



Berkshire County Housing and Food Insecurity Summit

Summary Report, September 2023

In the summer of 2023, the office of MA State Representative Smitty Pignatelli initiated a regional needs assessment and community dialogue related to housing instability and food instability in Berkshire County. This initiative had three primary components: an open-ended, online survey; a prioritization survey; and an in-person community summit. These are described in detail below:

1. **Online Survey** – An online tool, entitled Berkshire County Needs Assessment for Housing and Food Insecurity, was created by the staff of Representative Pignatelli's office. This survey ran from July through September of 2023 and contained twelve open ended questions.

The broad goals of this needs assessment were to:

- **Catalog organizations, institutions, and community groups** engaged with the issues of housing and/or food insecurity in Berkshire County.
- **Capture approaches that are currently being undertaken** to address housing and/or food insecurity in the county.
- **Identify willingness and opportunities for collaboration**, including collaboration across sectors, agencies, and/or towns.
- **Gauge interest in participating in a face-to-face summit** to discuss assessment findings and explore potential solutions.
- **Solicit input on the greatest housing and food security challenges** facing the region.
- **Solicit input on promising strategies** to address these challenges.

Ninety-four unique respondents answered the survey. One hundred percent indicated a desire to participate in increased collaboration around housing and food efforts and approximately eighty-five percent committed to participating in the proposed summit. These groups and organizations, their missions, programs offered, and demography served are captured in *Attachment-A* of this report. A breakdown of the top nine challenges identified is contained in *Attachment-B*, along with promising long-term system-change strategies associated with each challenge.

2. **Prioritization Survey** – A second online survey was distributed, in September, to respondents of the initial needs assessment. This survey asked participants to review the nine challenges areas identified through the needs assessment, and then to select:
 - The issue they see as most foundational to housing and food needs in Berkshire County.
 - The challenge they feel is most difficult to overcome.

The results showed that, by overwhelming margins, the areas of *Insufficient Availability of Affordable House* and *Insufficient Wages to Meet Basic Needs Expenses* were viewed as both the most foundational and most difficult-to-overcome issues.

The survey also asked participants to review the multiple strategies and solutions identified through the needs assessment, and to select:

- Strategies that are “low hanging fruit” (ones that can be most easily advanced)
- Solutions that can be better advanced through increased collaborative efforts.

The data revealed the following solution areas as worthy of further exploration:

- **Maintain and renovate existing properties** that are affordable, but either underutilized or in disrepair.
- **Provide onsite services and education** at food sites (e.g., nutritional counseling, information and referrals, consumer education, benefit enrollment).
- **Expand homelessness prevention and tenant advocacy** strategies that keep vulnerable individuals and families where they are already housed.
- **Develop more affordable housing units.**

3. **In-person Summit** – An in-person public forum, billed as the Berkshire County Housing and Food Insecurity Summit, was held on Friday September 22nd at the Town Hall Auditorium in Lenox, MA, with 94 individuals in attendance. This group included legislators, town officials, planners, funders, community volunteers, and staff from numerous health, human service, and housing agencies. The two-hour summit began with a review of data generated through needs assessment as well prioritization of challenges and solutions as generated through the prioritization study. The remainder of the event was structured as a public forum / public hearing in which attendees could speak from a microphone to share their thoughts, ideas, and concerns. Roughly fifty percent of those in attendance spoke. Twenty minutes was spent on each of the priority solution areas: *maintain and renovate existing properties, provide onsite services and education at food sites, homelessness prevention and tenant advocacy strategies, and develop more affordable housing units.* The remaining twenty minutes of the summit allowed for general comments from attendees related to housing and food needs. Key comments and learnings are captured in *Attachment-C*.

Participants also had the opportunity to sign up to continue working on one or more of the four issue areas listed above. At the time of this report preparation, these working groups have not yet begun their work.

Recognition:

- *Initiative and Coordination: MA State Representative Smitty Pignatelli and his staff, including Julie Murphy, Caroline Szatkowski, and Benjamin Wohl.*
- *Summit Facilitation, Data Analysis, and Summary Report: Jim Ayres, Principal Consultant at Strategies for Collaborative Impact and Justice Consulting.*
- *The Summit was made possible by funding support from the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, Berkshire United Way, and Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.*
- *Event Space and Logistical Support: Town of Lenox, MA.*

