



# The Food and Shelter Initiative

Final Report  
2002



The Boston Foundation

## What is the Boston Foundation?

One of the oldest and largest community foundations in the United States, founded in 1915, with current assets totaling more than \$560 million

### About Community Foundations

First created in 1914, today there are more than 600 community foundations nationally, contributing close to \$1.6 billion every year to nonprofit organizations. Each is made up of funds that are established by many different donors, then pooled and invested together. The result is a permanent resource for the community with the flexibility to respond to changing times. Community foundations are governed by boards made up of civic leaders who approve grants and act as stewards of the funds.

### A major funder

Making more than \$50 million annually in grants to nonprofit organizations that address community needs

### A flexible giving vehicle for donors

With some 750 separate funds established for the general benefit of the community and for special purposes

### A partner in philanthropy

Making it easy for donors to give and informing them about programs that are working

### A civic leader and convener

Sponsoring special initiatives, convening people to discuss civic issues and working in partnership with other organizations to meet community needs

# The Food and Shelter Initiative: Final Report

A Special Report of The Boston Foundation  
2002

## Food and Shelter Initiative Grantees

AIDS Action Committee  
American Red Cross  
Casa Myrna Vazquez  
Catholic Charities  
Community Action Program Inter-City  
Family-to-Family Project  
Homes for Families  
Lynn Economic Opportunity  
Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless  
Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance  
Project Bread  
Transition House  
United Way of Massachusetts Bay

## Advisory Committee to the Food and Shelter Initiative

Kelley Cronin  
Marie Rose Murphy  
Reverend Richard Richardson  
Lissette Rodriguez  
Annette Rubin

## Publication Credits

Author / Patricia Brady  
Design / Kate Canfield  
Editorial Consulting / Barbara Hindley and Cindy Rizzo  
Photography / Laurie Swope  
Project Coordinator / Terry Saunders Lane  
Research / Hadley Clark

---

## Preface

The statistics in this report are a chilling reminder of how life has worsened for the poorest members of our community since last year's holiday season. The declining economy, coupled with the persistently high cost of housing, has made this year extremely challenging. Calls to hot-lines for food assistance have climbed; requests for emergency help with rent and utilities are up; and emergency shelters throughout the state have reached record-breaking demand. Perhaps the most alarming indicator of all is the increasing numbers of families that have lost their housing. Today in Massachusetts, young children comprise the fastest growing segment of the homeless population.

As private efforts, such as those funded through the Boston Foundation's Food and Shelter Initiative, attempt to meet this rising need, state budget cuts threaten to eat away at the social safety net. Over the last several years, the state has eliminated programs that helped low-income people remain in their homes by providing some assistance with mortgage and utility costs. Last April, an especially important program that helped with short-term rental arrearages was discontinued.

Many Food and Shelter Initiative grantees believe that our community has reached a watershed in dealing with the problems of hunger and homelessness. Sheltering homeless people over the last two decades and providing food to the needy have amounted to no more than temporary relief of problems rooted in long-term increases in the cost of housing combined with the declining real income of working people. Now, as homelessness engulfs more individuals and more families with young children, advocates argue that it is time to tackle the underlying problems, time to expand the region's supply of affordable housing, and time to provide the kind of education and job training programs needed to lift families and individuals out of low-paying employment.

As we take on the problem of homelessness with renewed determination, certain steps could make an important difference in the short run. First, restoring the state's rental arrearage program would help hundreds of families a month to remain in their homes. Second, enrolling more families in the Food Stamp program would mean more reliable nourishment for children and greater stability in family budgets. Since Food Stamps are supported by Federal dollars, this program is also valuable in bringing new resources into the state.

The Boston Foundation has made homelessness a priority since it first surfaced as a serious problem in the early 1980s. We thank the Starr Foundation for its generous support of the Food and Shelter Initiative – and with this final report we recommit ourselves to working together with our colleagues, government, other foundations and nonprofit organizations to develop permanent solutions to the problems of homelessness and hunger.



Paul S. Grogan  
President  
The Boston Foundation

## Introduction

In mid-2001, the Boston Foundation launched the two-year Food and Shelter Initiative with grants totaling over \$1 million to organizations dealing directly with the needs of homeless and hungry people in Greater Boston. Funding for the Food and Shelter Initiative originated with The Starr Foundation of New York. This Initiative represents one facet of the Boston Foundation's overall support to organizations providing assistance to the needy. This is the second of two reports about the issues surrounding hunger and homelessness in Greater Boston. It highlights the work of Boston Foundation grantees that are addressing these problems on a daily basis.

