Partners in Prevention

HOW “NON-HEALTH” STATE AGENCIES ARE ADVANCING PUBLIC HEALTH IN MASSACHUSETTS

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# Table of Contents

1. About Massachusetts Public Health Association
2. Acknowledgments
3. Introduction & Overview
4. Healthy Transportation is Here to Stay: A Policy Revolution
   - Massachusetts Department of Transportation
5. The Aqueduct Trails Project: From Hidden Assets to Public Treasure
   - Massachusetts Water Resources Authority
   - Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs
7. Linking Local Agriculture and Healthy Eating to Food Security: A Trifecta of Agriculture, Public Health, and Social Services
   - Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, & Metropolitan Area Planning Council
8. Food for Thought: Implementing Competitive School Nutrition Standards in Massachusetts Public Schools
   - Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education
   - Massachusetts Department of Housing & Community Development

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The Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) is a private, non-profit state-wide membership organization focused on advancing prevention efforts and health equity. The organization works to strengthen the voice and power of public health by engaging new constituencies, broadening understanding of public health, and developing grassroots local leadership in order to improve laws, funding, and policies. Recent victories include the establishment of the nation’s first Prevention and Wellness Trust Fund, the implementation of competitive school nutrition standards, and its leading role in expanding healthy transportation funding to support public transit, walking, and bicycling. MPHA is an affiliate of the American Public Health Association.

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Introduction

In autumn 2013 the Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) undertook a project to profile “non-health” state agencies in Massachusetts that advance public health.

MPHA selected the agencies based on programs and policies they were implementing that encouraged healthy eating, active living, and tobacco-free lifestyles. These activities reflect the public health priorities of the Community Transformation Grants (CTG), a grant program of the Centers for Disease Control which is administered by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health’s (DPH) Division of Prevention and Wellness. In some cases, CTG work laid the groundwork for interagency cooperation among state agencies. In other instances, the work at those agencies was independent of and preceded these “traditional” public health initiatives.

In addition to this brief, MPHA developed and hosted a webinar, “A Tale of Three Projects: How Three State Agencies are Promoting Active Living in Massachusetts,” which showcased those agencies promoting physical activity and outdoor recreation. This webinar is available at: http://tinyurl.com/lwdgpn2

The project provided an opportunity to discuss ways in which traditional public health agencies, coalitions, and advocates can work together with new partners in state government to advance shared goals. The efforts of the agencies profiled here mirror ongoing federal initiatives to ensure that assessing health impact is standard practice in policy development plus project design and implementation. The 2012 National Prevention Strategy and the increasing utilization of tools such as health impact assessments are helping to foster greater interagency cooperation to address disease prevention and health promotion.
Impressively, the agency initiatives highlighted in this brief cut a wide swath through public health goals that have an impact on what Massachusetts residents eat, how and where they can be physically active, and whether or not they smoke. This brief highlights the forward-thinking strategies these agencies are employing to improve public health by:

- Implementing school nutrition standards;
- Promoting electronic benefits transfer (EBT) access at farmers’ markets;
- Embedding healthy transportation goals into business practices;
- Prioritizing urban parks and community green spaces for funding;
- Providing public access to trails on aqueduct property to advance active living; and
- “Opening the door” to smoke-free living in public housing.

MPHA hopes this brief provides readers with:

1) A portfolio of new ideas, strategies, and policies for interagency cooperation focused on health priorities;
2) An understanding of the internal and external challenges/barriers facing “non-health” agencies in incorporating health goals into the work they do; and
3) Ingredients for successful partnerships across state agencies to help advance public health.

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Mass in Motion: A Call to Action

Two out of three Massachusetts adults are either overweight or obese, and one in four children are overweight or obese. In 2009, Governor Deval Patrick released a Call to Action, which documents the extent of the obesity epidemic in Massachusetts, its consequences, and efforts to tackle it.

Massachusetts launched Mass in Motion in January 2009 to address this significant public health problem. This included a workplace wellness program and grants to cities and towns to help them build policies, systems and environments that promoted wellness and healthy living. From 2009-2010, Mass in Motion funded 14 cities and towns throughout the state to make wellness initiatives a priority at the community level. Two additional communities were added in 2010, bringing the number of funded communities to 16. Funding for these grants came from six private foundation partners and state-appropriated funding for health promotion.

In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention under the Community Transformation Grant Program. Thanks to this federal award, DPH now funds 33 Mass in Motion programs covering 52 Massachusetts cities and towns and one-third of the state population.
Overview

In the wake of new and innovative state programs such as *Mass in Motion*, the passage of state laws that are giving teeth to public health goals, and CTG funding, the Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) has become acutely aware of the significant involvement of “non-health” agencies in health-related work.

With funding from the American Public Health Association (APHA), MPHA interviewed staff at seven state agencies. The interviews provided first-hand information on exciting projects the agencies were leading within their respective sectors including some of the barriers they experienced as well as best practices. Some highlights of what is working to ensure health has a role at the table include:

- Embedding health goals into core business practices and organizational policies;
- Securing support from leadership and managing buy-in;
- Taking several consecutive “baby steps;”
- Promoting mutual benefit;
- Proposing to enhance existing resources;
- Helping shape positive associations with existing work;
- Agency leadership who share similar values and passion;
- Gaining support from local community champions;
- Forming collaborations to share resources, limit redundancy, and strategically match respective expertise to the work needed; and
- Utilizing technology to streamline processes and “ease the pain” of change.