Attachment-A Survey and Summit Participant Contact List

Group / Organization	Services Offered	Demography Served	Location	Mission	Email Address
Adams Community Bank	Banking	All residents of Berkshire County		To remain a community focused bank	ltrybus@adamscommunity.com Jmcninch@adamscommunity.com
Al Nelson Friendship Center Food Pantry, North Adams	food pantry	Residents of North Adams, Clarksburg, and Florida Mountain	45 Eagle Street, North Adams, MA	Our umbrella organizational name is the Northern Berkshire Interfaith Action Initiative. As people of faith AND goodwill, we work together to provide food and support to those in need, with dignity and respect.	lois.daunis@gmail.com
Beartown Advisors	Consulting	Non-profit organizations	Lee, MA		martha1551@att.net
Becket Democrats	Acquires productive land by gift or using tax-deductible donations and leases the land for workforce housing, farming, light manufacturing, or retail. Lessees own buildings, but not the land, thereby making access to land more affordable.	Farmers and year round residents of Berkshire County	Great Barrington, MA	I chair the Outreach Committee	TommieLou9@aol.com
Becket planning board	Creates and maintains bylaws that effect housing and food	Town of becket	Becket	Create and maintain zoning bylaws and review applications for permits	alvinblake@aol.com
Berkshire Bounty	Collection, purchase, and delivery of nutritious food to emergency food sites countywide.	Food insecure individuals and families	Great Barrington	Build capacity in the emergency food network by closing gaps and improving quantity and quality of food.	morgan@berkshirebounty.org
Berkshire Community Action Council, Inc	fuel assistance, energy conservation, Children's winter clothing program, VITA tax Program, Financial literacy skills	low income	Pittsfield & North Adams, MA	Committed to community programs that provides responsive approaches to the core needs of Berkshire County residents, and forges solutions to help people reach their fullest potential.	msylvester@bcacinc.org
Berkshire Community College	Educational Courses, Workshops and Degrees	students ages 16-101 - specific demographic data can be supplied	Pittsfield, MA	Berkshire Community College is committed to providing an exceptional education and a wide range of opportunities that meet the diverse needs of our community through college transfer, workforce and career pathways, partnerships and lifelong learning.	gmartinez@berkshirecc.edu casey.young@mcla.edu
Berkshire Community Land Trust	addresses land insecurity in Berkshire county	Berkshire county population including workforce	Berkshire County	The BCLT secures permanent access, affordability and productivity of land for housing, farming and local industry by holding land in community trusteeship	sarah.downie@gmail.com susanwitt@centerforneweconomics.org

Berkshire County Board of REALTORS, Inc.	Services for REALTORS to make the housing sales market work in Berkshire County and providing data on housing trends for the public.	REALTORS, Homeowners, Investors,	Pittsfield	We work to support the highest ethical standards and the professionalism of our members in service to the community through education, technology, philanthropy, and advocacy for property rights.	sandy@berkshirerealtors.org
Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority (BCRHA)	BCRHA is Berkshire County's primary provider of housing stability and homelessness prevention services. We also serve as the Dispute Resolution Center and Consumer Protection agency for the County	Tenants, landlords, homeowners, and other consumers	Pittsfield, although we cover the entire county and parts of the Pioneer Valley	The overarching mission of the organization is to promote community, household, and housing stability through the implementation of a continuum of interrelated services.	bradg@bcrha.com fernandoL@bcrha.com Jeffrey@bcrha.com lkittross@berkshireplanning.org tsimon@napsk12.org
Berkshire Funding Focus	Grant research, technical assistance.	Berkshire county municipalities, school districts, nonprofits, small businesses.	Pittsfield	Support Berkshire County entities seeking federal and state funds for pandemic-related recovery and rebuilding and building organizational and sector capacity for the long term.	kpelto@berkshireplanning.org
Berkshire Grown, Inc.	We purchase locally-grown vegetables, meat, eggs, cheese direct from local farmers, and work with other partner orgs to distribute that food to local food pantries who in turn get the food to local families facing food insecurity.		Great Barrington	Berkshire Grown is a nonprofit organization whose vision is a thriving local food system that supports and promotes locally based agriculture as a vital part of a healthy community, economy, and landscape. To fulfill this vision, Berkshire Grown builds and strengthens connections among local farmers, food producers, food access organizations and community members. We are guided by the following principles: • Local, prosperous, and diverse farms are essential to the economic health and environmental quality of the region; • Everyone should have access to fresh, nutrient-dense food; • An informed and engaged community is essential to the long-term sustainability of our local food system.	margaret@berkshiregrown.org martha@berkshiregrown.org
Berkshire Health Systems	healthcare	entire county	county-wide	To advance health and wellness for everyone in our community	mdaniels@bhs1.org jvrabel@bhs1.org kvogel2@bhs1.org cred@bhs1.org
Berkshire Housing	Develop, manage, support housing developments that we manage and/or own; financial assistance; section 8 vouchers; property management	all of Berkshire County	Pittsfield	Through collaboration and innovation, Berkshire Housing will find solutions to housing for all people across the communities of Berkshire County. We are good neighbors, great navigators, and allies to all.	jmeehan@berkshirehousing.com

