



How Lynn, MA Expanded a Farmers Market to Support Vulnerable Residents

Residents and community leaders in Lynn, MA worked together to address food insecurity by bolstering the Central Square Farmers Market and associated services to improve the health of pregnant women and young children.

The City of Lynn, 10 miles north of Boston, is known for its contemporary public art, international population, historic homes, and public parks and open spaces. Relatively old housing stock, however, makes Lynn prone to lead paint hazards.

About 88% of the city's housing stock was built before lead paint was banned under federal law.

Lynn's history of lead paint use inadvertently threatened food security for residents—especially children in lead-contaminated homes—which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public health and city leaders were concerned that joblessness—in part due to the pandemic—caused an increase in home gardening by low-income parents desperate for fresh low-cost produce. In many circumstances, the soil was likely lead-contaminated, meaning that fresh produce grown in contaminated soils could cause inadvertent exposure to lead, causing harm to children's brain development.

Lynn's mayor, Thomas McGee, designated a Food Security Task Force to identify gaps to better address food insecurity during the pandemic. With funding from [Healthy Babies Bright Futures](#) and the [Mayors Innovation Project](#), the Food Security Task Force bolstered its Central Square Farmers Market with a focus on improving the health of pregnant women and young children.

BRIGHT CITY: LYNN, MA

CONCERNS:

- Limited fresh and healthy food
- Lead contamination in home gardens

PROJECT OUTPUT:

- Lynn's first free online produce-ordering system
- Expanded hours of operation at the farmers market
- "Farmstand to doorstep" delivery system implemented
- Community-centered outreach to promote lead-safe gardening

KIDS IMPACTED:

- More than 6,000 kids under 5 years old live in Lynn



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A Central American mother with her young children purchasing corn leaves (unavailable at most markets) to make traditional tamales.

Central Square Farmers Market Expanded Reach

Lynn's Farmers Market is near low-income neighborhoods—including the Highlands, a neighborhood heavily affected by lead contamination. Seventy percent of the markets' shoppers use their SNAP/HIP benefits and qualify for WIC.

Much of the food sold at this market is sourced from [The Food Project's](#) expansive farming network, including produce grown and harvested by youth, staff, and volunteers from Lynn urban farms located only blocks away. As part of this project, produce costs were subsidized for families that include women with children under 10 and include community-requested veggies such as "Tongue of Fire" shell beans (often used in Cape Verdean cuisine), assorted hot peppers, callaloo (often used in Caribbean dishes), and East Asian cooking greens, among other produce.

The market's hours of operation increased too, and a "farmstand to doorstep" delivery system was implemented.

Launching the City's First Online Food Ordering System

To combat increased food insecurity from the pandemic, the New American Center, an organization dedicated to acclimating recent immigrants to US customs, and the New Lynn Coalition, comprised of community, faith, and labor organizations, agreed to a Grocery Delivery Program to deliver food to vulnerable families in the community at least once per week.

Groceries were delivered to any Lynn resident needing supplies—regardless of immigration status. **Conservatively, 2,100 lbs of fresh, mostly organic, local produce was delivered weekly through fall 2021.** Residents selected desired produce online or by phone, and were also able to select needed dry goods and/or hot meals.

The USDA estimates that nearly **13 million children** in the United States live in food-insecure households as of 2016.

"Equitable access to healthy food is critical to our City's overall health. This funding helped us provide resources to some of the most vulnerable families in our community. Lynn's resilience depends on healthy youth growing up in healthy environments free from toxic chemicals. This project most definitely grew and nurtured our resilience."

Mayor Thomas M. McGee,
Lynn, Massachusetts





The city used its “Lynn-genuity” to develop Lynn’s first tailored, online food ordering system. A local web developer built the online ordering system in partnership with [Norris Guscott](#), Director of Lynn’s Food & Fitness Alliance.

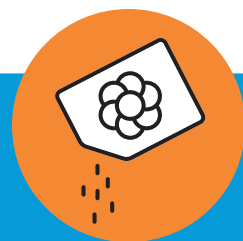
All produce that was distributed via the online food ordering system came from the Food Project’s farming network, including 1.5 acres of bountiful farmland in Lynn and ~70 more acres in the north shore area. Volunteers of all ages from Lynn make the deliveries using bikes, personal vehicles, or publicly owned vehicles that belong to Food Security Task Force member organizations.