Through the Food and Shelter Initiative, thirteen organizations in Greater Boston received grants ranging from \$20,000 to \$150,000. These organizations have

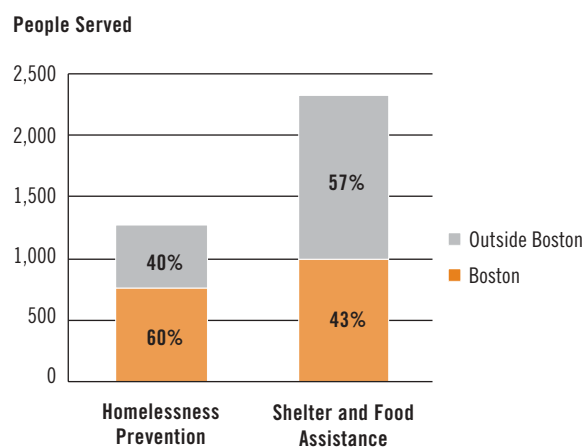
- helped people in danger of becoming homeless to remain in their homes,
- assisted people living in shelters to find new housing and employment,
- supplied food and necessities to families with young children living in shelters far from their home communities,
- provided special assistance to women who have become homeless because of domestic abuse,
- helped low-income people with AIDS receive vitally important nutrition,
- supplied food pantries serving a growing number of children and elderly people,
- and supported an entirely new approach to hunger by helping us view it as a critical community health issue.

Overall, the grantees received \$1,036,000 from the Food and Shelter Initiative. By late 2002, the Initiative's grantee organization expended a total of \$700,000 helping more than 32,000 people in the Greater Boston area. In Boston, grantees assisted residents primarily in Dorchester, East Boston, Roxbury and Mattapan, while residents in the rest of Greater Boston were served primarily in Chelsea, Lynn, Revere, Somerville, Natick,

Waltham, and other Metro-West, South Shore, and North Shore communities.

Almost three-fourths (73%) of the Initiative's dollars were allocated to homelessness prevention programs and combined shelter and food assistance programs. The homelessness prevention programs provided funds for emergency assistance, eviction prevention, and housing start-up costs. These programs also created networks and conducted outreach to assist with homelessness prevention, housing placement, and referrals. The combined shelter and food assistance programs provided temporary housing for victims of domestic violence, and emergency financial aid for basic food, utility and housing needs. These programs also provided food access programs and shelter discharge planning. Nearly 3,600 people were served through these programs. In the area of homelessness prevention, over one-half (60%) were assisted in Boston, whereas programs providing shelter and food assistance, less than one-half (43%) were assisted in Boston.

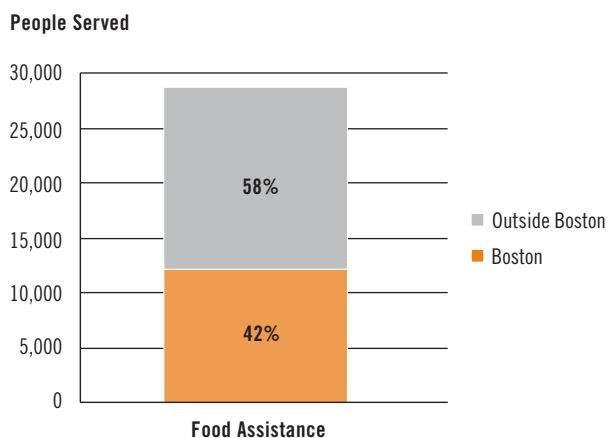
### Shelter Assistance Programs



Just over one quarter (27%) of the Food and Shelter Initiative dollars were allocated to food assistance services. These programs provided food delivery services, food at local pantries, nutrition education and awareness, and outreach to encourage application for Food Stamps. Nearly 28,700 people were served

through these programs. It is estimated that less than one-half (42%) were from Boston.

