

# FOOD INSECURITY IN PROSPEROUS NH

BY JUDI CURRIE

**F**rom orchards to farms and fishing boats, the iconic images of NH paint a bucolic picture of a bountiful state. While NH is prosperous, it also has a high cost of living and there are still many here that know the harsh reality of going hungry. In fact 10 percent of all men, women and children in the Granite State—or more than 130,000—live under the shadow of food insecurity, according to the NH Food Bank.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Contributing to that food insecurity is that those most in need live in food deserts, where healthy options are limited and with scant public transportation and harsh winters, most of NH is considered a food desert.

Despite a robust economy, many people are still unemployed or underemployed, says Eileen Liponis, executive director of the NH Food Bank. “Many have found great paying jobs and are now working, but not everyone is at the level they were working at before or making the same pay,” She says of the post-recession reality. “Wages have not kept up. A family with two working adults and two children would need to work 192 hours a week to make ends meet on a minimum wage salary, and, if they can’t, food is one of the first things that’s cut.”

Liponis says even though NH is often touted as among the best places to live, the need is there and the state could help by providing some funding that would allow the NH Food Bank to purchase “imperfect produce” from growers for area agencies and also create another revenue stream for local farms, she says.

## Feeding the State’s Hungry

A patchwork of programs, funded primarily by donations, work to address hunger in NH with the NH Food Bank, a program of Catholic Charities NH, leading the statewide effort. Liponis says the NH Food Bank is the backbone of charitable food distribution in the state. “Fifty percent of the food distributed comes from us,” she says. “It’s about 13.7 million pounds or just over a million pounds a month that we distribute to 435 agencies.”

The NH Food Bank is part of Feeding America, a nonprofit network of more than 200 food banks that source food through national grocers and manufacturers. Liponis and her team also work with local sources, including grocers, manufacturers and farmers. Nancy Mellitt, director of development at the NH Food Bank, points out

that because grocery stores have improved their technology and become so good at managing their inventory, the food banks have actually seen a reduction in the amount of food donated. “We now purchase [approximately] 15 percent of the food that we distribute,” Mellitt says, adding the NH Food Bank anticipates that trend will continue. Liponis adds the amount of “salvaged” food—perishable items that are picked up quickly from food vendors like supermarkets and distributed rather than thrown out—will also continue to decrease as technology makes the supply chain more efficient.

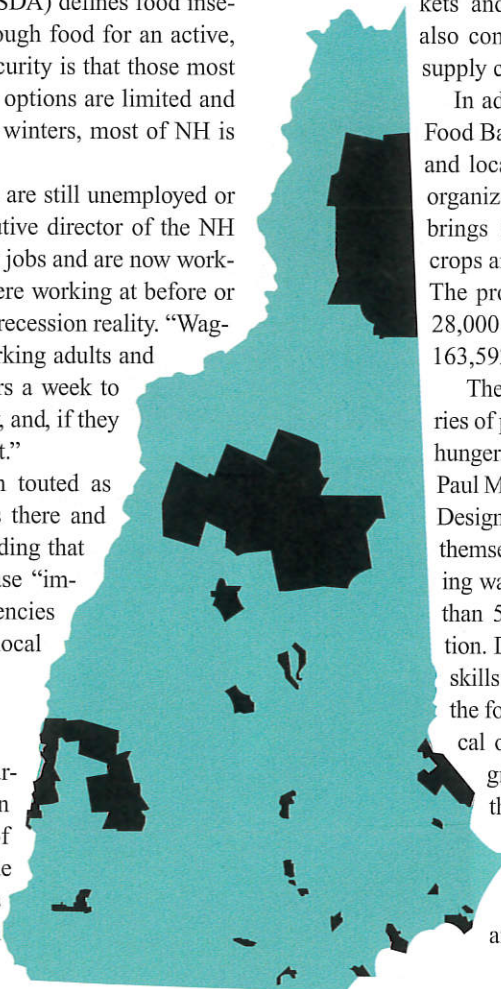
In addition to the distribution operation, the NH Food Bank works with UNH Cooperative Extension and local farmers through NH Gleans, a volunteer organization that picks up excess food at farms and brings it to food pantries. Farmers register their crops and volunteers stand by ready for the harvest. The program began in 2013 and resulted in about 28,000 pounds the first year. In 2017, the haul was 163,592 pounds.