Berkshire Interfaith Organizing	BIO is a 501c3 that organizes within the interfaith community to build grassroots power that affects systemic change. We currently are working to build a housing campaign focused on affordability and dignity.	Justice-oriented members of affiliated congregations and organizations	Our office is in Pittsfield, but we organize county-wide	We work together to make social justice real in our community and improve the quality of life for all in the Berkshires. We bring together people of faith and values by sharing our stories to: * Increase our power to act for justice * Develop skills to be more effective in the public arena * Take action on issues of common concern for our member groups * Ensure that those affected by the issues craft the solutions By doing this, we build relationships and strengthen community, identify and develop diverse local leaders, and achieve systemic solutions.	sean@biorganizing.org disweinstein@gmail.com mburniske@gmail.com dbmahoney@yahoo.com bjohnsonpitts@aol.com
Berkshire Regional Planning Commission	we are the regional planning agency (RPA) for Berkshire county	All Berkshire municipalities	Pittsfield	I am on the public health team; we have various initiatives around the county to respond to public health and prevention issues (flexible, from climate resilience to opioid dependency treatment), treatment capacity issues, and issues requiring a systems-level approach (like EMS response times across the county).	jzapata@berkshireplanning.org lkittross@berkshireplanning.org AmrKeever@berkshireplanning.org tmatuszko@berkshireplaning.org mfeuet@chpberkshires.org choss@berkshireplanning.org
Berkshire South Regional Community Center	Community services		Great Barrington		mamstead@berkshiresouth.org
Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation	Grantmaking, Convening, Capacity Building, Research, Philanthropic Services to Donors	All Berkshire Co, MA; All Columbia Co.,NY; NW Litchfield Co., CT; NE Dutchess Co., NY	Sheffield MA	Strengthening communities through philanthropy	twilmot@berkshiretaconic.org
Berkshire United Way	Education preK-13	Predominantly economically disadvantaged and high risk students.	City of North Adams	Empowering all students. Education is a route out of inter generational poverty.	Tbernard@berkshireunitedway.org Bpetelle@berkshireunitedway.org
Berkshire Veterans Outreach Center	helping with VA claims	veterans	Pittsfield	to help veterans get the care that they need, whether through treatment or monthly stipends	berkvetoutreach@gmail.com
Board of Health, Great Barrington	public health	Great Barrington	Town of GB	provide local public health	rubyrbchang@gmail.com

CBRSD Weekend Backpack Program	Restricted grocery gift cards for the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables to CBRSD students and their families	CBRSD students and families	Dalton	Increase food security, dignity, and choice for hungry families and students; connection to systems and resources	kamathews1@gmail.com
Christian Center	clothing and food services	folks in central Berkshire	Pittsfield	to provide food and clothing assistance to those in need	jsmargie@hotmail.com
City of North Adams	Local Government	Public Service	North Adams		mayormacksey@northadams-ma.gov
Claire Teague Senior Center	everything we can to help our senior citizens	55 years and up	Town of Great Barrington		jpeters@townofgb.org
Cohen & White Associates LLC	Assistance with housing needs	All in Berkshire County, Columbia County & CT	Lenox	To assist all in the housing needs	maryjane@cohenwhiteassoc.com
Committee for Public Counsel Services	We are public defenders - serving the indigent populations in Berkshire County who have been charged with crimes by the state.	Indigent population in entire Berkshire County	Pittsfield	public defenders	kgrubbs@publiccounsel.net lvanderpot@publiccounsel.net
Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire	Building housing that is affordable and supporting the local economic development	Low- and moderate-income population located in Berkshire County	Great Barrington, MA	The mission of the Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, is to create housing and economic opportunity for low- and moderate-income households in the southern Berkshires.	kamaart93@gmail.com cara@cdcsb.org carol@cdcsb.org
Community Health Programs	Care Coordination, Health care, social services	Everyone in the community	South/Central and Northern Berkshire County	WIC and family services	rmarkham@chpberkshires.org mfeuer@chpberkshires.org
Construct	Housing and access to needed resources	Southern Berkshire County	Great Barrington	Stable permanent housing	kcoulehan@constructberkshire.org jralph@constructberkshire.org
Egremont Housing Committee	it's Egremont's town housing committee	Egremont	Egremont	Promoting workforce and affordable housing	dmishkin@outlook.com judithfgoodman@gmail.com
Elder Services of Berkshire County	aiding elderly in areas of need	Elderly	Pittsfield		kroof@esbci.org pcunningham@esbci.org