A Few Brief Illustrations

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation’s (MassDOT’s) greatest internal challenge to meet the goals of the recently released Healthy Transportation Directive has been adapting business practices. The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) acknowledged that certain objectives of their Aqueduct Trails Project are counterintuitive to their work in operationalizing and maintaining the water supply. The uphill battle to foster culture change critical to achieving goals, securing sufficient resources to undertake projects, implementing policy that conflicted with federal regulations, and working in imposed silos based on internal and external factors, were also noted as barriers to incorporating health goals into the work of their agencies.

MassDOT has perhaps taken the greatest leap in integrating health and sustainability goals in everything it does. While MassDOT’s Healthy Transportation Directive has
been constructed to meet current and anticipated customer demand, it also serves as a model policy for embedding a commitment to safe, healthy, and accessible transportation into core business practices and organizational policies. MassDOT’s work on this Directive also provides an example of how critical the leadership and management buy-in is to moving a health and sustainability agenda forward within an agency. Lastly, it is important to note that the ground-breaking policy directive was the culmination of several consecutive “baby steps” taken over a period of ten years.

MWRA’s move to open up aqueduct trails has provided an alternative benefit for residents to engage in physical activity, outdoor recreation, and appreciation of the natural world. Since the policy to allow public access to the aqueduct property went into effect in 2011, MWRA continues to promote the mutual benefit derived from using the underutilized real estate. Another strategic lever is proposing to enhance existing natural resources such as trails and paths. MWRA has made the case for integrating aqueduct right-of-ways with the surrounding open space in each community. The agency has also found that the trails can serve as corridors to public services including routes for children walking to school. “Safe Routes to School” is a program of MassDOT and a priority of Massachusetts’ Mass in Motion initiative.

MWRA’s goodwill has also helped shape positive associations with its work in water treatment and the provision of safe and clean drinking water. Besides being spearheaded by agency leadership who shared similar values and passion for the natural environment and active living, the aqueduct trails project also was fortunate to have a local community champion whose credibility and dedication led to the opening of the first trail.
The Departments of Agricultural Resources (DAR), Transitional Assistance (DTA), and Public Health (DPH) formed a collaboration that met the market needs of local farming communities while encouraging healthy eating habits among clients receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women Infants and Children (WIC) benefits. The three agencies shared resources, reduced redundancy, and strategically matched their respective expertise to the work needed.

Technology has also played a central role in facilitating the sometimes painful process inherent in change. Software applications now provide nutrient analysis to help schools vet their food items, and EBT terminals are making it easier for SNAP and WIC customers to access healthy food at farmers and other markets.

Besides the best practices noted in the above examples, the following are additional strategies and tools, raised during the interviews, to explore partnerships that advance public health goals:

- Arm yourself with data to back up policy, program, and project proposals that are also sustainable.
- Recognize and award stakeholders to garner goodwill and build mutually supportive relationships.
- Play to people’s values.
- Rally managers and staff around a cause such as health equity or chronic disease prevention to facilitate shifts in culture and to foster a shared vision.
- Highlight ways to collectively achieve federal priorities and mandates.
- Seek out relationships with advocacy groups and other allies.
- Offer opportunities for education and training.
In the last 10 years, the state transportation agency in Massachusetts has evolved organizationally with an unprecedented merger, major reorganization, a new name, and a paradigm shift in transportation planning and design. In transforming itself, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT), strategically shifted to a multi-modal approach not only in response to changing consumer demand, but because it was the right thing to do.

In September 2013, a new policy was instituted by MassDOT’s Secretary of Transportation Richard Davey – The Healthy Transportation Directive. This Directive was created to formalize MassDOT’s commitment to ensure that the state’s transportation network served all mode choices for their customers, including walking, bicycling, and public transit. The Directive builds on other initiatives and policies that had been introduced over the last decade including the Project Development and Design Guide, the GreenDOT Implementation Plan, the Commonwealth’s Healthy Transportation Compact, and statewide Mode Shift Goal.

The Directive represents a shift from concept development, guidance, and good practice to authorizing and operationalizing the inclusion of healthy transportation goals into everyday business practices at MassDOT. The goals and guidelines brought forth by previous efforts were slow to be adopted and adapted to the work of MassDOT. Although alternative modes were being considered as a result of these efforts, they were not necessarily being formally incorporated as vigorously as possible.

It was clear that the Directive’s intent was to put other modes of transportation on the same footing as traditional forms of commuting and traveling when reviewing and designing transportation projects. Among other mandates, the Directive requires new standard content in public communications related to healthy transportation alternatives, accommodations for pre-existing or, if appropriate, new pedestrian, bicycle and transit modes, responsiveness to adjacent land uses and site context, and road safety audits focused on healthy transportation incidents particularly in designated Environmental Justice (low income, minority or limited English proficiency) communities.
What Led MassDOT to a Path for Healthy Transportation?

TREND IS NOT DESTINY
State transportation agencies are not traditionally thought of as being health conscious. So how did MassDOT get to this point? And what lessons are there to learn? Some longtime advocates in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts suggest that the MassDOT’s attention to health came about as a result of an agency re-organization and a legendary highway project.

