But if you’re working at McDonald’s or Dunkin’ Donuts, and your low hourly wage combined with unpredictable shifts are a source of constant anxiety, you probably don’t feel like you’ve made any progress in the last several years. Quite the opposite, actually.

255,000 households across the Commonwealth live in the shadow of those who are experiencing renewed prosperity. Far from feeling financially flush, they find it difficult—if not impossible—to stretch their resources to keep their families fed.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3
Dear Friends,

Earlier this year, on a dazzlingly beautiful fall day, I sat outside and read the just-published USDA statistics on food insecurity in Massachusetts. While these statistics reveal that the number of people who are at risk of hunger is slightly lower compared to last year, they tell us little about the people those numbers represent.

The report tells us that in 2014, 9.6 percent of the state’s households periodically didn’t have enough to eat—and that 4.1 percent of our neighbors across the state faced “very low food security”: actual hunger with no predictable access to food. This last figure shows no improvement over the previous year.

While these are state-wide numbers, food insecurity is by no means equally distributed across the state: it is concentrated in specific low-income areas. Because life in these communities often exists outside many of our lives, most of us don’t know how big the problem is. But if you’re in the 9.6 percent, food insecurity is very real.

We live in a divided Commonwealth: one thriving in the light, the other trying to get by, in shadow.

For those in the shadow Commonwealth who struggle to put food on the table, stress and anxiety are part of daily life. This population includes the unemployed, people who live on fixed incomes, the disabled, those who hold jobs that pay slightly more than minimum wage—and all those who depend on these people.

I’ve learned firsthand from mothers and fathers who can’t always make ends meet about the stress they experience. Their family food budget has very little room for error. A cancelled shift, a trip to the emergency room, a high heating bill, a snowstorm that means no pay that day… all of these can quickly translate to hunger. It’s humbling to hear their stories.

Last year I met a woman who had lost her job at a local bakery. She had to report to work at 4:00am—too early to engage a babysitter for her three-year old daughter. In desperation, she had arranged for the child to rotate sleeping at the houses of friends and relatives, but after a few months the little girl developed night terrors and begged her mother to keep her at home. The woman cried as she described losing her job because she was so frequently late—and cried even harder when she talked about her child’s sense of abandonment.

That’s how food insecurity came into her life. Project Bread was able to offer her food vouchers to ensure that she and her daughter could still eat.

In East Boston, where I work, many people have two jobs during the week and an extra one on the weekend—and they still can’t make ends meet. Recently I ran into a man who used to clean our office building; he was carrying three garbage bags bulging with bottles and cans his children had collected. I walked over to help him and he told me the deposit refund would all he had to buy ingredients for family dinner. Even with two jobs, food insecurity is a fact of life for this man and his children.

Project Bread forms a bridge between the two sides of Massachusetts. We learn from the people we serve—and this knowledge shapes the programs we develop and fund.

We have made a sustained investment in increasing access to healthy meals at school, after school, and summer programs (for low-income children). The value is clear: free or low-cost school breakfast and lunch take stress off the family budget; ensure that students will have the nutrition they need to concentrate and learn; and kids learn healthy eating habits that will always serve them well.

We also recognize the needs of frail, homebound elders who require help that comes directly to them. Project Bread partners with local home care organizations, and offers a special elder hotline service to assist older people in applying for SNAP and other benefits. The anonymity of a phone call is a plus for an older person who needs, and is eligible for help, but may be embarrassed to ask for it.

If you, like me, are living well outside our shadow Commonwealth, it’s easy to read statistics and miss the stories behind the numbers—and the real needs in our state.

At Project Bread, we know that there is no single face of hunger—and that there’s no one-size-fits-all solution. We honor the differences of those we serve and respect their dignity. With your support, we will continue to invest in effective programs that meet people where they are—programs that decrease the distance between our two Commonwealths.

We can’t do it without you.

Thank you,

Ellen Parker
Executive Director

Learn more about the different solutions to hunger that Project Bread develops, funds, and implements at PROJECTBREAD.ORG
According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s annual report on food security—just released in September—some 9.6 percent of the state’s households struggled at some point in 2014 to provide food for their families. That number is down from 10.6 percent in 2013.

And while there is reason to celebrate that improvement, the USDA’s survey also found that 4.1 percent of the state’s poorest citizens face “very low food security”—meaning actual hunger, or a frequent lack of access to food. This figure is unchanged from 2013.

On top of this, the 2014 figure can actually be a bit misleading: while 9.6 percent represents that roughly one in 10 households experiences worry about whether there will be enough to eat, those people are not evenly distributed in our cities and towns. In some communities in Massachusetts, seven in 10 households are living in poverty. Many of us would think that this statistic could only describe life in states that we consider “poor”—not our Commonwealth.