### Food Assistance Services



Grantees of the Food and Shelter Initiative particularly valued the flexibility of our grants, which enabled them to meet the real needs of the people they serve, free of the restrictions often attached to government funds. However, they uniformly reported that requests for assistance far outstripped their capacity to meet them. This is in part due to the slumping economy of the past year – a downturn that has taken a toll on Greater Boston’s low-income families but has not provided any relief from the sky-high rental housing market in our area. Many more families and individuals have come to food pantries; more have requested assistance with utility bills; more have requested help paying their rent. Long-term increases in the cost of housing have forced low-income families out of the housing market—and, increasingly, out of their homes. *The Greater Boston Housing Report Card 2002*, issued by Northeastern University and the Citizens Housing and Planning Association and sponsored by the Boston Foundation, sums up the problem:

During the 1990s the number of households in the Greater Boston region increased by 129,265, while the number of housing units increased by only 91,567. By 2001, the median advertised rent for a 2-bedroom apartment for new renters in Boston was \$1,700. In 12 of the 19 towns and cities surrounding Boston, advertised rents increased by over 30% between 1998 and 2001. Rents in some of the traditionally affordable towns and cities surrounding Boston increased by as much as 64% over this 3-year period.

By 2001, families earning the median income could not reasonably afford the median-priced single-family home in 112 of 161 Greater Boston communities. For the 161 cities and towns in the Greater Boston region as a whole, the estimated median sales price of a single-family home in 1998 was \$198,500. By 2001, the median sales price had jumped to \$298,350 – an increase of 50% over the 3-year period.

*The Report Card* adds that only 12 of Greater Boston’s 161 communities have achieved the 10% threshold for affordable housing. In fact, “the City of Boston’s 49,000+ subsidized units represent one-third of the region’s total,” according to the report.

Several grantees in the Food and Shelter Initiative are urging the Massachusetts community to rethink the state’s response to dealing with the problem of homelessness. Long-term solutions clearly involve an expansion in the supply of affordable housing, and equally important, a living wage for low-income working people; short-term solutions require a shift in state funding from sheltering the homeless to preventing homelessness in the first place. These grantees regard the state’s current approach as simultaneously costly and ineffectual – a matter of “managing” rather than “solving” the problem of homelessness. They cite the high cost of sheltering homeless people – as much as \$1,500 a month for individuals and \$3,000 a month or more for families, for periods averaging from six to nine months – to the comparatively modest costs of homelessness prevention, often no more than a few hundred dollars to help people pay back rent or utilities or to buy food for their families.

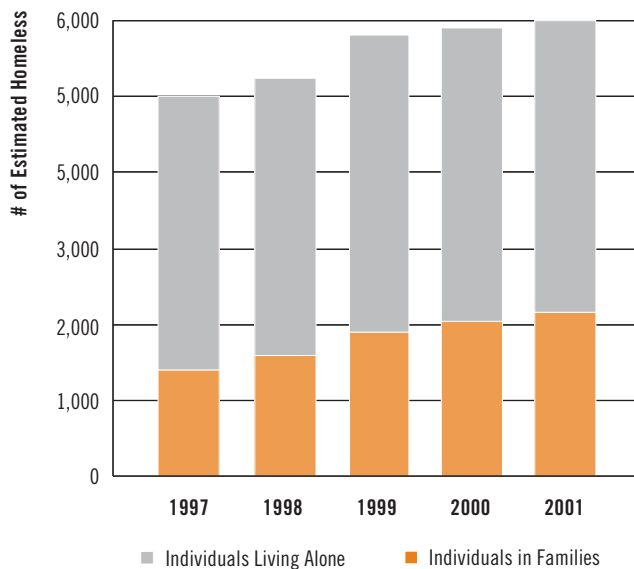
These organizations are encouraging the state’s philanthropic and political leadership as well as the general public to take a new look at dealing with homelessness. Not only is the problem growing steadily worse, they argue, but the population affected by homelessness is changing. In the past, homelessness was associated with single men and sometimes women suffering from mental illness, substance abuse, or other disabling conditions. This has changed. At the present time, it is families who make up more than 40% of the state’s homeless. The fastest growing segment of the homeless population in Massachusetts today consists of children under the age of 8.

## Homelessness in Greater Boston Today

Homelessness is on the rise nationally and locally. According to the Urban Institute there are now 800,000 homeless adults in the country on any given night. In Boston the homeless population, according to a census taken in December 2001, stands at 6,000 – a number that exceeds the entire population of a town the size of Lenox – or of 125 other towns in the Commonwealth. In April 2002, overcrowding at Massachusetts shelters reached an all time high, as shelter populations rose to 124% of legal capacity. In May, the *Boston Globe* reported that at the Boston Rescue Mission in Downtown Crossing, which received funding from the Food and Shelter Initiative through the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, people were vying for floor space in the chapel, the lobby, and the kitchen. Homeless men were sleeping in hallways and closets and propped up on plastic chairs. “I’ve never seen it this bad,” the mission’s night supervisor told *Globe* reporter David Abel.