RE-BUILDING THE AGENCY
Anyone who lived in or visited Massachusetts’ capital city in the 1990s or the 2000s surely experienced some aspect of the Big Dig—nation’s most complex, technologically challenging, and costliest highway project to date. This Herculean project moved multiple highway and subway lines to underground tunnels to relieve growing traffic problems. While the results are impressive and have improved the quality of life in Boston, the legacy of the Big Dig is controversial due to delays and the cost of the project. During the project the Commonwealth greatly relied on private contractors and shrank its transportation agency staff. When the massive project neared completion years later, new administrations were able to add back the many lost staff positions. With an infusion of transportation leadership and staff, local stakeholders noted a difference—the new generation tended to have working relationships with bicycle, pedestrian, and transit advocates as well as state legislators. Was this a turning point for broader thinking about transportation policy?

RE-ORGANIZING & MERGING
In 2009, Massachusetts’ numerous and disparate transportation agencies were merged into a single department to create the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT). During the drafting of the legislation to create this over-arching agency, transit, bike, and pedestrian advocates worked with supportive state legislators to include language requiring the new agency to prioritize public health by increasing emphasis on walking and bicycling. This became known as the “Healthy Transportation Compact.”

HEALTHY TRANSPORTATION: A UNIFYING MESSAGE?
When MassDOT was “born” in 2010 as a new umbrella agency, one can scarcely imagine how challenging the many changes were for hundreds of staff in scores of different offices across the state. It was in this climate, say some longtime pedestrian and bicycle advocates, which the first MassDOT Secretary, Jeff Mullan, adopted the “healthy transportation language” as an effective, unifying message for the culture-change needed. Carrying the process a step further, Mr. Mullan’s successor, current Secretary Rich Davey, issued the Healthy Transportation Policy Directive in September 2013 to begin embedding the focus into operational procedures. Now, Massachusetts has one of the country’s strongest policies on incorporating public health into transportation. Nevertheless, fully incorporating these values into real results statewide will require consistent monitoring and pressure by advocates and stakeholders.

For more on this topic from Massachusetts advocates’ perspectives, visit:
LivableStreets – www.LivableStreets.info/
The Public Way Blog – www.blog.livablestreets.info
Healthy Transportation Compact – http://tinyurl.com/lubfxw7
More than anything else, it was the standardization of “context sensitivity” and the need for greater flexibility that turned transportation planning, design, and project execution in Massachusetts on its head. The context sensitivity approach takes into consideration the communities and land through which streets, roads, and highways pass.

More specifically, the Directive indicates that in projects where adjacent use includes planned residential or commercial development with more than five units per acre, a sidewalk should be provided along the roadway. Attention to context is particularly important in areas where there would naturally be more walking, bicycling, and transit activity. To this end, the Directive points out relevant design features that will help ensure easy and safe access to these modes of travel. This includes considerations such as “wider sidewalks, street trees, landscaped buffers, benches, lighting, frequent crossing opportunities, and strong intermodal connectivity to transit.”

The Directive also requires that all MassDOT divisions review projects currently in design (including retrofit and maintenance projects) to ensure adherence to the specifications and spirit of the Directive.

BEST PRACTICES

The ground-breaking policy Directive was the culmination of several consecutive “baby steps” taken over several years. The creation of the Massachusetts Highway Division’s award-winning “Project Development and Design Guide,” published in 2006 set the ball in motion and paved the way for the 2013 Healthy Transportation Directive and has since served as a national model for developing context-sensitive, community-friendly road and bridge projects. The Directive took the Guide a step further by institutionalizing some of the practices described in the publication.

In 2009, a transportation reform bill passed by the Massachusetts legislature included a key requirement – The Healthy Transportation Compact – that was designed among other goals to improve public health. The Compact promoted interagency cooperation with Massachusetts’ Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Department of Public Health, and divisions within MassDOT to support healthy transportation.

That same year, the MassDOT developed a GreenDOT program. GreenDOT’s vision focuses on three ideals: (1) sustaining economic development; (2) protecting the natural environment; and (3) enhancing the quality of life for all Commonwealth residents and visitors. The ideals would be carried through the full range of MassDOT’s activities from strategic planning and system operations.
Three years later, the agency released a draft *GreenDOT Implementation Plan* for public review. The Plan was written to embed the sustainability vision of GreenDOT into the core business practices of MassDOT. Also that year, MassDOT established a statewide mode shift goal, incorporated into the GreenDOT plan, which seeks to triple the share of travel by walking, bicycling, and public transit by 2030 by promoting intermodal access to the maximum extent feasible. Not surprisingly, MassDOT’s greatest internal challenge is in adapting business practices to meet these goals.

Shortly after the 2009 merger of all Massachusetts transportation modes, the Secretary of Transportation at the time, Jeffrey Mullan, used his focus on healthy transportation as an opportunity to come together around a shared vision to enhance the quality of life and health of their customers and stakeholders. He promoted an intentional culture shift to purposefully achieve this vision. This “health” imperative focused on a multi-modal approach to transportation design and planning that would be sustained by adapting business practices and policies including workplans, job descriptions, and performance reviews.