Ultimately, the state’s poverty level lands at just above 8 percent—the same as it was in 2010, according to the U.S. Census data released in September 2015. So for those who were struggling before and during the Great Recession, there’s been no light at the end of the tunnel.

“The need among low-income families is growing in many parts of the state, social service agencies say—in some cases exceeding levels seen during the recession,” according to a Sept. 17, 2015 story in The Boston Globe based on US census data. “Rising household income is not being distributed evenly, with the largest share going to the highest-income households.”

Big picture: even with a stronger economy, an increase in some wage categories, and a state unemployment rate of 4.7 percent (as of September 2015), for households experiencing “very low food security” 2014 was their toughest year yet.
A closer look at food insecurity

Rates of food insecurity were higher than the national average for the following groups:

- All households with children (19.2%)
- Households with children under age 6 (19.9%)
- Households with children headed by a single woman (35.3%) or a single man (21.7%) and other households with children (24.4%)
- Households headed by Black, non-Hispanics (26.1%), and Hispanics (22.4%)
- Low-income households with incomes below 185% of the poverty threshold (37.7%)

PROJECT BREAD: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY AND HUNGER

At Project Bread, we know both Commonwealths. We also know there’s no single face of hunger—and no one-size-fits-all solution.

For years, we’ve worked, with the help of our committed donors, to develop, pilot, and implement programs that meet people where they are. We provide a hand-up, not a handout—and we work to break the devastating cycle of poverty and hunger in ways that enable those in need to retain their dignity.

Our programs assist families, children of all ages, and people with disabilities. We connect with people in churches, community centers, emergency food programs, health clinics, schools, and playgrounds. We serve people from every culture and background.

We believe that if we can help people be healthier—our state as a whole becomes healthier, too.

HEALTHY (AND TASTY) MEALS, WHERE CHILDREN LEARN AND PLAY

All children in the Commonwealth are required to attend school. So when a healthy breakfast and lunch are integrated into a child’s daily routine, food insecure students benefit in two ways: they get consistent access to food, and a daily diet that includes generous amounts of fruits and vegetables.

Last year, more than 400,000 students in the state qualified for free or reduced-price school meals. That’s why, for more than two decades, Project Bread has invested in individual schools and school districts, and partnered with state government to improve the school meal system.

First, we work with the government to guarantee that every eligible student can take advantage of free and reduced price meals. Second, we are national leaders in developing processes that ensure school meals are kid-approved and healthy. And we partner with Harvard School of Public
Health to evaluate our projects and use those data to make program decisions. Then we provide program design, outreach, and marketing that support school food professionals in their efforts to increase student participation in school breakfast.

More students will eat school breakfast when it’s an easy choice to make, which is why breakfast in the classroom and brown bag “grab and go” breakfast are simple and convenient ways to make sure all students are well fed and ready to learn.

In 2012 the federal government set new school meal nutrition standards to reflect our current understanding of the relationship between diet and child health. The skeptics predicted that students would reject meals that met the healthy standards—but Project Bread proved them wrong.

This year, through an innovative collaboration with Fenway High School and the Boston Public Schools, Project Bread’s Chefs in Schools program launched the first BPS test kitchen. In cooperation with BPS staff, Project Bread chefs will develop healthy menu items that meet BPS budget guidelines.

Fenway high school students will tell us what they like to eat, and we’ll back it up by measuring daily consumption. (Healthy food that ends up in the trash doesn’t benefit anyone!)

The goal is to roll out an improved school food menu designed and tested at Fenway High School to all of Boston Public Schools next school year—giving all 57,000 BPS students the fuel they need to reach their potential.

Prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security in US households, 1995-2014†

LEADING THE WAY THROUGH INNOVATION

At Project Bread, we know that the annual measure of national and statewide food insecurity reveals important trends. At the same time, the numbers can conceal the diverse experiences of those who face hunger and food insecurity.

A single solution to hunger leaves too many people out. That’s why we’ve developed a set of solutions that meet people where they are—solutions that give them the support and resources they need to break out of the cycle of poverty and hunger.

Massachusetts is known for its brains, its technology, its healthcare, and its leadership in compassionate thinking and progressive action. Now we have another opportunity to lead.

Through your support of Project Bread’s innovative programs, we’ll continue to bring people out of the shadow of our second Commonwealth.

*PREVALENCE RATES FOR 1996 AND 1997 WERE ADJUSTED FOR THE ESTIMATED EFFECTS OF DIFFERENCES IN DATA COLLECTION SCREENING PROTOCOLS USED IN THOSE YEARS.

†FACTS & FIGURES FROM:
HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2014, ERR-194, ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE/USDA. USDA, 9/2015

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What does the term “food insecurity” mean? What does the recent USDA report tell us about how many families in the US are struggling with food insecurity?