The NH Food Bank’s Recipe for Success is a series of programs that try to address the root causes of hunger. Chefs and instructors Jayson McCarter and Paul Morrison run the culinary job training program. Designed to help those who are unable to sustain themselves or their family, or obtain a job at a living wage, the program is in its 10th year, and more than 500 students have graduated since its inception. During the eight weeks, students learn critical skills for the hospitality industry while they help the food bank prepare 2,500 meals per week for local organizations. Mellitt says they’ve had some great success stories. “To see the self-esteem that they have after going through the program compared to where they were when they walked in the door is wonderful,” she says.

The Food Bank also brings local chefs and a nutritionist to teach people to eat healthy on a budget through the Share Our Strength’s Cooking Matters, a national program sponsored by Walmart. “It is our desire to help people out of

poverty by teaching them job skills and teaching them how to eat healthy, shop healthy and cook healthy,” Liponis says.

UNH Cooperative Extension offices, which are in all 10 NH counties, provide local expertise and assistance and the nutrition educators for Cooking Matters. Heidi Barker, an extension field specialist in Coos County, says the cooking classes are important



A map of NH's Food Deserts (in black)



to fight food insecurity as research shows those experiencing food insecurity often don't know how to prepare vegetables or how to stretch meals to go farther.

### Focusing on SNAP Recipients

Barker says Cooperative Extension used to do mostly direct education about budgeting and nutrition; now it is more focused on community policy work and seeing a greater impact from its efforts. One of the best ways to increase access to healthy food is to encourage people to take advantage of SNAP, the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), she says. The program helps more than 40 million people nationwide and an estimated 44,000 NH households.

And there are other incentives targeted at SNAP recipients. Barker is the regional lead for Granite State Market Match, which allows the 106,000 NH residents receiving SNAP to turn \$10 into \$20 in healthy, locally grown produce every time they visit the farmers market. "We call it the triple bounce effect," Barker says. "We are putting money into the farmer's pocket; our SNAP recipients get healthy food and the markets support communities—especially when people stay out and about and continue to spend locally."

For the past two years, the incentives provided nearly \$50,000 worth of food on top of SNAP purchases and about 3,000 recipients took part. Funding comes from the USDA and other smaller grants.

To help increase the buying power beyond seasonal farmers markets, Barker set up a pilot program with a local store. "Littleton Coop was the first retail outlet to come onboard and create the first year-round opportunity to get fresh food. It started last November and is funded through June," Barker says. "Ed King, who is the manager of the Coop, has wanted to do this for years."

Families and individuals receiving SNAP benefits get 50 percent off fruit and vegetable purchases. Barker says seven stores will join the program, including the Coop in Lebanon, Sully's in Allenstown, the Berlin Marketplace, the Root Cellar in Lancaster, E. M. Heath in Center Harbor, Lovell Lake Food Center in Sanbornville and Newbury Farms in Newmarket. "Some areas have winter farmers markets, but for those who don't, having the retail component is really important," Barker says. "Incentivization for fruits and vegetables is such an important part of the work we do."



Eileen Liponis, left, executive director, and Nancy Mellitt, director of development for the NH Food Bank

In Strafford County, Public Health Network Coordinator Corinna Moskal, says the SNAP incentives have helped. In partnership with Goodwin Community Health, the network runs a farmers market every Monday from June through September. This year they are incorporating a cooking demonstration on the second Monday. "If you attend the demo, you receive a \$10 voucher to spend at our market." Moskal says, "We will offer this to all market attendees but hope to get those who use SNAP to complement their current benefits."

Moskal says people in the class learn about the farmers market and the fresh produce available that day from the vendors. "It proves that it is sometimes cheaper and fresher to buy at the market than a grocery store," Moskal says. "We give them the \$10, but it can only be used for fruits and vegetables, meat, eggs or dairy—not the cupcakes."

### Identifying Unmet Needs

Another critical tool in fighting food insecurity is recognizing unmet community needs. Federal funds have long provided for free and reduced school lunches, but in recent years, many communities have added summer food programs. Kristen Welch, director of advancement for CAP in Strafford County, says it is important to realize that hunger

does not take a summer vacation. "The summer months exacerbate the issue, as families find their budgets are stretched to the maximum by having to provide meals that would normally be available through school," Welch says. "The summer meals program [provides] breakfast and lunch five days a week, including formula,



A vendor at the Somersworth Farmers Market.

Through the Granite State Market Match program, SNAP recipients can spend \$10 for \$20 worth of produce.



