

Notes for the SFPC Quarterly meeting, August 18, 2026

The Southcoast Food Policy Council (SFPC) mission is to convene, connect, and advocate for food system stakeholders to strengthen the regional food system, improve community health, and eliminate food insecurity across the Southcoast.

Working Group Updates

1. **Education & Communication Working Group:** The focus is on engaging the public in understanding the food system.
 - **Eat Local Challenge:** The goal is to encourage participants to eat foods within 200 miles of their homes. Content topics include production, aggregation, distribution, food recovery, and how and where to purchase local food. The 2026 challenge was redesigned from five weekly emails to a 21-day email challenge. Participation grew from roughly 400 to more than 1,300 people, and respondents rated it 4.5 out of 5. Reported behavior changes included buying more local produce and meat, visiting farmers' markets more often, joining CSAs, and learning about HIP and local food sources. Most participants were from Bristol County, with additional participation from Plymouth and Barnstable counties. Groups in Western Massachusetts have inquired about replicating the model.
 - **Annual Food Summit** — September 24, 2026, from 6:30- 8 pm, held virtually. The theme is Community & Agriculture Resilience Audit Tool (CARAT) preliminary outcomes. Success stories from the CARAT informed the organizers on potential groups to invite as presenters.
 - **FarmCoast Documentary:** In partnership with filmmaker Ethan de Aguiar and Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP), the Marion Institute is producing a documentary highlighting our local food producers. [Link to](#) documentary teaser.

Policy Update:

1. **[Farm to School FRESH Grant:](#)** Included in the Senate version of the State Farm Bill to be a permanent program; not currently in the House Farm Bill version. In September, advocates will meet to discuss how to move the [MA Farm Bill](#) to the conference committee. The \$1 million request for the Farm to School grant bill and the Wellness program in the Food Literacy bill was funded for FY27.
2. **[Food Literacy Bill](#) (K–12):** Would require food literacy standards across all Massachusetts schools. Passed out of the Senate committee; the House placed it in the Rules Committee, where it died. However, the Wellness program in the bill was funded at \$200,000.

Discussion:

- **[Linguistic justice:](#)** It was noted that food education and outreach materials must be accessible in the actual languages used by community members, including Cape Verdean Creole and Haitian Creole, rather than assuming Portuguese will meet all needs. Materials should clearly identify the language used, helping readers recognize and access content appropriately. The concern is meaningful access to materials, translation, and live interpretation where needed.
- **[There was an inquiry about whether there was a precedent of other states passing a Food Literacy Bill](#)** According to the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law's [Local Food Policy Resource Hub](#), it looks different in other states.
- **[The Marion Institute's Grow Education \(Farm-to-School\) program](#)** is expanding into Fall River this fall, launching in three elementary schools. Over the next several years, we look forward to bringing the Grow Education programming to additional elementary schools across Fall River.

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2. **Food Access Working Group:** The focus is to increase healthy food access.

- **Monthly Emergency Food Resource Meetings:** After four months of meetings, there are three common trends:

- a. Demand for food assistance is increasing and is outpacing the capacity of refrigerated space, volunteer or staff time to be open.
- b. Lack of trust in sources of information and the freezing effect of ICE have created a need to build trusting relationships with people when applying for SNAP or going to food pantries. Many people are reluctant to use benefits or food pantries unless the information comes through a trusted person or organization. People are safe in numbers, and the trust is in the relationship, not the media.
- c. Emergency Disaster Food Planning: Strong interest in having a shared, multi-language emergency food preparedness document, similar to materials MEMA or some towns have used during storms.

Discussion:

