



Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health Newsletter

Volume 1 | Issue 2 | Winter 2022/2023

REACH celebrates four food pantry fridge donations

Program boosts access to fresh produce amid pandemic-related food insecurity

The Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program's main Food Systems strategy project is donating refrigerators to food pantries across the city to distribute fresh produce.

To date, WDPH has donated to four pantries: Catholic Charities, Pernet Family Health Service, El Buen Samaritano Food Program Inc., and Yes We Care. The food pantries were chosen through an assessment process, considering their functioning, accessibility to clients, access to resources, and challenges they face.

The purpose of donating these fridges is to help pantries handle skyrocketing levels of new clients due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as increase access to fresh produce, a crucial, yet sometimes expensive, inaccessible, and unsubsidized factor in a healthy diet.

Access to fresh produce becomes especially difficult for those in food deserts, where grocery stores are scarce and a trip to obtain produce may be prohibitive due to cost or time. It can be even more of a challenge for those who rely on public transportation. In these situations, residents may opt to purchase pre-packaged processed foods or visit local fast food chains out of convenience.

In addition, the REACH program is facilitating the implementation of the Supporting Wellness At Pantries



REACH refrigerator donation to Yes We Care food pantry, completing the donation of refrigerators to four food pantries across Worcester.

The Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) is excited to share the second edition of the triannual Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) newsletter.

This edition of the newsletter focuses on the Food Systems branch of the program, for which the WDPH partners with the Regional Environmental Council. Food insecurity is a crucial issue to address, as it directly affects education, health, workforce, economic development, public safety, environmental equity, and civic engagement.

REACH promotes more buying and

selling of fresh fruits and vegetables, addresses food insecurity, and promotes food benefits like SNAP, HIP, and WIC.

The REACH program is a five-year grant through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with the overarching goal of addressing health disparities in the Latino community. If you are interested in participating in any programs you read about, please feel free to contact Worcester REACH at 508-735-0220 or reach@worcesterma.gov.

Learn more about REACH programs at worcesterma.gov/public-health/reach.

WDPH REACH refrigerators address food insecurity

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(SWAP) system and client choice model.

SWAP is a system in which food is labeled using a green/yellow/red scale, indicating the nutrition and recommended serving based on sugar, sodium, and saturated fat content. Customers are urged to pick more green-labeled foods—usually fresh produce—and the donated refrigerators will make storage at the pantries easier.

Under the client choice model, pantries are designed to resemble a grocery store, where customers can walk around and choose their food themselves rather than being handed a pre-packed selection. This can reduce the stigma around visiting food pantries, and provide a more dignified service to families.

There are a few challenges in the implementation of the client choice model, primarily related to space. Most food pantries do not have the capacity to shift from a pre-bagged system to a system in which customers enter and browse. Such a project can be costly and is partially supported by the REACH program.

The REACH program is currently supporting El Buen Samaritano Food Program Inc. and Pernet Family Health Service with the implementation of SWAP and the client choice model. Moving forward, WDPH will also assist Green Island Neighborhood Center and St. John's Food Pantry with their specific needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused extreme rates of food insecurity in Worcester, putting unusually high pressure on food pantries. Pantries are not only serving new families, but are also needing to serve their families more frequently. For example, families who once received

services from their local pantry once a month suddenly needed to visit weekly.

According to the 2021 Community Health Assessment, in the city of Worcester alone, the food insecurity rate is 8.6 percent, compared to the Massachusetts average of 9 percent. The percentage of Worcester households using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits jumps to 21.59 percent. In comparison, the average percent of families receiving SNAP benefits in Massachusetts is only 11.66 percent.

The Regional Environmental Council (REC) along with the Latino Education Institute (LEI) have been crucial partners to the REACH program Food Systems initiatives.

The REC's mission is to bring people together to create a just food system and to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities in Worcester and beyond. They do so in part through the promotion of the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which allows customers to use their SNAP dollars at farmers markets and then refunds those dollars onto their SNAP cards, essentially making fresh produce free.

The REC also brings fresh produce into inner-city neighborhoods, where access is otherwise slim, through their mobile markets. The REC and the LEI have worked together to increase Latino participation at farmers markets.

The REACH program is also involved in an effort led by community partners to create an assessment on food security in Worcester. The purpose of this assessment is to identify opportunities and gaps in the local food system and to facilitate opportunities for decision-making. The assessment aims to

gather information from those on the front lines of food insecurity, whether they have lived experience or work in organizations combatting food insecurity.

WDPH has provided significant assistance to the Worcester community during periods of unprecedented food insecurity through immediate response and strategic collaboration with local partners. The REACH program was a crucial aspect in how WDPH addressed the impacts of COVID-19, especially regarding food insecurity.

Where to find Worcester REACH Refrigerators:

Pernet Family Health Service

237 Millbury Street
Worcester MA, 01610
508-755-1228

El Buen Samaritano Food Program Inc.

39 Piedmont Street
Worcester MA, 01610
774-253-1619

Yes We Care

55 Illinois Street
Worcester MA, 01610
508-754-4539

Catholic Charities

10 Hammond Street
Worcester MA, 01610
508-798-0191