Elizabeth Freeman Center (EFC)	Domestic and sexual violence survivor services	The whole county. Specialized programs for LGBTQ people, immigrants, people with Disabilities	Offices in Great Barrington, Pittsfield, North Adams	Supporting survivors	soed@elizabethfreemancenter.org erinh@elizabethfreemancenter.org
First and South Church (South Community Food Pantry)	Food, occasional financial or material help	Anyone who asks.	110 South Street Pittsfield	The church's is "Embraced by Christ's love and in community with one another, we seek to practice loving-kindness, do justice, care for all creation, and walk humbly with God." The pantry's is: "To provide for our neighbors in the spirit of generosity, respect, kindness, and acceptance so that no one in our community goes to bed hungry."	revdenton@gmail.com
Food Bank of Western Massachusetts	Food distribution, nutrition education, SNAP enrollment	People facing food insecurity	Currently in Hatfield but moving to Chicopee	To feed our neighbors in need and lead the community to end hunger	Christinam@foodbankwma.org naomid@foodbankwma.org
Goodwill of the Berkshires and Southern Vermont	Transportation of food from Foodbank to food pantries in North County	Berkshire County and Southern Vermont	Berkshire County		mkamangar@goodwill-berkshires.org
Grace Church	The priest at Grace Church provides pastoral care. We also have community partners in ministry, such as The Lee Food Pantry, Gideon's Garden - with Taft Farms, Construct, Inc., to name a few. Please visit our website GraceBerkshires.org to learn more.	Everyone	Great Barrington, MA. We have an office at 67 State Rd. Great Barrington. We worship every Sunday at Crissey Farm, 426 Stockbridge Rd.	We are always looking for the new thing that God is doing among us and in our communities. We are like a stripped down version of church that reminds us of the essentials we are to carry with us in this world: that we are loved unconditionally by our God and that our one, true mandate is to go forth and love one another. Like the limbs of the Tree of Life that became our logo, we seek to spread the Good News of the Gospel through our commitment to service and love of God.	office@graceberkshires.org ebl.crane@gmail.com
Great Barrington Affordable Housing Trust Fund	Affordable Housing Support including emergency rental grants, down payment assistance, grants to non-profits to create affordable housing, and development of affordable housing.	Low and moderate income Great Barrington residents	Great Barrington (town committee)	The purpose of the Trust is to provide for the creation and preservation of affordable housing in Great Barrington, for the benefit of low and moderate income households.	fred3clark@yahoo.com billcooke.gb@gmail.com

Greenagers	Employment, Employee housing, youth development, community development.	Youth 14-24 mainly	South Egremont	Greenagers works to inspire teens and young adults to develop deep connections to land, work, and community. We prepare youth for success in work and life by offering paid jobs and education in the areas of conservation, sustainable farming, and related trades.	sarah@greenagers.org director@greenagers.org tsimon@napsk12.org director@greenagers.org
Greylock Federal Credit Union	Financial Services and community partner	Moderate to Low income	All over Berkshire county	Financial inclusion	Tshumsky@greylock.org rmabee@greylock.org cshorgy@greylock.org
Hilltown Community Development Corporation	Housing, transportation, food access	Rural communities, seniors, low to moderate income families and people	Chesterfield MA		huntc@hilltowncdc.org joang@hilltownvdv.org cara@cdcsb.org
Lee Bank Foundation	Grants to community organizations	Low to moderate income residents of Berkshire County	Lee, MA	Reduction of the opportunity and wealth gap in our region.	abrigham@leebank.com
Lee Planning Board					Peterbluhm@icloud.com
Louison House	Food Pantry - food and other essentials (e.g., laundry detergent), BIO - works for systemic change in Berkshire County; currently working on Housing and Transportation	Food Pantry - those who are struggling with food insecurity primarily in Pittsfield, BIO - all of Berkshire County	Both are based in Pittsfield	Food Pantry - I am a volunteer who delivers food on Tuesdays, I am on the Board and the grant committee, BIO - I am on the Board, grant writing team and a member of the Housing Campaign Team	Kkeeser@louisonhouse.org njoline@louisonhouse.org
MCLA AND BCC	Higher education	All demographics, high and low income, bipoc, immigrants	North Adams and Pittsfield MA	Provide students with basic needs support so they can excel in their academics while completing their degrees at either MCLA or BCC	casey.young@mcla.edu
Multicultural BRIDGE	food sovereignty, housing, legal services, victim of crime services, racial justice, language services	BIPOC communities and victims of crimes	Lee, MA		shamia@multiculturalbridge.org wes@multiculturalbridge.org florence@multiculturalbridge.org
NB School Housing Partnership, North Adams Public Schools	Supporting schools and community partners in removing barriers to ensure highly mobile students access schools and remain engage in their schools through graduation	PK-12 students by providing comprehensive, whole family	North Berkshire	Educational attainment	sparsons@napsk12.org
New England Rural Health Association	Technical assistance and funding	Rural communities	Throughout New England		ebaskin@newenglandrha.org

Nonprofit Center of the Berkshires	Support services for all Berkshire nonprofits (Trainings, networking, referrals etc.)	1200 Berkshire nonprofits	Sandisfield MA	to help nonprofits connect, learn & grow	liana@npcberkshires.org
North Adams Public Schools	PK-12 Education	PK-12 students and their families	North Adams	The mission of the North Adams Public Schools is to help every child learn every day in every classroom and empower all students to recognize and optimize their full potential.	eschiavoni@napsk12.org tsimon@napsk12.org bmalkas@napsk12.org
Northern Berkshire Community Coalition	Family Support & Neighborhood Development, Health & Wellness, Youth Development, Leadership Development, Community Convening & Connecting, and Youth Substance Use Prevention	Any person who lives within the 10 towns of the northern Berkshire region and beyond.	North Adams	Empowering the Northern Berkshire region to enhance the quality of life through our efforts at connecting, convening, and supporting all facets of the community	abesaw@nbccolalition.org
Planning Board Egremont MA	zoning bylaws for Egremont	residents of Egremont MA	Egremont MA	regulatory environment that spurs affordable and workforce housing	mary.mcgurn@gmail.com
Railroad St Youth Project	Youth empowerment, advocacy & resource sharing. Youth engagement in community through various programs, fostering peer to peer connection & provide support.	14-25 youth	Great Barrington	Youth advocacy & mentoring through the lens of substance misuse recovery & prevention	giulia@cdcsb.org lo@rsyp.org
Roots Rising	Youth employment, food access, farmer support through labor and sales	Pittsfield youth (Youth Crews), All (farmers market)	Pittsfield	To empower youth and build community through food and farming.	jess@rootsrising.org
Rural Recovery	Peer Substance Use Recovery Support	Anyone affected by substance use	Great Barrington	The mission of Rural Recovery Resources and the South County Recovery Center is to lower the morbidity and mortality associated with substance use and to foster a culture of compassion and empathy in our peer-driven community. We are committed to engage, assist, refer, and empower people who are affected in any way by addiction; to improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential, in a judgment-free atmosphere.	gary@rural-recovery.org
Social Systems Re-Imagined LLC	Research and Development of social service programs				jpschnauber@yahoo.com
Southern Berkshire Public Health Collaborative	Public health nursing services	Our coverage area is 12 towns in south county	Town of Lee		jill@tritownhealth.org jayne@tritownhealth.org