- ✓ It was noted that public outreach methods related to immigration support, such as LUCE, must be designed carefully. Based on local experience, some concerns were raised that broadly posted signs could unintentionally expose vulnerable community members or locations. There was encouragement to collaborate with trusted neighborhood-based agencies.
- ✓ United Neighbors of Fall River is trying to bring a [LUCE](#) Ice Watch training to Fall River if anyone is interested in collaborating. Contact kerrie@unfr.org.
- **Southcoast Food Alert:** A listserv connecting over 200 partner organizations. Used to alert the network when surplus food is available and facilitating rapid redistribution. To join, email sfpc@marioninstitute.org.
- **DTA staffing shortages have a significant ripple effect:** Staffing constraints are undermining SNAP delivery. Since August 2024, SNAP caseloads have dropped by 117,000 households, including 60,000 children. From January to April this year, 70% of SNAP applicants were denied for lack of staff follow-up, straining the food pantries and costing farmers HIP customers. When people lose SNAP, they lose HIP, and we see an increase in people going to food pantries, and farmers are negatively impacted by the loss of HIP customers. Read the Mass Law Reform Institute [Overview](#) of the problem.
- ✓ **Take Action! Email the Governor using this [TEMPLATE](#).** If you have any questions, contact Christine at csmith@marioninstitute.org and 508-748-0816 x110.
- ✓ The office of Rep. Michelle Badger noted that constituents facing unresolved or delayed DTA cases should contact their local [state representative's office](#), which can elevate cases directly with DTA.
- ✓ Project Bread's Make Hunger History, Dominique Resendes, offered to connect interested participants with the Make Hunger History Coalition and SNAP Coalition advocacy effort.
Dominique_resendes@projectbread.org

Policy Update:

1. **[The Healthy Incentives Program \(HIP\)](#):** The Budget request of \$29.7 million is fully funded for FY27.
 - [Massachusetts Farm Bill](#): HIP permanent language was included in the Senate-passed version; the House leadership did not move it forward. In September, advocates will strategize how to get this to Conference Committee to reconcile before December.
 - It was noted that there are three other HIP advocacy wins: 1.) SNAP-card phone messaging was changed to reduce confusion between SNAP balances and HIP usage. 2.) Farmers market receipts were revised from "HIP earned" to "HIP available." 3.) DTA was asked to reconsider using Stop & Shop gift cards as incentives for HIP focus groups; future incentives may instead support farmers markets directly
- 2.) **[Basic Needs Assistance for MA Immigrant Residents](#)** (AKA State Funded SNAP for MA Immigrants): Successfully moved out of the Joint Committee and is now consolidated into S.118 Lift Kids out of Poverty Bill and sits in the Senate Ways and Means. The bill is dead for the session.

3.) Capacity Building Working Group:

- **Community and Agriculture Resilience Audit Tool (CARAT):** Developed by Indiana University and the North American Food System Network, CARAT assesses food system resources within a region using indicator

questions that measure the region's assets to support a resilient local food system. We partnered with all six Southeastern counties (Norfolk, Plymouth, Bristol, Barnstable, Nantucket, and Dukes) to ensure we have shared language, shared data, and shared buy-in for the 2026 Food System Assessment. We launched a Community of Practice among all six Southeastern MA counties to align use of the CARAT. Established county-specific CABs to complete CARAT assessments and scoring in all six counties. Findings will inform the 2026 Southeastern Massachusetts Food System Assessment, releasing in fall 2026.

✓ **Plymouth County Food Action Plan** based on the CARAT. <https://oldcolonyplanning.org/foodresiliency/>

- **Aquaculture Policy Coalition.** Launched earlier this year with steering committee members: Buzzards Bay Coalition, New Bedford Ocean Cluster, MA Aquaculture Association, Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP), and the Marion Institute's SFPC. Join the Aquaculture Policy Coalition by [clicking here](#). Successfully worked with legislators to embed the Financing bill into the Environmental Bond bill (see below).
 - ✓ Discussion: There was strong encouragement to engage affected communities and longtime local advocates of CSO's and aquaculture, noting that the issue requires substantial public investment and shared responsibility.

Policy Update:

- [Donation of Food to Persons in Need](#) provides a tax credit to farmers, producers, and aquaculture operators who donate food to the emergency food relief system. The full bill calls for a \$25,000 tax credit; the Governor included a \$5,000 credit in the FY26 supplemental budget, which is now law for the next three years. MDAR will develop implementation guidelines once officially enacted.
- [Equity in Agriculture](#) would create a commission to study and propose legislation to remove barriers for BIPOC farming. This passed the Senate Joint Agriculture Committee and House members, who sent it to the Rules Committee, where it died. Equity Network members are talking about listening sessions with farmers of color to see what they want to do with the bill. SFPC will continue to support the efforts.
- [Coastal Wastewater Infrastructure Financing \(for CSO's\) Commission](#) addresses aging combined sewer overflows that release nitrogen pollution into Buzzards Bay following storms, triggering aquaculture closures and beach restrictions. The bill has been incorporated into the Environmental Bond Bill, which passed both chambers and is now in conference committee. Also added to the Environmental Bond Bill is funding for the Division of Marine Fisheries for additional staff and equipment, which would help to reduce the post-storm aquaculture closure periods.