### City of Boston Annual Homeless Census 1997-2001



Source: Leading the Way – Boston’s Housing Strategy FY2001-2003 (Oct 2000)  
City of Boston Press Release: Results of 2000 and 2001 Homeless Censuses

During the summer, front-page news stories revealed that homeless people were living in tents in the woods

on Cape Cod. In the fall came reports of homeless men and women, perhaps 50 in number, living under the Southeast Expressway in huts made of materials salvaged from the Big Dig. “We’re hearing more and more stories [of homelessness], but an encampment in Boston is something new,” Ed Cameron, former deputy director of the Emergency Shelter Commission of Boston told the *Globe* in October. “This is a frightening sign of where we’re heading.”

Despite months of record-breaking shelter overcrowding, state support for programs serving the homeless and hungry has decreased as part of the massive state budget cuts that have so severely affected health and human services programs. In April a program that helped people by paying small amounts of back rent ended. During the summer, temporary funding for 328 “overflow” beds was dropped. Budget cuts in the new fiscal year slashed \$5.5 million from a budget of \$35.6 million in assistance to the homeless: the Pine Street Inn alone lost \$2.2 million, forcing cuts in day programs that will affect all but the most elderly and fragile of their residents. This coming April many homeless adults will lose their health coverage when the state terminates the MassHealth Basic program.

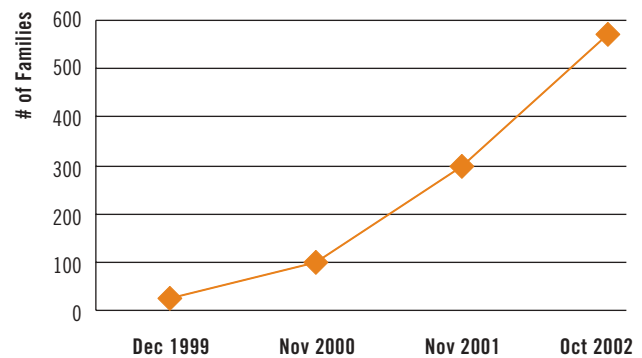
## Helping Homeless Families Sheltered in Motels

As homelessness increases for single individuals, more and more families are also losing their housing. Today, according to Homes for Families, there are 10,500 homeless families in the state, more than twice the population of 5,000 in 1990. Homeless families in Boston make up between 30 and 40% of the state's homeless population. The number of homeless children in Boston has almost tripled in the last decade.

Traditional shelters in Massachusetts accommodate single adults only. When couples become homeless, they apply to separate men's and women's shelters. When families become homeless, they apply to one of the state's 83 family shelters. Currently, according to the One Family Campaign, up to 65% of the families requesting shelter in the state are turned away because they earn too much to qualify for help. Recent changes in regulations have lowered the income level from 130% of the official poverty line to 100%, which will render yet more families ineligible for assistance. Last year, a family of three with an income of \$19,536 would be eligible for help. Now, only families of three making under \$15,020 can receive assistance. A mother of one child working full time at a minimum wage job would now be ineligible for assistance if she and her child were to become homeless.

At present, all the state's family shelters are at capacity. Because regulations currently preclude the use of public funds to place homeless families in permanent housing, the state is using motels to shelter families that have lost their housing. In 1999, 23 families were sheltered in motels. In 2001, that figure rose to 300. As of late October 2002, 569 families are being housed in motels. Many of the motels are located on highways outside of Boston, far from schools, jobs, social services, health centers, and public transportation. The Door-to-Door Initiative, which received a \$35,000 grant through the Food and Shelter Initiative, represents one effort to help these families.

### Number of Homeless Families Receiving Emergency Shelter in Motels



Massachusetts 1999-2001

Source: Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless

“Not one of the motels currently in use would be considered equipped for extended stays,” says Robyn Frost, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, which operates the Door-to-Door Initiative. “Many of the motel rooms lack microwave ovens for preparing basic meals and refrigerators for storing perishables; parents often store milk on windowsills. Most families do not have cars. When a mother ventures down the highway to purchase food, the nearest option is usually a convenience store charging premium prices. Getting to a supermarket may involve an expensive cab ride. The result is that families sheltered in motels often exhaust their monthly income and Food Stamps by the middle of the month.”