The reorganization also led to the creation of a centralized Office of Transportation Planning (OTP). The new planning office would support the objectives of the Directive by applying metrics, data-gathering, and analysis to its implementation and impact on business practices and policies. The GreenDOT program was developed in-house at OTP. GreenDOT also relied on OTP’s capacity to collect data, conduct research, and perform statistical analysis to support planning and implementation objectives.
The Healthy Transportation Directive’s cover page intentionally includes the sign-off of all the division leaders to ensure commitment to the Directive. The Secretary understood that embedding healthy transportation objectives into business practices would require leadership and management buy-in. To foster this, MassDOT division managers have been given flexibility in developing their own plans to operationalize these objectives.

In addition, MassDOT had an internal campaign designed to negate the old adage, “But we’ve always done it this way.” This has encouraged management and staff to think outside the box as a way to inspire and grow accustomed to change.

To learn more, visit:
www.massdot.state.ma.us/GreenDOT.aspx
The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) is a quasi-public agency that provides wholesale water and wastewater services to more than 2.5 million customers in 61 communities in eastern and central Massachusetts. On average, MWRA delivers about 200 million gallons of water per day to its customers. MWRA also collects and treats an average of 350 million gallons of waste-water per day, with a peak capacity of 1.2 billion gallons.

One of MWRA’s main charges is to provide clean and safe drinking water. This harkens back to the early days of public health when unsafe drinking water led to a cholera outbreak that killed more than 600 people in London in the mid-nineteenth century. Drinking water and public health have been inextricably linked ever since.

A new health-related initiative took shape over the last 15 years as a result of MWRA’s efforts to allow public access to its aqueduct property located in the MetroWest region of Greater Boston. In July 1998, as the agency was in the process of modernizing the water system, a study assessed the feasibility of allowing public access to the aqueducts that were being phased out from daily use. Working with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), researchers reviewed the aqueducts in the 14 MetroWest host communities as well as existing case studies in Massachusetts and across the country.

In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, interest in the project waned some as it was necessary for MWRA to reaffirm the importance of maintaining and protecting old aqueducts in cases of emergency. National security trumped public access.

By 2002, MWRA was buoyed by the success of a public access program at the Deer Island Wastewater Treatment Plant in Boston. Deer Island is a part of the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area, and is connected to the mainland by a causeway that can be accessed by foot, bike, or car. Sixty acres surrounding the Plant were landscaped and designated as a public park, providing new opportunities for physical activities and outdoor events. One example was MWRA’s sponsorship of a 5K race which served to highlight Deer Island as a destination and promote the newly-opened access to the area surrounding the Plant.
In 2004, a new aqueduct tunnel was completed, which rendered the older aqueducts to emergency back-up status. Ultimately, the success of other public access projects, such as the opening of a trail around a reservoir west of Boston in 2003, helped lead to the creation of a new 2011 MWRA Board-approved policy to allow public access along MWRA’s back-up aqueducts. There were, in fact, a multitude of other factors that came into play as well that led to the formalization of the project.

Implementation of the Aqueduct Public Access Trails Project was not without some challenges and required extensive local engagement. In spite of obvious public health benefits, new sources of open space, and the low cost for initial start-up and maintenance, some municipalities and residents struggled with the idea of making the aqueducts open to the public. There were overall concerns about environmental impacts, public safety, emergency planning and liability. Some Residential abutters in particular were concerned about increased trash and crime or losing their backyard privacy. Early engagement with the communities was key to addressing and resolving most of these concerns.

The project also necessitated internal buy-in to operationalize the trails including such details as establishing right of way and signage, engaging in a permitting process with municipalities, and undertaking emergency and safety planning with local officials. The strong leadership, prior pilot projects, success with public access to MWRA property, and a general feeling of “doing the right thing” provided the catalyst internally to adapt the work to meet the goals of the project.

**BEST PRACTICES**

The agency’s leadership first championed the concept of repurposing the aqueduct property in the late 1990s which led them to commission a feasibility study. Since then, the baton has been passed on to a successor whose leadership continues to sustain the effort as a result of a shared passion and appreciation for the great outdoors.
MWRA’s relationships with state agencies helped foster cooperation that provided leverage to achieve buy-in from stakeholders. The agency also has champions on its Board of Directors, including the current MA Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Richard Sullivan and MAPC Deputy Director Joel Barrera. As a resident of a community abutting the aqueducts, Barrera has been personally invested in seeing the aqueduct trails project become a reality. Additionally, his municipal connections through his role at MAPC helped facilitate discussions with municipal leaders in the abutting communities.

It also became clear that there were opportunities to work with municipalities and advocacy organizations to build on existing corridors of larger multi-community trails and smaller local trails. The aqueduct trails can often provide missing links to existing trails and support local and statewide efforts to provide more options for walking, bicycling, cross-country skiing, and other forms of outdoor recreation. Here was another way to demonstrate the value of providing public access to the aqueducts.

As of November 2013, two trails have been opened since the policy change in 2011. Framingham, a Metrowest community along the aqueduct, was the first to open up “their” aqueduct trail due in large part to the efforts of local champions including State Representative Chris Walsh, Framingham Selectwoman Laurie Lee, and Bob Merusi, the director of Framingham’s Parks and Recreation Department. A one-mile path was initially piloted. Concerns were addressed and practices and policies were put into place such as requiring every application to include an emergency and safety plan. Also, the idea of having “eyes on the ground” as a result of public utilization of the trails helped alleviate some of the concerns around crime and trash.