The federal government measures food insecurity through a survey that gathers data, family by family, about what’s going on in their lives. I think it’s great that the government asks people about their own experience. The questions center on whether they have enough food, or if their food runs out, whether they have trouble getting a balanced meal or if they’ve had to cut back, and simply, whether or not they are hungry. If you answer a certain number of these questions affirmatively then you are classified as food insecure. I think we’re getting an accurate assessment of what people are facing.

What is the biggest cause of food insecurity in the United States?

There are multiple reasons why people lack sufficient income to meet their needs, and multiple reasons they go hungry. Some young people who want to work might not have a job because the unemployment rate is high, or there are no jobs available to them at their skill or education level. Others might fall into poverty because of a medical condition: they’re too sick or injured to work, and they have major costs to cover. They may have a disability that keeps them from having access to the services and support they need. They might be older and isolated in their homes. This is why no one solution fits everyone who is food insecure.

Some of those solutions would be?

First, access to food. This might start with emergency food networks and nutrition assistance programs to prevent people from going hungry. But we need to have a variety of resources to meet the variety of situations people are facing each day. There’s a long-standing tradition in the United States of making efforts to reduce poverty and I feel that tradition has fallen by the wayside.

Are there programs in place working to close the poverty gap and help people out of food insecurity?

There is a system in place, but we have to reach the people who are most vulnerable. We have programs for students like universal school breakfasts, special programs for elders or people with disabilities, programs for younger people who are able to work but are facing other challenges. A number of these are smaller programs, however, and have been serving as a substitute for a real strengthening of our social safety net.

Are things getting better?

Some would say that at least they aren’t getting worse, but we still have more than 14% of families facing food insecurity. We need to remember the goal of 6% that we set before, and figure out how to get there. Even though our economists tell us we’re in a period of economic expansion, we’re still not seeing the rate of food insecurity drop.

“There is no one cause of hunger and there won’t be one solution.”

Parke Wilde
Food economist and author

PARKE WILDE

“Th e is no one cause of hunger and there won’t be one solution.”

PARKE WILDE
Shaking off the chill of a tough winter

For many Massachusetts residents, the memory of last winter’s record-breaking snowstorms still sends a cold shiver down their spine. The same inconveniences shared by many people across the state—cars buried beneath mountains of snow, ice dams, snow days at school, closed businesses, and public transportation shutdowns—were nothing short of crippling for hundreds of thousands of our low-income, under-employed, and disabled neighbors.

When a snow day is anything but a break…

Most students view the days when snowstorms bring school cancellations as a cause for celebration; for them, no class means sleeping late and playing in the snow with friends. But for the more than 400,000 children who qualify for free and reduced price school meals across Massachusetts, no school means no school meals: vital sources of nutrition for families who can’t reliably provide meals at home every day. When school cafeterias are closed and school meals aren’t an option for consecutive days, where can these students turn?

At the MGH Chelsea Healthcare Center this past winter, many families faced a confluence of worst-case scenarios, Community Health Worker, Emmanuel Encarnacion told us. Not only were the students not getting fed at school during the day, but the local emergency systems were pushed to the limit, too.

“A lot of families had a tough time getting to the food pantry because of the harsh weather conditions and horrible lack of sidewalk access,” said Encarnacion. “Between December and January, we experienced approximately 30% weekly "no show" rate. Some families had their personal carts, which they would use to transport the 30-40 pounds of food we provide, destroyed because of the ice and snow banks on the sidewalks.”

For the professional staff working in schools where Project Bread runs their Chefs in Schools program, each day off was a cause for worry. “This winter was particularly tough,” said one of Project Bread’s chefs. “If you don’t see some of the kids for a day, you worry. If you don’t see them for a whole week, you can only wonder how they are getting by.”

Project Bread is working to ensure no one goes without

These are the tough realities that inspire us to pilot, fund, promote, and grow programs that meet these needs—both in times of emergency, and on a day-to-day basis. Every individual and family in every neighborhood in our state deserves to have regular, reliable access to the fresh, healthy food they need to live, work, learn, and play—and we’re working hard to make that happen.

Whether we’re funding an emergency food pantry in a vulnerable area, working through our Chefs in School program to meet the nutritional needs of today’s students, or doing our part to improve food systems across the Commonwealth for generations to come, we’re focused on connecting folks with the right solution for their needs.

AND WITH YOUR HELP, WE CAN DO EVEN MORE.
DONATE NOW!

PLEASE HELP US meet the needs of the increasing number of hungry families by giving the most generous gift you can today.

Every dollar counts.

You make our vital work possible—and you play a critical role in our mission to alleviate, prevent, and ultimately end hunger in Massachusetts.

Donate now at projectbread.org/statusreport