Southern Berkshire Rural Health Network	Convening and planning	Residents of South Berkshire County	Fairview Hospital, Great Barrington, MA	To build a healthier community	dphillips5@bhs1.org Kvogelz@bhs1.org Pgazillo@bhs1.org jschwaetz3@bhs1.org
Stanton Home	Affordable housing	Great Barrington	Great Barrington	Affordable housing options	peter@stantonhome.org
The People's Pantry	food	anyone	Great Barrington	Provide nutritional food locally sourced whenever possible in a respectful way to all	hutchinson1.anne@gmail.com patriciapatrianakos@gmail.com info.thepeoplespantrygb@gmail.com
Town of Great Barrington	Public Health Services, Housing Inspections	All of Great Barrington	Southern Berkshire County	To provide quality public health services accessible to all.	rjurczyk@townofgb.org leighdavis99@gmail.com bksnelson28@gmail.com
Tritown Health	Community support and outreach	Varied	Lee MA	Co-responder, community support	ivy@tritownhealth.org
UMass Amherst	Food	All	Great Barro	To provide food for people facing food insecurity	haneet.sahasden@gmail.com
Volunteers in Medicine	360 healthcare	Uninsured. Mostly immigrant	Berkshires		istehnhauer@vimberkshires.org
Western Mass Labor Action					Conroysinna@gmail.com
	Additional Partners				
					merylperrotta@gmail.com
					fixakedonhouses@gnlaf.com
					morrisac2001@yahoo.com
					gabrielabw@yahoo.com
					clausenaj@gmail.com
					fixatedonhouses@gmail.com
	Berkshire Legislative Delegation				
	Representative Smitty Pignatelli				Smitty.Pignatelli@mahouse.gov
	Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier				Tricia.Farley-Bouvier@mahouse.gov
	Representative John Barrett				john.barrett@mahouse.gov
	Senator Paul Mark				Paul.Mark@masenate.gov

Attachment-B, Survey Data Matrix for Berkshire Housing and Food Summit, September 2023