A Grow Nashua community garden.



A woman in a community garden.

cereal, and baby food for infants.” Welch says the program allows children to have access to fresh produce and protein, and many are able to try foods for the first time.

Welch says research shows children’s physical health and brain development depend on being well-fed. It is particularly critical during their earliest years. The summer program began with five sites in Dover and now serves children at 16 sites throughout Strafford County for eight weeks during the summer. In the summer of 2017, Community Action Partnership of Stratford County (CAPSC) served 22,871 meals to children who would otherwise have little or no food. With a food insecurity rate of 11.2 percent, and approximately 4,000 children without enough to eat in Strafford County, families rely upon CAPSC throughout the year. Similar programs are held by regional Community Action Partnerships.

Another Seacoast initiative is taking the food where it is needed most. The Seacoast Area Mobile Market (SAMM) vans go to communities that have high concentrations of low-income or at-risk residents who are designated as being at higher risk for food insecurity or have a number of residents with lack of access to transportation. Jillian Hall, director of programs, says SAMM sources its product locally, purchasing from 20 to 30 farms during the season. “Most product comes from within 10 to 20 miles of the stop,” Hall says.

“It’s very rare for product to come from more than 30 miles away and never more than 55 miles.” She adds they expect to be in 12 locations this season, including corporately held accounts, which pay a fee for their services as an employee wellness benefit, and com-

munity stops that seek to serve a low-access population. SAMM stops at Dover senior/disabled housing facilities where many individuals have reduced mobility and lack access to transportation, preventing them from visiting the farmers market. SAMM also goes to Farmington, Milton and Raymond which are high SNAP density areas and partners with Gather, a Seacoast food pantry, to provide the Meals 4 Kids Program with fresh, local food.

All SNAP recipients receive an automatic 50 percent discount on fresh fruit and vegetables. “SAMM has done very well,” Hall says. “We are learning a lot in this process as the first and only mobile market in New Hampshire and a rare mobile market serving a more rural population than most. SAMM is able to cover its operational costs, and staff time is covered by grant funding.”

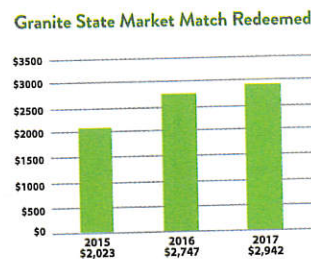
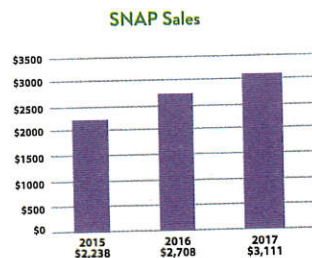
According to Hall, this is the third and final funding season by sponsor Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare Foundation’s Healthy Food Fund. She says they expect funding will be renewed.

“Mobile markets are proving effective at overcoming barriers of availability and cost that prevent families from consuming recommended amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables,” says Mike Devlin, director of grants & initiatives for Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation. “Our goal for the SAMM is the same as for our other 24 healthy food fund projects we support across the region: to increase access to

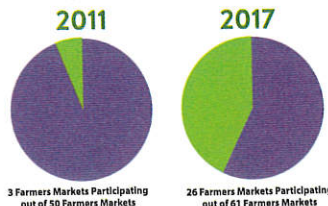
fresh, healthy local food for low-income families and communities.” In 2017, more than \$1.57 million in grants were distributed to the Foundation’s Healthy Food Fund initiatives within New England and New York.



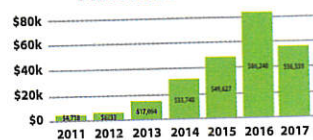
## North Country Impact & Growth



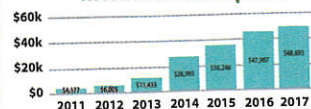
### State Wide Participating Farmers' Markets



### State Wide SNAP Sales



### State Wide Incentive Redemption



Another way to get healthy food into a community is to grow it there. Grow Nashua is creating urban vegetable gardens throughout the city at schools, community sites and by partnering with non-profit organizations. Justin Munroe, executive director, says “Food is really an amazing tool to build community.” One of the newest gardens was established through a partnership with the Police Athletic League (PAL) that already runs an afterschool program. “They have a space connected to their facility that is in the inner city,” Munroe says. “We are offering space to the parents and people in the neighborhood.”