The Door-to-Door program has made weekly deliveries of food to 300 families – including 650 children – living in motels along highways stretching from Brockton to Lawrence. More than 400 pounds of nutritious food have been supplied to families, along with winter coats and boots for children, back-to-school supplies, toys and books. The program has also helped mothers with baby bathtubs for newborns (since many motels have showers only), extra blankets, and strollers. Throughout the year the Door-to-Door Initiative has also provided financial assistance to families, providing over \$4,000 for subway passes for children to attend school and



---

taxi vouchers to transport families to essential doctor appointments.

In carrying out this program, the Door-to-Door Initiative uncovered additional problems affecting families sheltered in motels and has worked to resolve them. In September 2001, when children living at one motel were being placed in separate classrooms from other students, Door-to-Door staff informed parents of the federal McKinney-Vento Act's provisions to protect homeless children from discrimination, and the Coalition worked with the Department of Education to rectify the problem.

Because the McKinney-Vento Act also gives students the right to remain in the school they attended prior to losing their housing, the Coalition has worked with parents who want to provide this continuity, which can be especially important to older children. Frost tells of one East Boston High School junior, who, when her homeless family was assigned to a motel on the North Shore, made her own way to the local commuter rail station, took the train to North Station, and traveled from there to East Boston day after day until transportation could be set up by her school. Sending children back to their schools of origin can

take time to arrange, however, and many parents choose to put their children in local schools to prevent interruptions to their education. This option is not easy on children either, because those staying in motels often arrive at their new schools on the same bus each morning, branding them as homeless in the eyes of their classmates. While the McKinney-Vento Act requires school systems to provide transportation for children living in distant motels, some systems have acted only reluctantly because of the cost involved. The Boston Public Schools have complied effectively – but at considerable cost. According to Frost, that cost can be as high as \$88 per day per student. Meanwhile, local school systems serving children at the motels have complained about this financial burden.

This tangle of personal pain and taxpayer expense renders the motel solution to the homeless problem, in the eyes of Robyn Frost, who has been involved with the work to end homelessness in Massachusetts for more than seventeen years, the “single most poignant example of our community’s failure to resolve the problem of homelessness.” Sheltering families in motels runs as high as \$3,000 per month per family. Last year, the Commonwealth spent \$11 million to keep homeless families in motels.



---

## Helping Homeless People Living in Shelters

Several Food and Shelter Initiative grantees are working to help homeless people, both individuals and families living in shelters, make their way back to apartments and a normal life. Finding new housing usually involves applying for a subsidized housing certificate (Section 8) and then locating a landlord who will accept it, or getting into public housing – which requires separate applications to dozens of public housing authorities across the state. For those who go into shelter without jobs, it also means finding a job and saving the funds required to move into an apartment: first and last months' rent, a security deposit, and sometimes a realtor's fee. It also means finding donated furniture to replace what was lost in the eviction process. "Often families put their possessions into storage, pay the fees to keep them there for several months, then, because of the expense, are forced to stop paying and simply let everything go," says Paul Brown, of Catholic Charities. "This can be an extremely painful part of the shelter experience." Robyn Frost tells of women arriving at the Coalition for the Homeless' warehouse of donated furniture, looking around, and commenting that they once had their own things.

The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance distributed its \$150,000 grant from the Food and Shelter Initiative to twelve Greater Boston organizations helping homeless people work their way through this process. Together these organizations moved 96 homeless people out of shelter and into permanent housing, helped 259 people engaged in housing and job searches, and provided transportation assistance for job and housing searches to 145 people.

## Preventing Homelessness

While many grantees of the Food and Shelter Initiative work with individuals and families who have become homeless and are living in shelters, every grantee stressed the importance of dealing with homelessness before it reaches this stage. Again and again, grantees pointed out the small sums needed to prevent homelessness in comparison to the large expenditures

"All of the people helped through the Food and Shelter Initiative were in need of the relatively small amount of funds that would move them from shelter and homelessness to a new tenancy and the promise of stability," said Mary Ellen Hombs, Executive Director of MHSA.

"The underlying problem, of course, is the shortage of units available to individuals with incomes at or below 30% of the median income, or about \$14,700 in Boston," she noted. "To meet the needs of people living at these levels of income in Massachusetts, we need 6,000 additional units of housing in the next three years."