Problem	Solutions	
	Housing Security	Food Security
Economic Misalignment / Wage to Expense Gap: Wages for low and moderate income workers do not meet cost of basic needs	Workforce development strategies to increase wages and opportunities for advancement	
	Housing subsidies that make rent more affordable for low and moderate income individuals and families	Cost assistance and subsidies that allow families and individuals to buy more and/or buy for less
Use of Existing Assets & Resources: Failure to take advantage of housing stock and programming already in place	Landlord Engagement that provides support, training, and other resources to landlords so that they are more likely to rent to and retain low and moderate income tenants, particularly those with section 8 or other mobile subsidies	Support the viability of markets or food resources already in place that serve vulnerable residents and/or vulnerable neighborhoods
	Maintain and renovate existing properties that are affordable, but either underutilized or in disrepair	
Insufficient Assets & Resources: Availability of affordable housing and shelter are insufficient to meet needs		Expand number and capacity of food pantries
	Increase shelter options (number of and capacity of shelter options)	Expand number and capacity of meal sites
		Expand number and capacity of local food producers (farms, restaurants, etc.) catering to low/mod individuals and families.
		Establish markets in food-scarce areas
Inadequate Upstream Focus: Inadequate emphasis on resources and interventions that prevent crises	Homelessness prevention and tenant advocacy strategies that keep vulnerable individuals and families where they are already housed.	Budgeting and consumer counseling services
	Prevention: Investment in services that focus on needs that often lead to homelessness (mental health needs, addiction, etc.)	
Need to Acknowledge Complexity and Interconnectivity: Housing and food security needs are often inextricably linked to other needs	Service Integration: Develop and fund comprehensive wrap around services that embrace interconnectivity of needs, thereby promoting stability / preventing vulnerability and increasing access efficiency for those who need them	
	Advance and implement supportive housing models	Provide onsite services and education at food distribution and meal sites (e.g. nutritional counseling, information and referrals, consumer education, benefit enrollment)
Policy and Systems Shortcomings: Current policies and regulations systems inadvertently trap people in difficult situation or fail to provide adequate options	Cliff effect: Short sighted eligibility regulations often result in individuals and families losing needed supports and services (e.g. child care and transporation assistance) as they gain income. This in turn, can lead to stability backsliding and disincentives to career advancement.	
	Increase affordability options through zoning, land use and regulatory changes (e.g. small houses, accessory apartments, creative land use)	
Resource Innovation: Current systems for service access are dated, limited, or lack adequate coordination	Explore and implement use of no-wrong-door, one-stop-shopping, and comprehensive case-management approaches to service delivery	
	Advance coordinated needs assessment, planning, and reform within food systems (e.g. coordinated systems for housing development, rehabilitation, outreach, support services)	Advance coordinated needs assessment, planning and reform within food systems (e.g., coordinated systems for food production, distribution, preparation, and procurement of food for vulnerable and low income populations)
Population Need Differentiation: Needs of all are not the same. Failing to acknowledge this and plan accordingly can exacerbate challenges.	Increase options and capacity for delivery of differentiated resources and services for populations that need them	
	Differentiated needs assessment and service eligibility: Homelessness and housing insecurity in youth, families, individuals and elders present differently, and therefore must be assessed and addressed differently.	
Access Challenges: Resources may be available to those who need them, but remain unused, because they cannot be accessed	Address inadequacies of public transportation options, particularly as they relate to transport to work, education, health services, food shopping, and procurement of other basic needs	
	Mobile outreach and support programs	
	Creative ride-sharing and vehicle maintenance programs	
	Multilingual and culturally competent services	
	Satellite programming in smaller communities from existing organizations	
	Housing and shelter options in one's own community	Neighborhood based food options through community markets, meal sites, and pantries meal sites, and pantries



House of Representatives
State Representative Smitty Pignatelli
3rd Berkshire District
State House, Room 166 Boston 02133-1053

2023

Dear Friend,

The following are the thoughts, ideas, and concerns expressed by community members, professionals, and public officials in attendance at the Berkshire Housing and Food Insecurity Summit. This in-person community forum was held on Friday September 22nd at the Town Hall Auditorium in Lenox, MA, with 94 individuals in attendance.

The forum structure, and the charge to participants, was to focus discussion upon on how we can effectively, creatively, and collaboratively address needs and fill service gaps, as opposed to simply continuing, or expanding, services already offered by Berkshire County organizations. The discussion, summarized below, focused on responses to four solution areas identified by participants in advance of the in-person forum, as well as an opportunity for comments related to housing and food insecurity in general.

I am confident that the information and perspectives collected throughout this process can be utilized to inform policy, catalyze increased collaboration, and shape future programing for residents of Berkshire County, and Massachusetts as a whole, who face housing and/or food insecurity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Smitty".

Smitty Pignatelli
State Representative
3RD Berkshire District
rep.smitty@mahouse.gov

Attachment-C
Public Comments from In-Person Housing and Food Insecurity Summit
9/22/2023

General Comments:

- There is an overwhelming consensus among summit participants that the largest force driving housing and food insecurity in Berkshire County is a combination of two factors:
 1. Wages for low- and moderate-income workers are insufficient to meet the costs of everyday expenses. Sharp increases in food, rents, and home prices since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly magnified this dynamic. Berkshire County's proximity to both New York City and Boston has attracted people looking to leave the cities, work remotely, and/or purchase second homes.
 2. Berkshire County has a severe lack of housing units that are affordable.

Not only are these challenges foundational to housing and food insecurity in the region, but they were also recognized overwhelmingly as the most difficult problems to tackle. As such we must maintain a vigilant focus on these issues, bring creative solutions forward, and commit adequate funding.

- While there is a climate of collaboration in the region, many efforts are disconnected from others and/or are siloed by geography, demography, and/or funding stream.
- The rural and spread-out nature of the county makes access to services difficult.
- Rural communities and small cities are often forced to compete against large urban communities to secure state funding. We need to develop application processes and funding pools in which communities compete against like-sized communities.
- As a county, we cannot grow our economy if we can't overcome basic needs challenges. Therefore, all food security and housing security interventions have economic development benefits and should be valued as such.
- Berkshire county is rapidly diversifying and as such there is a growing need for multilingual services, cultural competence within community organizations, and culturally appropriate food options through pantries and meal sites.
- Some new immigrants do not have documentation, and therefore are not eligible for traditional types of housing assistance.
- Many smaller communities lack municipal staff to apply for funding and advance creative solutions. Expansion and better utilization of shared services would greatly help.
- Dispersed development of new affordable units is very much preferable for the county. This accomplishes three important outcomes:
 1. Units become available across multiple communities, ensuring that residents are more likely to remain in their home communities.

