

# Massive new food distribution hub in Roxbury aims to combat food insecurity, provide more fresh produce

By **Jeremy C. Fox** Globe Staff, Updated December 9, 2024, 21 minutes ago



Chrissy Jarvoe sorted items inside the new facility in Roxbury. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

A new food storage and distribution hub in Roxbury is expected to help bring more fresh produce and other perishables to disadvantaged Bostonians, thanks to a collaboration between the city and two local non-profits working to respond to food insecurity.

Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Mass General Brigham, and the YMCA of Greater Boston on Monday announced a partnership that has turned a 27,000-square-foot former Amazon fulfillment center into a “food hub” with 5,500 square feet of refrigeration and freezer space.

Until 2020, the Greater Boston YMCA provided meals to children after school and in the summer, but the organization wasn’t deeply involved in food distribution until it saw the [need laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic aftershocks](#), according to president and chief executive David Shapiro.

“In the pandemic, we became a huge player, for being a middle organization between the [Greater Boston] Food Bank and lots of organizations like pantries and faith-based [groups] that received food from the food bank,” Shapiro said. The YMCA “got really into the grocery distribution effort using our buildings — which were obviously shut down as gyms for a period — as food distribution centers.”

The need has continued since the pandemic abated. About [1.9 million adults went hungry in Massachusetts last year](#) as the cost of living climbed, making it hard for many households to afford basic necessities, according to [an annual report](#) from the Greater Boston Food Bank released in May.



Tracy Sylven, director of community health and wellness for Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital, spoke with David Shapiro, president of the YMCA of Greater Boston, inside the new facility in Roxbury. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The Roxbury facility will provide cold storage and freezer space for the YMCA and potentially many smaller organizations, Shapiro said. And while making more fresh foods available to people who need them, the site will also help the city pursue its goal of reducing food waste.

“In 2022, we did a community [health] needs assessment; it really identified a particular choke point of food storage, in terms of closing that gap between food production and making sure that all the food that is coming into Boston is being used in addressing food insecurity,” said Brian Swett, the city’s chief climate officer. “We just have too much food that is perishing because we don’t have cold storage.”

Cutting food waste has become a city- and statewide priority in recent years. In 2022, Massachusetts banned businesses that generate more than 1,000 pounds of food waste a week from tossing it in the garbage, and it has since [become the only state with a food](#)

[waste ban that has reduced landfill waste](#), according to a study [published in September](#) in the research journal Science.

One way to cut waste is by recovering food that is fine to eat but would otherwise be tossed out, according to Aliza R. Wasserman, director of the city's Office of Food Justice.

“Recovered food is essentially food that is safe and edible and still fresh, but for a variety of reasons would otherwise be wasted,” Wasserman said. A lot of perfectly good food gets rejected by distributors or supermarkets because they lack the storage capacity or because a small portion of a delivery is damaged or looks unappealing, she said.

That wasted food is often sent to landfills, where it has secondary effects, according to Swett.

“It's actually a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions — that inefficiency in terms of food perishing,” he said. “The UN estimates upwards of 79 percent of global emissions is from food waste.”

A 27,000-square-foot warehouse is opening in Roxbury to serve as a collection and distribution center for local food banks, through a collaboration among the YMCA of Greater Boston, the City of Boston, and Mass General Brigham. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The collaboration between the city and its non-profit partners also prioritizes choice and dignity for those who it helps feed, Wasserman said, seeking to provide only food that is appealing — not the familiar, dusty canned beets recycled through countless church food drives — and culturally appropriate to the city's varied communities.

The city is contributing \$2 million from its remaining federal American Rescue Plan Act funds to lease and operate the new facility, with another \$3 million coming from Mass General Brigham through its Community Health Impact Funds. The city's Office of Food Justice has also just announced a dozen \$500,000 grants to help local non-profits to support the storage and distribution of perishable food.



Dr. Elsie M. Taveras, chief community health and health equity officer for Mass General Brigham, said its health care providers can see “among our own patient population that there is a rising prevalence of food insecurity . . . of households with families saying that they’re not sure that they will be able to make ends meet to feed their household by the end of a of a particular month.”

That, too, can have dangerous downstream effects, according to Tracy Sylven, director of community health and wellness for Brigham and Women’s Faulkner Hospital.

“If someone comes to our emergency department . . . and they’re put on a care plan for whatever is going on with them, and we send them away but they’re hungry, they’re likely not going to be able to follow the care plan because they’re more worried about, ‘What am I going to eat? How am I going to feed my family?’ ” Sylven said. “So if we’re not taking care of that essential need, then their health care suffers.”

Jamar Thompson is the mobile market manager at The Greater Boston Collaborative Food Access Hub. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

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