



The Southcoast Food Policy Council (SFPC), a Marion Institute (MI) program, is building a thriving and inclusive regional food system that engages and represents our culturally diverse residents. Our mission is to connect, convene, and advocate for local food producers, consumers, and community partners who seek to generate policies and systems that strengthen our regional food system, improve community health, and eliminate food insecurity.

The Marion Institute launched the [Southcoast Food Policy Council](#) in January 2020 to fill a much-needed gap in our region and to address regional priorities necessary to build a thriving local food system. Our first task as a newly formed food policy council was to update the 2014 Food System Assessment of Southeastern MA to better understand and identify food-related priorities throughout our region, including Bristol, Plymouth, and Norfolk counties. When the pandemic began in March 2020, no one could have predicted the pivotal role that the SFPC would play in the Southcoast's emergency response to regional food insecurity. The SFPC framework allowed us to rapidly respond, foster regional collaborations among a myriad of partners, and swiftly mobilize resources and action during the most challenging year of the pandemic.

In 2021, we completed and released the updated Food System Assessment (FSA) of Southeastern MA. The report captured timely data highlighted by the pandemic and revealed service gaps and issues caused by an overdependence on an industrialized food system. Upon completion of this report, the SFPC recruited and trained a 30-member Community Advisory Board (CAB), recruited and offered stipends to Food Equity Advisors (FEA) - individuals who have lived experience of food insecurity – to participate in our work, developed a food equity training for our CAB, and conducted a 3-month, community-driven strategic planning process using the findings of the recently released FSA. This work resulted in 27 priorities peppered into four SFPC working groups: Education and Communication, Food Access, Capacity Building, and Policy. Each CAB member is required to sit on one of the identified working groups. Through monthly working group meetings, the SFPC's policies and initiatives are implemented.

SFPC Community Advisory Board Priorities in Working Groups

- **Education and Communication** identified a critical need to advance the public's understanding of the local food system. This working group's top priority is a regionally-focused, multi-year, branded educational campaign comprised of a [Food System 101](#) mini website course, an [Eat Local Southcoast Challenge](#), with over 400 individuals participating in 2024, and our [Annual Food Summit](#), where over 450 people have learned more about the regional food system. We are currently working on a **FarmCoast Documentary** to elevate the voices of farmers, fishermen, and food producers while inspiring action on food policy and food justice.
- **Food Access** focuses on convening and responding to emerging emergency issues that arise in our food relief system, improving the availability of healthy, local food, and reducing food waste. The top priorities of this group was establishing a farm-to-food relief program to grow culturally relevant food and a regional gleaning program. In 2023, we partnered with A.D. Makepeace to lease 6 acres of unused land to launch the Marion Institute's newest program, [Frogfoot Farm-Neighbors Feeding Neighbors](#). This farm will grow produce for local food relief programs and be a training site for gleaners.
- **Food Policy** is focused on engaging the community in advocacy through action alerts, which include letters to state and congressional legislators asking to support specific food system issues, written and oral testimonials, providing **legislative advocacy training** to our Community Advisory Board and community collaborators, and hosting [Candidate Forums](#) and [Legislative Breakfasts](#) with partners.
- **Capacity Building** is focused on building the networks and infrastructure necessary to create a vibrant, regional food system. Our short-term goals are to identify and map out physical assets and supply chain gaps by initiating the [Community & Agriculture Resilience Audit Tool](#) (CARAT). Our long-term goal is the creation of hard infrastructure assets such as food hubs, distribution, and processing centers that support a resilient local food system in Southeastern Massachusetts.

2025 Legislative Priorities

1.) An Act relative to an Agricultural Healthy Incentives Program would codify the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) into law. More than 185,000 families have been served by HIP, providing \$44.5 million in sales of healthy fruits and vegetables for farmers. As one person at a Fall River farmers market said, "If I buy fresh fruit and vegetables using HIP, money goes back on the SNAP card to buy other stuff I need." Making HIP a permanent part of the budget would ensure that people across MA have access to healthier food.

2.) An Act Encouraging the Donation of Food to Persons in Need would provide more food to emergency food services in food pantries by providing a \$25,000 tax credit to Massachusetts farmers and food businesses that donate food to food pantries. This bill would reduce food waste, mitigate climate impacts, and provide much-needed nutritious food to individuals and families in the Commonwealth struggling to eat three meals daily.

3.) An Act establishing basic needs assistance for Massachusetts immigrant residents restores essential food assistance (SNAP) to legally present immigrants. Many of our neighbors who are immigrants who have lived in the state for years and are the backbone of our economy are not eligible for critical cash and nutrition benefits. This money would provide households that have survived much already with a small amount of nutritious food.

4.) An Act to Promote Food Literacy would add food literacy to the list of topics that students would learn about in school. Currently, students do not know nutrition, where their food comes from, or how to grow food, nor do they see economic opportunities in the food system. Many teachers feel unprepared to teach about the food system and struggle to find culturally appropriate, curriculum-aligned lessons. This program would enable the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to convene a working group of educators to create standards, guide the implementation of food literacy, and establish a Food Literacy Trust to support this programming.

5.) An Act Establishing Farm to School Program would codify this program into the MA Budget. The chronic epidemics of obesity, diabetes, and other metabolic diseases increasingly negatively impact our youth. Families are asking for healthier food options in the school cafeterias. This Act would provide equal opportunities for public schools and licensed childcare programs to apply for grant money from the Department of Elementary School and Secondary Education for the purchase of local food for MA students, provide the necessary infrastructure to return to scratch-cooked meals rather than relying on processed foods and educate students about the local Food System.

6.)An Act Promoting Equity in Agriculture would establish a commission to develop recommendations to the MA Department of Agriculture to serve socially disadvantaged farmers and address disparities. The 2017 USDA Census showed Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers represented 2.3% of MA farmers, despite people of color comprising 29% of the MA population. There is an 8.1% decrease in the number of farms in the Commonwealth which illustrates a need to support young and BIPOC people entering the field of agriculture. The commission designates who will be on the 17-member commission from BIPOC communities. The research would create transparency in grant-making to promote equitable distribution of funds and greater equity in regulations.

7.) MA Food System Budget includes the following programs: Healthy Incentive Program, Food Security Infrastructure Grants, UMass Extension, Local Food Policy Council grants, MDAR staffing, Buy Local Agricultural Organizations, Massachusetts Food Trust, Mass Farm to School, MA Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP), Senior Farmshare Program, School Meals Extension, and Mass in Motion.