Other grantees focused on specific populations affected by homelessness, particularly women who are homeless as a result of domestic abuse. According to the One Family Campaign, more than half of homeless women have experienced domestic or sexual abuse. With a grant of \$21,000 from the Food and Shelter Initiative, Casa Myrna Vazquez, which is the largest domestic violence service organization in eastern Massachusetts, provided meals for 636 women and children staying in its residential programs and helped 46 families find and move into permanent housing. Transition House, a family shelter in Cambridge, received a grant of \$50,000 to help disadvantaged immigrants and victims of domestic violence, especially Haitians and Somalis, who had become homeless or were at risk of homelessness.

required to sustain people in shelters and then help them back into housing. As a family approaches the kind of crisis that threatens its housing, parents often begin cutting back on both food expenditures and utility payments. It is here that programs like the Initial Response of Catholic Charities of Boston and the Special Fund for Emergency Financial Assistance

---

of the United Way play a critical role in preventing homelessness by providing the help that families need to stay afloat.

Catholic Charities operates programs at 53 sites throughout Greater Boston, helping 175,000 people a year with an array of services. Catholic Charities used its \$100,000 grant from the Food and Shelter Initiative to fund expanded hours at each of its sites, permitting them to remain open one evening a week to accommodate the working poor, and thereby enabling the Initial Response Program to help 576 additional families with food, 278 with utilities, and 129 with rent.

The Initial Response Program reports a rising level of need over the last year. “We have seen an increase in the elder population and in families with babies requiring formula,” says Judy Whitmarsh, Director of Program Planning and Social Policy. “Clients are also requesting things like toilet paper and socks. In the month of August, many asked for clothes and school supplies for their children.”

A high percentage of people who come to Catholic Charities’ sites are employed, but most are living close to the edge and their income does not always get them through the month, or through certain seasons. “In the summer,” says Whitmarsh, “our food pantries bring in school-age children, who usually eat breakfast and lunch at school. We also see school bus drivers, bus monitors, and cafeteria monitors who need help with food, housing costs, and utility bills during the summer months.”

The United Way offers similar help through its Special Fund for Emergency Financial Assistance, which provides grants to 14 area agencies, including Shelter, Inc., the Salvation Army, Laboure Center, El Centro del Cardenal, Travelers Aid Society, Centro Latino de Chelsea, and others to supply “last resort” assistance to individuals and families. The United Way used its \$100,000 grant from the Food and Shelter Initiative to expand its pool of resources for direct relief in the form of rent, fuel assistance, food vouchers, and other emergency services.

Through these programs, both Catholic Charities and the United Way Special Fund are helping potentially homeless people remain in their homes, and are doing

so for small sums of money. For example, the average amount the Special Fund supplied to a family for food assistance this year was \$59. The average grant to help pay for fuel oil was \$123; for utilities, \$216; and for back rent, \$332. Some families received grants in more than one category, and some returned more than once for help. Nevertheless, the totals are modest in comparison to the costs of keeping an individual in a shelter, which can run \$1,500 a month, or keeping a family in a shelter, which runs \$3,000 a month for periods of several months.

Judy Whitmarsh, of Catholic Charities, emphasizes the importance of stabilizing families in their homes by helping them with these basic needs. She sees many families threatened with homelessness. “They hit a bump in the road,” she says. “Someone gets sick or loses a job. One of the breadwinners leaves the family, or dies. Suddenly a family is in crisis. But with help, and often not a great deal, it can get back on its feet – and remain there. The importance of these small infusions of assistance in preventing family homelessness cannot be overestimated.”

Mary Doyle, of Homes for Families, concurs with this view. To date, the Homes for Families Collaborative, a group of 14 organizations helping the homeless, has expended 78% of its \$150,000 grant from the Food and Shelter Initiative. Along with providing a range of assistance to families who have lost their housing, the Collaborative has helped 63 families threatened with homelessness to remain in their homes. The average amount families needed was \$894. Homes for Families helped 19 families with back rent averaging \$674, and 22 families with utility costs averaging \$563.

“This level of assistance is absolutely invaluable to families struggling through a financial crisis,” says Doyle. “Yet a very important state program that provided similar help to families was discontinued last April. Since then, the strain on the budgets of organizations in our network has been tremendous.” The state rental arrearage program provided up to four months’ back rent once a year for families that qualified. “The average amount families received from the program was \$1,200,” says Doyle, “which is clearly far less than the cost to shelter a family for periods currently averaging six to almost nine months.”