The next garden on tap is a plot leased from Citizen’s Bank on Main Street. Munroe says they are working with the Church of the Good Shepherd that shares the green space next door. “The church can provide volunteers, and they are looking for connections to the community and to help people grow their own food,” he says, adding as soon as they open a garden, it fills up. Grow Nashua also works with refugees and immigrants. Another target area is senior housing where Munroe says gardening also provides residents with therapeutic and social benefits.

“When people grow their own food, they feel empowered by it,” Munroe says.

### On the Front Lines

Throughout the state, there are hundreds of local providers, from soup kitchens and food pantries to shelters and recovery centers. Many are run by local charities and churches. The Community Kitchen in Keene is unusual in that it is both a meal kitchen and pantry. Executive Director Phoebe Bray says it opened in 1983 and serves all of Cheshire County and Peterborough and has a network of local sources. “We pick up food seven days a week at supermarkets and restaurants, and we have a gleaning project where volunteers go out and get fresh vegetables from the farms and CSAs in Cheshire County,” she says. “New Hampshire was the only state that didn’t have a gleaning program, so in 2013 when it began, we were happy to jump on board for the opportunity to get fresh food.”

Bray says Keene has plenty of supermarkets, but nearby Winchester is a food desert. The Community Kitchen is helping smaller pantries in Jaffrey, Peterborough, Chesterfield and Winchester. “They are good local alternatives, but a lot don’t give as much as we would and nowhere near as much fresh produce,” Bray says.

Although the need for food pantries is growing, people still find it hard to ask for help. Bray says some people almost miss registration deadlines, “hoping somehow they can avoid it. I think it’s the stigma ... We try to be as friendly and compassionate as we can. It’s not a great day when you have to sign your family up.” Many clients are not fully employed or make just enough money to pay for critical expenses like rent or a car. She adds, when it comes to food, “That’s the gap we fill.”

Those involved in alleviating hunger and food insecurity are also keeping a watchful eye on Congress. SNAP funding is part of the federal farm bill that comes up for renewal every five years. Liponis of the NH Food Bank says one recent version of the bill called for eliminating SNAP funding altogether.

“If plans to cut the program were to go forward, it wouldn’t just be a hunger issue. It would be a significant blow to the grocery stores and to the farmers,” she says. “The loss would be felt on many levels.” ■

## Food Insecurity on College Campuses



Plymouth State University's "Swipe It Forward" program.

Arriving on campus, new college students are warned, beware the “Freshman 15,” as they often pack on extra pounds due to calorie-rich all-you-can-eat meal plans and late night pizza deliveries. But recent studies indicate more than a third of college students can’t afford a meal.

Professor Stephen Pimpare, a nationally recognized expert on poverty, says not every student has the money to pay for a meal plan, which can run \$1,000 to \$2,000 per semester. Pimpare, who teaches American politics and public policy at UNH Manchester, says the problem is particularly challenging for his students. “We do not have a dining hall in Manchester. Our students are all commuters, and the same is true of most community colleges,” he says.

Even at the UNH campus in Durham, with its multiple dining halls, students sometimes go hungry. Pimpare says a 2017 survey conducted by UNH student Alana Davidson found that of the nearly 1,000 students who responded, 25 percent reported being food insecure, meaning they were without reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food. Pimpare adds the results are consistent with what is going on nationally.

A first-of-its-kind survey by researchers at Temple University and the Wisconsin HOPE Lab showed 36 percent of students do not get enough to eat. Pimpare says the figure is closer to 40 percent at commuter schools. “On our Manchester campus, we have a student profile more in common with a community college than UNH Durham,” Pimpare says. “Many are working full time, are Pell-eligible (low income), and 15 percent are veterans. We have a higher age and so they are more likely to be parents, too.”

He adds students with higher rates of food insecurity have lower grades.

“At the most basic level students can’t concentrate and focus,” he says. “The stress associated with deprivation of all kinds actually impairs cognitive function.”

A new program “Swipe It Forward” allows students to give an extra swipe of their meal cards. At UNH Durham, 329 meals were donated, and UNH Dining and the Dean of Students’ Office contributed 1,000 meals last year. This year, as of May, 266 meals were donated, and 700 meals were purchased with contributions. At Plymouth State University, an eight-day campaign with a goal of 800 donated meals exceeded expectations with 840 meal swipes. ■





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COURTESY OF SOMERSWORTH FARMERS MARKET

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