While MWRA works closely with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) on the safety of the state’s drinking water, public access to the aqueduct trails also presents opportunities for greater alignment with the state’s public health goals around health promotion and environmental change. In particular, linking DPH’s Mass in Motion program to the Aqueduct Trails Project can support the active living goals of the federal Community Transformation Grant which allocates funds to Mass in Motion.

Today, MAPC continues to convene an aqueducts municipal regional group and more aqueduct trails are in the works.

To learn more visit:
Massachusetts is a pioneer in land conservation and has taken a fairly progressive stance over the years to protect its natural landscapes. Today, there is a robust network of land trusts, advocacy organizations, and local champions that work with state and federal agencies to protect and steward all types of natural areas, including forests, farmland, beaches, and wetlands in their commitment to open space for public benefit.

In 1956, the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (LWCF) was created under the auspices of the National Park Service (NPS) to appropriate money for the acquisition of conservation or recreation land, the development of new parks, and the renovation of existing parks. Funded by taxes on gas and oil drilling, the federal LWCF funds are distributed to state agencies to use in their respective states.

In order to receive LWCF funds, a state must regularly assess and make plans to address the changing gaps between the existing recreation and conservation resources of the state and the needs and preferences of its residents. The public input process for Massachusetts’ most recent plan yielded some interesting findings, in particular about urban residents’ desire for more and varied, as well as accessible, open space options.
Every five years, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) submits its Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) to the National Park Service to receive its LWCF allotment. The document also helps guide EOEEA’s outdoor recreation and conservation grants planning within the state.

Since taking office seven years ago, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick has made land protection for conservation and recreation a priority of his administration. As a result, EOEEA and its agencies have helped permanently protect more than 110,000 acres of land in the state. The creation and restoration of 150 parks have provided new construction jobs and succeeded in raising surrounding property values.

Additionally, the state administers two grant programs to support urban parks and community green spaces. The Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) Program assists cities and towns in acquiring and developing land for park and outdoor recreation purposes. The Gateway Cities Parks Program creates new parks and enhances recreational facilities in 26 designated “Gateway Cities” across Massachusetts. The grant program defines Gateway Cities as communities with populations above 35,000 and median household incomes and educational attainment levels below the state averages.

The National Park Service’s 2011 publication, “America’s Great Outdoors: A Promised to Future Generations,” has also influenced local state LWCF grant administrators to consider recommendations and strategies supporting a focus on urban land and conservation.
BEST PRACTICES

The Massachusetts EOEEA’s Division of Conservation Services, working out of the Secretariat’s office, undertook a public input process to inform the development of the 2012 SCORP. A number of methods were employed for collecting input including (1) an online survey of citizens, municipal officials, and land trusts to determine land and water recreation utilization and demand; (2) a phone survey performed by an outside firm; and (3) a written survey administered to schoolchildren. As a result of the state and federal emphasis being placed on urban areas, the phone survey included an oversampling in Gateway Cities to ensure a sufficient response. Additionally, EOEEA held six public meetings across the state to gather regional input.

As part of the SCORP process, a review of local open space plans indicated that since 2005 the desire to see more community green spaces, including dog parks and community gardens, had increased. Those who indicated in surveys that they resided in urban areas stated more than other segments of the population that they planned on recreating more in five years than they currently do today. Respondents wanted to see more investment in “close-to-home” neighborhood parks, other forms of water-based play, and local conservation areas. The results dispelled an unproven but lingering notion that people living in urban environments do not care about land and the great outdoors.

Survey participants also responded that closer proximity to recreation options would address barriers to participating in recreational activities such as lack of time, a shortage of transportation options, and for some, a preference of not getting in a car to access recreational activities.

The youth survey proved enlightening. It revealed just how much young people want to try new things and gain access to new opportunities for recreation. Along these lines, the federal America’s Great Outdoors Report underscored the need for youth to have unfettered access to places to play. This emphasis on youth was highlighted as one of the six tenets of the vision articulated in America’s Great Outdoors:

“All children, regardless of where they live, have access to clean, safe outdoor places within a short walk of their homes or schools, where they can play, dream, discover, and recreate.”

- One of the visions in the 2011 America’s Great Outdoors Report

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The results of the public input process affirmed the Governor’s decision to invest in Environmental Justice neighborhoods. The state was already responding to urban residents’ recreation demands, recognizing that there would be more “bang for the buck” in achieving better health outcomes and economic growth in Gateway Cities.

Ultimately two of the four goals in the 2012 SCORP highlighted the importance of investing in recreation and conservation areas that are close to home for short visits and in racially-, economically-, and age-diverse neighborhoods.

The land conservation movement views health benefits as one of the reasons to protect open space. With an increasing focus on population health, access to green space and places for outdoor recreation has taken on even greater significance. Studies show that people generally feel happier and experience a better quality of life when in close proximity to the natural environment. Community green spaces (such as community gardens) are known to facilitate social cohesion and decrease feelings of isolation. One of the goals of urban agriculture, a priority of the Department of Agricultural Resources Commissioner Gregory Watson, is providing greater access to fresh fruits and vegetables and empowering individuals and families to invest in their own well-being.

In meeting their active living goals, some Mass in Motion communities have partnered on or even initiated PARC grants that have funded such projects as athletic fields and a kayak launch at a park. Mass in Motion, a program of Massachusetts’ Department of Public Health, was launched in 2009 to address obesity through healthy eating and active living. The program funds initiatives to develop policy, systems and environments to promote wellness and healthy living.

