services** providers by strengthening the City's capacity to help residents navigate increasingly complex applications and maximize benefit use.
- Use Somerville's robust network of population-focused coalitions to **share relevant information and receive feedback** on the food system.

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Expand the creation of **accessible, multilingual content** and continue leveraging diverse media channels for broad dissemination.
- Grow the **Tap Water Campaign** to promote safe, accessible drinking water. *Also a City Work goal.*

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Expand the **Somerville mobile farmers market** by adding a location in a higher need neighborhood or extending the season.
- Extend the **SNAP match to other nutrition benefits at farmers markets** such as WIC and Senior Farmers Market coupons.
- Identify and **stipend trusted community figures to serve as 'ambassadors'** for key food and health messaging.



ACCESS: GETTING FOOD AT DIFFERENT LIFE STAGES

Collective Work: Coalition Partnerships

- Further explore the **best approach** to improving food access for **high-school students**: permitting food trucks, supporting food businesses around the High School, or piloting a fresh vending machine in the building.
- Partner with the Youth Workers' Network to determine the best way to **ensure youth representation** in the Somerville Food Coalition.
- Collaborate with **Somerville High School stakeholders to improve outreach** to high school students about relevant food resources
- Collaborate with the **Disability Commission and Human Rights Commission to join the Somerville Food Coalition** and center people living with disability when making food access decisions.

City Work: Internal Collaborations

- Increase **summer meals utilization** by moving locations of open sites and increasing the time window to longer than 15 minutes.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Strengthen the **High School Culinary Program's capacity** to create after-school food options for students.
- Account for **food needs** when planning City and school budgets for **Out-of-School Time** programming.



High School students in the Culinary CTE program prepare foods with pesto which was harvested and produced through their hydroponics and urban agriculture curriculum in partnership with Green City Growers.

Photo credit: Green City Growers



CONNECTIONS TO HEALTH: FOOD LITERACY

City Work: Internal Collaborations

- Collaborate with the **Somerville Public Library** to integrate relevant food and nutrition topics into public programming.

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Elevate the **federal elimination of SNAP-Ed** and show how SPS will be impacted starting in the '26-27 school year.
- Maintain engagement with the **Mass Food System Collaborative's food literacy campaign** to align local efforts with state-level initiatives.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Host **cooking events and classes to engage the community** and connect residents to food access resources.



Peppers in the walk-in cooler at Food For Free.



CONNECTIONS TO HEALTH: HEALTHCARE

Collective Work: Coalition Partnerships

- Strengthen the collaboration between the **City, the school district, and Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA)** to provide a coordinated package of food resources and benefits for Somerville constituents and patients.
- Create a system for **CHA healthcare providers** to share medically recommended foods with **food pantry providers for patients** with complex health needs.

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Ensure social service providers are **aware of the incentives connected with Tufts Health Together** with CHA and other Accountable Care Organizations.
- Leverage **CHA's 2025 Wellbeing report and other data sources to inform decision-making, program planning, and grant applications.** (also a Funding goal)
- Support **increased Health-Related Social Need funding** in the upcoming Medicaid 1115 waiver to open up more programming for residents and contracting opportunities for community organizations.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Pursue **grants** that align with the **Food is Medicine** framework.



FOOD WASTE: RESCUE, RECYCLING, AND PREVENTION

City Work: Internal Collaborations & Communications and Advocacy

- Develop a **city-wide messaging campaign** to reduce household food waste.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Identify institutional partners who can **support successful reuse programs for prepared foods**.
- Support **expanded partnerships and funding for Somerville's food rescue operations** consistent with Somerville's Zero Waste Plan goals. *Also a Collective Work goal.*



POLICY: FOOD INITIATIVES AT THE LOCAL, STATE, AND FEDERAL LEVEL

Collective Work: Coalition Partnerships

- **Support advocacy for public assistance benefits and emergency food access**, such as SNAP, the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), and the Massachusetts Emergency Food Access Program (MEFAP), as well as key issues affecting food access such as immigration status.
- Advocate to **simplify the SNAP application process** by working towards Common Application for state-managed benefits and state policies designed to make the application process accessible to all.

City Work: Internal Collaborations

- Advocate for the **reinstatement of the SPS Wellness Policy Committee** to guide food and health initiatives.
- Coordinate with the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) to keep **food access innovations prominent in neighborhood development goals**.

Outreach: Communications and Advocacy

- Apply lessons learned from local political campaigns that have successfully garnered lots of public attention and support to **increase attention and energy around food access issues in Somerville**.

Funding: Programmatic Needs

- Increase the voice of people with **lived experience of food insecurity** in food access work by offering stipends for people who use food assistance programs to **participate in coalitions or volunteer** with local programs. *Also an Outreach goal.*
- Assess and plan for long-term allocation of the City's **community benefit funds** to support **consistent and longer-term application** for community partner food access programs.
- Help people navigate SNAP and upcoming MassHealth **work requirements** by **offering support in proving an exemption or coordinating accessible opportunities** to meet the requirements.







Somerville Community **FOOD ASSESSMENT**

2026