---

Robyn Frost, of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, agrees. “The state’s rental arrearage program was a great help to families at risk of homelessness,” she says. “For an annual cost to the state of \$9.1 million the program kept 800 families a month in their homes. Last year, the cost to the state of keeping far fewer homeless families in motels was \$11 million. It is not only far more humane, it is far less expensive to help families remain in their homes.” Frost adds that the recent elimination of the rental arrearage program follows similar cuts in past years. “In 1994, the state ended a utility and fuel arrearage program, and in 1995 it cut a mortgage arrearage program,” she says. “These programs helped get people through difficult periods. Without this kind of assistance, we have watched homelessness increase year by year.”

Family-to-Family, a small organization in Somerville that received \$50,000 through the Food and Shelter Initiative has focused 70% of its grant money on helping clients with rent. The organization tends

to work very intensively with families to ascertain their specific needs; it offers financial counseling, interest-free loans, and grants. “By providing the right amount of assistance at the time that help is needed, in the way it is needed, the project really helps low-income families,” says Ann Marie Healey, Executive Director. In the organization’s 13-year history, over 80% of the families it has helped were still housed when contacted a year after receiving assistance.

“Carefully targeted assistance can make a difference in keeping families housed,” says Healey. “That is clear. Nevertheless, tremendous needs are now going unmet. There are now very few resources aimed at really preventing homelessness. Our organization is responding to current needs as best we can, but the question remains as to how to get assistance to citizens of the Commonwealth without relying so heavily on private philanthropy. And can we continue to shoulder the burden as virtually all avenues of assistance are cut back?”

## Hunger

According to a report of the US Department of Agriculture in 1998, over half a million people in Massachusetts were hungry or at risk of hunger. Over the last year, as the economy has slowed down and unemployment has gone up, indicators suggest that hunger has risen to yet higher levels. Project Bread, the state’s leading anti-hunger organization, reported that 76% of its emergency food agencies saw an increase in requests for aid. Calls to its FoodSource Hotline requesting emergency food assistance increased nearly 48% from 1,333 calls in July-Sept 2000 to 1,967 calls July-Sept 2002.

During this time of intensified need, the Food and Shelter Initiative has helped feed thousands of people in Greater Boston through programs like those of Catholic Charities and the Special Fund of the United Way, as well as those of Casa Myrna Vazquez and Door-to-Door. The Initiative also funded the Red Cross’s food pantry in Waltham, which provided food during the last year to 3,841 people, including many elderly. It also

funded a unique project called Nutrition Works, which offers not only food but nutrition counseling and support to people living with HIV/AIDS.

Today in Massachusetts, according to Project Bread, 21,000 children under the age of 12 – one in five – are hungry or at risk of being hungry. It is a problem exacerbated by New England’s harsh winters, when families are forced to juggle heat, rent, and food expenditures. A local study cited by Project Bread indicates that the number of children who are underweight as a result of malnutrition rises significantly after cold winter months.

While the demand at food pantries and soup kitchens has increased in communities throughout the state, the use of Food Stamps remains strikingly low. “Only half of the people who are eligible for Food Stamp benefits are actually getting help,” says Ellen Parker, Executive Director of Project Bread. “The most recent data show Massachusetts as ranking 47th among the 50 states in

Food Stamp participation.” Yet Food Stamps, a mainstay against hunger in the United States for over 60 years, provide a steady and reliable means of ensuring a family’s nutrition, permitting families to shop for food at their own convenience at neighborhood markets and to receive more food, including perishable items, than at a food pantry.

A major barrier confronting working families in attempting to access this program in our community is that they can apply only at one office of the Department of Transitional Assistance, and only during traditional office hours. They must also make their way through the daunting sixteen-page application form used in Massachusetts – in comparison to two-page applications used in some other states – with numerous verification requirements. Project Bread is helping families through a new web site, [gettingfoodstamps.org](http://gettingfoodstamps.org), which takes people step-by-step through the complex application process and helps them determine if they meet eligibility requirements.

With a grant of \$150,000 from the Food and Shelter Initiative, Project Bread is building on its long-term work in preventing hunger by developing a model to help define hunger not as an issue of poverty but as an issue of health. A primary goal of the project is to remove the stigma associated with public assistance that discourages many working poor and newcomer families from applying for help.

In this bold and innovative program, intended to spark a shift in social attitudes, Project Bread is working with five community health centers in the Boston area to integrate food insecurity into routine medical visits. When health care staff identify patients as hungry or at risk of hunger, they offer immediate relief in the form of food vouchers usable at local supermarkets. They also direct patients to on-site outreach workers for help in applying for Food Stamps.