To ensure institutional commitment across the board at the EOEEA, the 2012 SCORP findings and goals were shared with other departments within the state agency. The information contained in the SCORP is often useful to the other departments. In particular, department commissioners review the document as they develop their own workplans and most of the commissioners serve as members of the SCORP Advisory Committee.

The existence of an Advisory Committee is another sustaining factor to the implementation of the SCORP. The Committee represents the diversity of Massachusetts and comprises MA EOEEA department commissioners, municipal representatives, environment-focused nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic organizations. They meet annually to provide guidance and ensure integrity in the implementation of the plan.

To learn more, visit:
www.mass.gov/eea/dcs-grants
www.nps.gov/lwcf
The Massachusetts Departments of Agriculture (DAR), Transitional Assistance (DTA), and Public Health (DPH), plus the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) have recently collaborated on projects that have both supported local farmers’ markets and provided those receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women Infants and Children (WIC) benefits with access to fruits, vegetables and other healthy items. The projects include a joint survey to assess barriers to utilizing benefits at farmers’ markets; promoting Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT); access to the markets to expand customer base; and a Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) that incentivizes SNAP recipients to purchase more fruits and vegetables.

MAPC also convenes the Farmers’ Market Working Group, a collaboration involving DPH, DAR, WIC, and the Massachusetts Farmers’ Market Association. Massachusetts ranks among the highest in the nation for the number of farmers’ markets.
JOINT SURVEY – ASSESSING SNAP AND WIC RECIPIENTS’ USE OF BENEFITS AT FARMERS MARKETS

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), the regional planning agency for the Boston area, has engaged several Mass in Motion communities across the state to increase the number of participants who use SNAP and WIC at local farmers markets. One of Mass in Motion’s priorities is to increase access to markets selling healthy foods. Supported by project funds through the Community Transformation Grants, DPH and MAPC is conducting an assessment of the barriers clients experience in utilizing their SNAP and WIC benefits at farmers’ markets.

The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (DAR), Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), and DPH are part of a working group to help assess SNAP and WIC recipients’ patronage of local farmers’ markets. The goal was to better understand the barriers and identify strategies for increasing the number of SNAP and WIC recipients at farmers’ markets. To conduct the assessment, DTA and DPH developed a single survey translated into Spanish and Portuguese, to target both SNAP and WIC recipients. At this juncture, the survey has been administered by DTA to 130,000 SNAP households, reached through a scheduled DTA mailing to clients. There are plans to survey WIC recipients next year.

DTA disseminated the survey at its 22 local offices and provided a link on its website to an online version of the survey. DTA also reached out to members of 16 DTA Advisory Boards to assist with the distribution of the surveys. A similar communication was sent to four state-wide SNAP nutrition education providers.
More than 950 surveys were returned from SNAP users. This was quite surprising given that survey participants were not offered an incentive for completing the survey. Survey results are preliminary at this time but the following are highlights:

Nearly 49% of the respondents had not shopped at a farmers’ market in the last year. Interestingly enough, 30% of those had never heard of farmers’ markets and 38% didn’t know when the markets were open. The survey also asked what would make them shop at a market more often. The top three responses were: (1) more information on farmers’ markets; (2) knowing that the market accepted EBT; and (3) affordability. Of the survey respondents who indicated that they shopped at farmers’ markets, fifty-eight percent (58%) did not use their SNAP benefits primarily because they did not know which markets accepted SNAP. Those patronizing the farmers’ markets had knowledge of them through WIC or DTA and/or promotion such as flyers, posters, or advertisements in their local community.

Based on the data, initial thoughts to address barriers to access include:

- Enhanced efforts around advertisement and promotion of EBT at farmers’ markets;
- Expanded education about farmers’ markets in general, including hours, location, purpose, and benefits;
- Need to investigate funding opportunities within the state for matching or doubling programs to support SNAP use at markets.

Another potential approach is to identify and address statewide barriers through policy at the state level. Much has been left to the communities to figure out, which is difficult given their lack of capacity and resources. Statewide policy change, a more streamlined and standardized procurement approach, and additional resources would provide much-needed support to farmers’ markets.

PROMOTING EBT ACCESS TO FARMERS’ MARKETS

Utilizing state funding in 2010 and 2011 and then federal funds from the USDA via DTA in 2012, DAR worked to expand SNAP recipients’ access to farmers’ markets by funding EBT terminal purchases. The equipment would provide access to new customers, give SNAP recipients more access to healthy, affordable food, and encourage consumption of locally-grown produce. The funding was in response to the high costs associated with providing EBT access at farmers’ markets.
Funding in 2010 and 2011 was used to provide mini-grants to farmers markets to purchase wireless-point-of-sale equipment, cover a portion of the fees associated with the terminals, provide incentives to SNAP recipients to encourage using their benefits at the markets, (i.e., matching programs) and to conduct outreach to SNAP recipients. Use of the federal funds starting in 2012 was limited to the cost of the wireless terminal and the monthly access fee.