2. A broad cross-section of the county's geography is served.
 3. No single community bears the burden of a major development project.
- The most recent Massachusetts Subsidized Housing Inventory shows that eighteen of thirty-two towns in Berkshire County have zero units of housing that meets their definition of affordable.
 - There is a need for shared services and regionalization in Berkshire County. With the dissolution of county government in Massachusetts in the 1990s, there are no longer entities for shared purchasing, grant writing, staffing, and the like. This leads towns to work competitively instead of collaboratively. Berkshire County should borrow from models like the Cape Cod Commission (CCC) that are filling this void and expand upon the success of organizations like Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, who help facilitate cross-town cooperation.
 - Eligibility rules for state and federal benefits sometimes create disincentives for low-income wage-earners to advance in their jobs, increase their pay, and gain long-term self-sufficiency. With this so-called "cliff effect," vulnerable individuals sometimes find jobs that work for them because they receive necessary childcare, housing, and transportation assistance. However, as they begin to earn more, they lose these benefits, and the security these benefits have brought them. We need to develop models by which services taper off gradually as opposed to ending abruptly, as well as develop models by which increased funds from a raise or promotion could get banked as savings for a home, college, etc., and not count immediately toward eligibility determination, not unlike tax free savings for retirement or higher education.

Solution Area Discussions:

Solution Area 1 - Maintain and Renovate Existing Properties:

- Receivership programs like the Affordable Housing Program, operated out of the Attorney General's Office, are a promising practice. Under these programs abandoned properties can be identified and turned over/sold to community organizations that will sell them affordably to those in need. The program works but is a very slow and cumbersome process. Could aspects of this process be better streamlined?
- The Local Initiative Program (LIP) is a good state initiative for developers seeking to build single or multi-family homes, condos, or apartments where a certain percentage of the units are proposed to be affordable work with town officials to obtain approval. and allows for efforts like the one above; Both for profit and non-profit developers may use the LIP program in concert with a city or town to jointly submit the application to The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC). Many small towns do not have the time or person-power to do so.
- High real estate prices, coupled with high interest rates, make it difficult for CDCs and other developers to purchase, improve, and re-sell existing properties affordably.

- Community Development Corporations (CDCs) municipalities, and housing trusts (where they exist) can be and are especially effective when working in close partnership.
- Receivership programs rely on building inspectors or health inspectors to identify properties. In many cases the inspectors are shared by multiple towns. We should develop coordinated and centralized ways to engage and educate these inspectors.
- Continue to provide on-ramps into the trades so that local young people can become the building inspectors, contractors, and other needed partners in redevelopment efforts.
- Many towns have adopted housing trusts to advance affordability. 1) Increase coordination and collaboration between these towns and their housing trusts. 2) Develop a dedicated income stream through the state, so that these efforts do not depend so much on municipal investment.
- Public-Private partnerships are a good way to advance this work. Let's build more impact investment models through which private individuals and companies can invest funds through community foundations, CDCs, or other institutions. These institutions, in turn, make loans that advance affordability or fuel re-development efforts, while providing modest returns for investors.
- Local lenders are initiating creative loan programs that advance affordability and make borrowing possible for non-traditional applicants. We can learn from them and advance similar efforts.
- We should work with Housing Authorities to maintain and upgrade current public housing. In particular, we should accelerate accessibility upgrades.
- We need to assist people with being able to care for their homes. We should be teaching these skills in schools.
- Let's institute transfer of tax programs to create funding for housing redevelopment.
- The 30% rule and change of use laws often functions as a disincentive to landlords in making repairs and improvements. If landlords make improvements or change use of properties, it triggers additional requirements that either they cannot afford, or that drive the cost of renovations such that they can no longer be rented or sold affordably. This needs to be reformed and/or we need to institute incentives for small landlords to offset some of these costs.

Solution Area 2 - *Offer education and services on-site at existing food program sites:*

Provide services such as nutrition education, budget counseling, cooking instruction, benefit enrollment, and information and referral services on-site at food pantries and meal sites where people are already going for assistance and where trusting relationships have been developed.

- The Food Bank of Western MA is focusing on nutrition education and working to bring this to various food sites along with SNAP enrollment. Due to staff limitations, they seek

partnerships with colleges, universities, or others with the capacity to offer nutrition education.

- United Way believes this comprehensive on-site approach is effective and is working with pantries and meal sites it funds to move in this direction. This works because it brings services to already trusted sources.
- Many food pantries and meal sites are located within very small buildings, which makes offering additional on-site resources challenging. Addressing this building-space bottleneck can make it more feasible to offer additional services and programming on-site.
- Mobile food pantries, like the one just developed in Beckett, are an effective and affordable food security strategy. They allow for use of surplus products from local farms, bring food to where people need it, address food deserts, allow for tiered pricing, and provide efficient/affordable distribution. This model also helps mitigate public transportation limitations that are common across Berkshire County. Let's develop more of these.
- Look to federal sources of funds for these and other efforts, not just state and local government.
- Expand efforts such as Berkshire Funding Focus that serve as a clearing house for funding research and grant writing. These efforts can serve small towns and small organizations to access state and federal funds.
- Community navigators, whether for health, food, housing, or other issues, are a great way to engage vulnerable community members through peers who are from the community and of the community. We need to invest in these approaches and value navigators at a high level.
- South Community Food Pantry is experimenting with having people with resource knowledge (doctors, mental health workers, navigators, etc.) to serve food. Doing so allows them to take advantage of the "bartender effect" in which people open up about their needs and are receptive to advice and resources.
- Even though they are not necessarily involved in food security services, organizations like Goodwill have large vehicles, drivers, and knowledge of logistics. This positions them to coordinate transportation for smaller food pantries that don't have these same capacities. Let's develop more of these partnerships.
- Expand partnerships with local farms. This allows for food that is affordable, healthy, nutritious, and local, while also supporting Berkshire County agriculture.