To date, 1,386 vouchers – store coupons or gift certificates – have been distributed to patients at the health centers, representing food purchases for approximately 3,800 people. Of the 1,045 patients who received vouchers, 599 were referred to a Food Stamp application assistant. Data are still to be collected on how many of these patients will be approved for the benefit. However, this much is



clear from a questionnaire filled out by people who met with the outreach worker: 100% of the patients agreed that the Health Center is a convenient place to apply for Food Stamps. Almost as many commented that health care providers should ask if patients need food. A significant portion (33.3%) said they hadn’t applied for Food Stamps because they did not know about the program; 42% said they did not think they were eligible.

The project also revealed that, on average, 42% of the patients who received food vouchers at one of the Boston health centers have nutritionally related diagnoses, suggesting that food insecurity can pose a serious health risk.

Childhood hunger has long been a primary focus of the work of Project Bread. “We genuinely believe that childhood hunger can be solved,” said Noreen Kelly, Director of Special Projects. “The key is to make better use of a wide range of federal resources that are already available. These resources can provide healthy meals throughout the day where kids live, learn and play.” Project Bread has done major work to connect Massachusetts children with existing food assistance programs through school breakfast and lunch programs, WIC, summer meals, and Food Stamps. This new project represents another valuable contribution to this important work, and one with long-term potential for helping to change the way our society thinks about the issue of hunger.

---

## Conclusion

Thanks to \$1 million in funding from The Starr Foundation, the Boston Foundation's Food and Shelter Initiative has helped thousands of people in Greater Boston over the last year and a half with the basic necessities of life. As reflected in reports from our grantees, the Initiative has also helped to further the discussion in our community about the future of homelessness. There is an increasing sense of arriving at a watershed in dealing with this issue. After a decade of prosperity that lifted some Massachusetts families to new levels of wealth, the fact that homeless men are crowded into shelters lacking even floor space for them to sleep on, that families are living for months in motels without cooking facilities, and that the fastest growing segment of the homeless population consists of children, the grantees of this Initiative and many others working with the homeless in Massachusetts are calling for a major re-thinking of public policy on this issue.

There is considerable agreement that short-term solutions must include a restoration of the state's rental arrearage program, increased funding for shelter beds, increased flexibility in the use of state funds so that programs are not prevented from finding families permanent housing, and a stepped-up effort to help more people access the Food Stamp program.

Long-term solutions will require taking on the two fundamental causes of homelessness: the lack of housing affordable to low-income people, and the low-wage employment that forces so many families into deciding whether to heat their houses, feed their children, or pay the rent.

The roots of today's homelessness reach back into federal and state housing policy of the last few decades. According to *The Greater Boston Housing Report Card 2002*, "Most of the state's subsidized units were added between 1965 and 1980, the heyday of federally supported low income housing production." When the federal government eliminated much of this support in 1980, the state stepped in with a variety of approaches and added several thousand new units. "Since 1990, however, new production initiatives have

been limited," and today, according to the report, "most available housing resources do not provide the deep subsidies required to produce new units at prices that low and moderate income households can afford." To make matters worse, as *The Report Card* points out, a portion of the subsidized housing created in the 1970s has now expired and returned to market-rate rents.

At the same time that the supply of affordable housing has been shrinking, the wages of low- and middle-income families in Massachusetts have been losing value. Andrew Sum points out in his 2001 report "The Story of Household Income in the 1990s," that despite the record economic expansion of the 1990s, which boosted top earners in the state to new heights of income, the typical Massachusetts household today makes less money, in real dollars, than it did in 1989.

The result is a steadily widening gap between high rents and low wages – and new levels of homelessness. As described in a recent *Boston Globe* editorial, today "in Massachusetts, homelessness is swallowing more and more people: overwhelmed children, humiliated parents, and single adults struggling to provide for themselves."

Twenty years ago hunger and homelessness were new phenomena in Massachusetts. Before 1980, a homeless person was rarely seen on the streets of Boston. The sight of an elderly woman sitting on the sidewalk outside a subway station begging for quarters would have shocked passers-by. The notion of thousands of children without homes would have been unthinkable.

Today, hunger and homelessness have become commonplace features of life in our community. With funding from this Initiative, thirteen organizations in Greater Boston have worked to help thousands of people caught in the struggle for food and shelter. At the same time, and perhaps more important, these organizations are joining many others in Massachusetts in calling for an end to managing this crisis and are urging a new commitment to solving it.