To date, twenty-eight (28) markets have taken advantage of the federal funding in addition to the 49 markets and organizations that benefited from the state program in 2010 and 2011. The Massachusetts SNAP program provides more than $1.3 billion in benefits and is a largely untapped source of revenue for farmers’ markets. The EBT funding is meant to help facilitate access to this market, increase the buying power of SNAP recipients, and also encourage more farmers’ markets to participate in accepting SNAP benefits.

The USDA grant is a good example of ways in which the federal government can facilitate collaboration among non-traditional partners, in this case DAR and DTA, to reduce redundancy and achieve common goals.

HEALTHY INCENTIVES PILOT

In 2010, through a competitive application process, Massachusetts was the only state in the country to receive USDA funding, through the 2008 Farm Bill, to implement a pilot project with residents enrolled in SNAP. Located in western Massachusetts, Hampden County was selected as the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) site. The pilot was set up to determine if incentives provided to SNAP recipients at the point-of-sale increased their purchase of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods. It was part of a larger effort to evaluate health and nutrition promotion in the SNAP program. The goal to increase SNAP use at farmer’s markets dovetailed with DTA’s implementation of its HIP program.

BEST PRACTICES

The common goal of providing not just sustenance but also better access to healthy, affordable food options served as the lynchpin for collaboration among DTA, DAR, DPH, and MAPC. The USDA funding was a timely catalyst for linking local agriculture production and nutrition promotion and wellness with food security in Massachusetts. On multiple fronts, the partnership among these entities is exploring possible solutions to issues of hunger, economic growth, and disease prevention.

The three projects are reflective of an increase in interagency collaborations to achieve public health priorities. The promotion of EBT access at farmers’ markets and the cooperation on the survey project marked the first time the agencies had collaborated around SNAP. As a result of working together, the agencies have been able to leverage and share resources, tools, and expertise to meet both their mutual and individual organization’s strategic goals.
While the implementation of the projects continues to be assessed, it remains clear that the agencies’ efforts are in part providing expanded opportunities for nutrition education and increasing the visibility of local farmers’ markets. The concept of nutrition and healthy eating habits is being promoted to a larger audience as a result of communications about the survey and the offering of incentives through the HIP and the EBT access funding. Farmers’ markets are getting more exposure as a result of the incentives, technology enhancements, and even the survey tool.

Championed by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick’s administration, farmers’ markets garnered additional visibility as a result of three Farmers Market SNAP Use Demonstration tours held in Fall 2013. Several Massachusetts state agencies participated including DTA, DAR and DPH. The tours: (1) highlighted the kinds of healthy food choices people can make at markets; (2) demonstrated the ways in which farmers’ markets are accessible to SNAP clients; and (3) promoted local farmers who provide fresh, affordable, locally grown foods.

Early assessments of the projects also indicate areas in which business practices could be adapted to ensure greater success. Even more revealing is how the different approaches are motivating culture change within organizations; for example, shifting from a purely administrative focus to more of an emphasis on promoting ways to maximize resources to enhance quality of life.

To learn more, visit:
www.mass.gov/dta/hip
www.fns.usda.gov/hip/healthy-incentives-pilot
www.surveymonkey.com/s/SNAPFMSurveyEnglish

Key Elements of the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP)

- 7,500 SNAP households were randomly selected to participate in HIP.
- Households participating in HIP earned 30 cents for every SNAP dollar they spent on targeted fruits and vegetables.
- Participants could earn the incentive for purchasing any fresh, canned, dried, or frozen fruits and vegetables (without added sugar, salt, fat or oil) at participating HIP retailers.
- HIP implementation phase: November 1, 2011 through December 31, 2012.
- 75+ community partners supported the pilot implementation, including DAR, DPH, and MAPC.

The ongoing goal to increase SNAP use at farmers’ markets dovetailed with DTA’s implementation of HIP. The HIP final report will be available in early Spring 2014.
Food for Thought: Implementing Competitive School Nutrition Standards in Massachusetts Public Schools

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Department of Public Health (DPH) have a well-established and long-standing relationship in the area of school nutrition. The Act Relative to School Nutrition, state legislation that was passed in July 2010 represented a new chapter in their mutual efforts to promote healthy school environments.

**PROJECT**

The Act Relative to School Nutrition was signed into law by Governor Patrick in 2010 capping nearly a decade of legislative sponsorship and advocacy group efforts led by the Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) and numerous partners across the state. The legislation was a monumental achievement to establish the highest standards backed by nutrition science, as well as data demonstrating the link between diet and exercise and academic achievement. At the time this law was passed, it was considered to be of the more forward-thinking frameworks for school nutrition among its peers.

The thrust of the law focused on nutrition standards for competitive foods in public schools (defined as foods and beverages provided as à la carte items in school cafeterias, school stores, school snack bars, or in vending machines). Additional elements of the Act included: promoting farm-to-school programs; establishment of wellness advisory committees; and training for public school nurses on diet and screening and referral for chronic disease. The school wellness committees were particularly important in tailoring and institutionalizing the new regulations within their school systems.

DESE has been an active and engaged collaborator in data collection, analysis and dissemination, nutrition education and training, tool development, and in helping shape recommendations.
With Massachusetts at the forefront of school nutrition reforms, it was not surprising when the new state law found itself on a parallel track with the passage and subsequent rulings of the federal Healthy, Hunger Free Act in 2010. The point of this new federal legislation was to expand the opportunities, regardless of income and reliance on the hunger safety net, to improve child nutrition. Besides authorizing funding and setting policy for federal child nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, the Act also included nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools.