Solution Area 3 - Expand tenant advocacy and other support services so that vulnerable people can remain in their current homes:

- The Tenancy Preservation Program works in partnership with the housing court to provide short-term intensive case management. It particularly focuses on those impacted by disability or substance use.

- The Housing Consumer Education Center (HCEC) Program offers legal and housing counseling services to over six hundred Berkshire households per year. Not only does it engage tenants, but also landlords; particularly small “mom and pop” landlords.
- Core Connected and Housing Mediation Program provides mediation to over 200 households per year to prevent evictions.
- The three above listed programs are achieving a housing preservation rate of 65%-80%. Let’s continue to build upon and expand these models.
- Housing court tends to be imbalanced in that landlords typically have lawyers to represent them whereas tenants do not. Not surprisingly, tenants who lack representation are far more likely to be evicted than those with representation. The Pulitzer Prize winning book *Evicted* has shown that in Massachusetts, enacting a right to counsel law for tenants would be far less costly than the current financial impact to communities from evictions and subsequent community challenges. Massachusetts should have a right to counsel law for tenants.
- Landlords should be educated that not renting to tenants with Section 8 vouchers is housing discrimination, which is illegal and can result in a lawsuit. Let’s help landlords understand their obligations.
- Navigators can be very helpful to people facing evictions, especially when paired with relatively small sources of funding for arrearages.
- By helping people to weather small crises and remain in their homes, we prevent escalation into major crises.
- Properties being condemned or flagged with health issues can force people onto the streets. We need to partner with health and building inspectors so that we can be proactive and prevent such homelessness.

Solution Area 4 – Develop more housing units that are affordable:

- Development of housing complexes can require six or more sources of funding and often take up to five years. A challenge associated with this is that each funding source has its own specific rules and requirements.
- Some projects, such as the Eagle Mill project in Lee, are taking ten years or more. We need state agencies to get money out the door much more quickly.
- Clean water problems need to be addressed prior to development.
- Title V septic laws and local zoning are inadvertently stifling development of housing that is affordable. The cost of septic upgrades can be insurmountable for many low-income homeowners.
- Options such as accessory apartments/in-law apartments, tiny houses and co-housing are not always allowed. Additionally, even these types of construction can be out of reach because of factors such as required septic upgrades.

- Boards of health do not have access to funds to help tenants who have created health issues, such as those struggling with hoarding. Health inspectors need systematic access to funds.
- There are not currently enough sources of funding for infrastructure. This said, Berkshire Funding Focus is meeting with managers of the State Revolving Loan Fund to advocate for availability of funds to municipalities and planning commissions to address septic issues and other infrastructure challenges. The fund will have significantly more dollars available in years to come, as well as more options for loan forgiveness.
- Several towns have first-time home buyer programs. These are an affordable and effective practice and should be replicated.
- Promoting home ownership helps to break inner-generational poverty cycles and allows for building equity.
- There is a lack of housing for people with substance use/abuse issues. We need housing-first approaches. Abstinence-first approaches do not work.
- It is not unusual to have waiting lists of five hundred or more people for housing subsidies, meanwhile units are not occupied. We need to speed things up.
- We should be experimenting with localizing waiting lists, as opposed to state-wide lists.
- The county has an aging population. Many are in large homes with large plots of land that they don't need and can't maintain. They are looking to downsize but can't find affordable options. If we can help them, it will free up more housing for families and others.
- Berkshire County is land-rich, but cash-poor. Let's find ways to capitalize on land ownership and availability.
- Groups like the Berkshire Natural Resource Council own a lot of land and have expressed their openness to working closer with communities to address the shortage of affordable homes.
- Can we establish large pieces of land held in trust, where others can build their homes? By only owning the structure, their cost would be reduced. This could also allow for tiny with shared infrastructure (septic in particular).
- We need funding that CDC's and other nonprofit developers can access to buy down interest rates. This makes development of housing projects feasible and affordable for these developers.
- Low-income housing tax credits/community development tax credits should be reconfigured to allow for scattered site projects.

In conclusion, we all must keep working together to confront housing and food insecurity in our region. I hope this report has been helpful to you. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me or members of my team with questions.

I look forward to continuing our work together to address and overcome these challenges.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Smitty", with a stylized, cursive script.

Smitty Pignatelli
State Representative
3RD Berkshire District
rep.smitty@mahouse.gov