The Massachusetts Public Health Council, a body of appointed officials that promulgates public health regulations and advises the Commissioner, was charged with creating the nutritional standards within the framework set forth in the new state law. In July 2011, the Public Health Council adopted new DPH regulations establishing the strongest health standards for all competitive foods and beverages provided or sold on school grounds during the school day.

The following year, DPH and DESE led the creation of a revised guidance document titled, “Healthy Students, Healthy Schools: Revised Guidance for Implementing the Massachusetts School Nutrition Standards for Competitive Foods and Beverages.”

**CHALLENGES**

During the last four years one of the more obvious challenges in implementing the state nutrition standards was the concurrent release of state and federal legislation as well as the subsequent amendments and the development of the regulations.

Naturally, implementation of the regulations has drawn reluctance on the part of school districts to institute them within their own systems, especially with confusion about the requirements under each of the two new laws. Each school district brings a different level of understanding, priorities, resources, infrastructure, and culture to the table.

Like most systems, school districts comprise distinct groups of stakeholders who are motivated by different sets of goals, values, interests, and influences. For decades, this has proved sometimes quite daunting in ensuring that students
have the very best education within a supportive, safe, and healthy environment. Misunderstandings occur and implementing nutrition standards is no exception.

One of the greatest barriers is the concern of school administrators and food service vendors about the impact of the regulations on profits with many assuming that kids will only purchase sugar-sweetened and salty foods and bypass healthy options.

**BEST PRACTICES**

Guidance in the form of recommendations, strategies, tools and technical assistance has been provided by a number of academic and advocacy groups, and state agencies, legislator and executive office sponsored commissions. In addition to its lobbying efforts to pass legislation, MPHA also convened the School Nutrition Implementation Working Group to bring together the expertise of educators, public health and nutrition leaders. Specifically, partners included DESE, DPH, advocacy organizations such as the Massachusetts School Nurses Association, professional school and athletic associations including the Massachusetts Athletic Directors Association, academic institutions, anti-hunger organizations, and local community-based coalitions. The outcome of that process was a report entitled, “Recipe for Success: Recommendations for Implementing New Massachusetts Competitive Food and Beverage School Standards.”
The recommendations included:

- Execution of strategies to focus on robust education and training concerning obesity and school nutrition’s link to academic scores;
- Moving toward a shared vision and collective responsibility; and
- Encouraging multi-stakeholder involvement and thus empowerment in the process.

Evidence is emerging that if students and families understand why the changes are occurring, and are not taken by surprise by sudden changes, there is less likely to be a drop in food and beverage sales. In this sense, education at school and at home has been essential to motivate change.

Some school food service and school nutrition directors have already varied their approach and preparation of their food offerings. As a result, schools are making up for initial losses to their food program and are seeing an increase in revenue.

Technology has also played a key role in facilitating the implementation of the standards. The John C. Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition (JSI), a partnership of DESE and Framingham State University, created a nutrition calculator to determine if a product meets the Massachusetts standards and a recipe calculator to evaluate recipes.

Over the next several years, efforts to institutionalize and sustain the standards will be critical. In the near future, a review of the state curriculum frameworks for health education and the revised school plans will support making the “healthy choice the easy choice” for students.

To learn more, visit:

- www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/hprograms/cshp/
- www.astho.org
- http://tinyurl.com/p6korew
In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) approved the implementation of the Boston Housing Authority’s (BHA) ground-breaking policy to ban smoking in all its state-funded public housing. BHA’s policy made Boston the largest city in the nation to ban smoking in public housing. The policy was aimed at protecting non-smokers, especially children, from breathing secondhand cigarette smoke from neighboring units.

The prior year, the BHA had secured the legal backing of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which provides funding for the 10,000 federally-supported units BHA owns. HUD was encouraging public housing authorities across the country to adopt non-smoking policies.

The BHA’s new policy was in response to the increasing desire of tenants to live in smoke-free environments. When surveyed, approximately 90 percent of BHA residents across the city—including those who smoke—reported that they support a non-smoking housing environment. Also, the BHA regularly received transfer request from residents looking for housing free of second-hand smoke; in particular those with asthma, cancer or other illnesses.

Given its mission of “housing first,” DHCD was cautious. After all, the agency has a mandate to protect tenants’ rights and uphold statutory requirements. DHCD’s decision to ultimately back the BHA policy was due to a number of factors including the BHA’s pilot implementation of the policy and the headway it had made over the previous year. Also, BHA’s policy did not prohibit people who smoke from residing in BHA owned and managed properties; rather it prohibited smoking in BHA owned designated non-smoking
buildings. Furthermore, a group of partner health agencies had been convened to work with BHA to thoughtfully develop a plan to offer education, cessation services, and other support prior to the effective date of implementation.

In addition to BHA, housing authorities across the state had either established their own non-smoking policy or were looking for guidance. DHCD is now working to create a guidance document and model policy for statewide dissemination to housing authorities. It is also dedicating resources and staffing to the project and has sought assistance from the DPH. DPH is providing data, tools, and recommendations to demonstrate how to take a property smoke-free.

While the DHCD has encountered challenges to the policy, it continues to forge ahead in its genuine attempt to balance tenants’ needs and rights with the desire to also support a better quality of life and a healthier environment for its residents.