Helping Grow Healthier Gardens at Home

Project partners believe that everyone who wants to grow their own food should have access to adequate, toxin-free growing space. Norris Guscott developed a template with FAQs about why heavy metals like lead, cadmium, and arsenic can be found in soil and what residents can do. Community organizations are encouraged to customize this information and share locally.

What’s Next?

Partnerships formed during this initial process created a culture of trust within Lynn’s Food Security Task Force. This shared vision and trust paved the road for Task Force members to continue to work collaboratively. Mr. Guscott and Task Force members plan to expand the online ordering system and food delivery capabilities, advocate for policies and programming at the state level, and continue to create and pilot new initiatives designed to reach the most vulnerable, food-insecure residents of Lynn.



Three Seeds to Grow Equitable Food Access

1 Create a municipal position to direct equitable food access for all residents.

Following the lead of cities like Boston and Cambridge, Mayor McGee created a position among his staff to drive progress related to equitable food access. This position proved instrumental in creating collaboration and momentum among diverse stakeholders.

2 Create a Food Policy Working Group with partners from the city, local NGOs, and other community partners to centralize the ongoing work throughout your city and identify existing gaps to better address food insecurity.

Success within Lynn’s working group was driven by collectively articulating a “big picture vision” and meeting each organization “where it was at.” Time and care were taken to build the links between each organization’s needs and the route to the working group’s goal. All work was backed by a resident-lead steering committee called “Lynn Grows.” Community support is absolutely essential for an outcome with impact.

3 “Always be the wind behind the backs of organizations and residents.”

Convene regular meetings using a consensus strategy to meet your goal.

“Lynn residents planted the seeds of our Food Security Program last year. Today, these seeds have blossomed into an online food ordering system, increased engagement with families living in lead-contaminated areas, expanded farmers markets, and more.”



Norris Guscott, Director of Lynn’s Food & Fitness Alliance



Lynn was the first municipality in MA to implement COVID-distancing requirements at farmers markets (the Massachusetts Dept. of Agriculture used Lynn's requirements as a template to implement guidelines statewide). Shown here are shoppers at Lynn's farmers market following COVID guidelines (70% of customers are SNAP/WIC recipients).

What Have Other Cities Done to Address Low Food Access?

Many, if not all, US cities have low food access areas where residents can't access healthy and affordable foods. [Bright Cities](#) Champaign, IL; Columbia, SC; Salem, MA; and Salt Lake City, UT, each have launched locally tailored solutions in neighborhoods with inequitable food access.

Many other US cities have drafted resolutions to address food access and inequities. Examples can be found in [Anderson, Indiana](#); [Austin, Texas](#); [Baltimore, Maryland](#); [Madison, Wisconsin](#); and [Seattle, Washington](#).

Interested in learning more about this project?

Contact Norris Guscott, Chair of Lynn's Food Security Task Force and Director of Lynn's Food and Fitness Alliance, at nguscott@lynnma.gov.



The Bright Cities program provides up to \$35,000 in grant funding for US cities and community based partner organizations to reduce exposures — in pregnant women and children under 2 years — to the nine neurotoxins with the strongest associations to developmental delay.¹ These neurotoxins are arsenic, flame retardants, lead, mercury, combustion byproducts called PAHs, banned industrial chemicals PCBs, organophosphate pesticides, a rocket fuel component and fertilizer contaminant called perchlorate, and plastic additives called phthalates.

Curious about funding and technical support to reduce neurotoxic exposures in your city? Contact **Kyra Naumoff Shields**, Bright Cities Program Director, at knaumoff@hbbf.org



The Mayors Innovation Project is a national learning network for mayors committed to shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. Around the country, mayors are taking the lead on pressing issues— climate change, racial equity, economic revitalization, housing, and more. The Mayors Innovation Project supports mayors by providing cutting-edge thinking and concrete examples that mayors can implement.

Looking for peer networking and best practices for city leaders focused on equity, sustainability, and democracy? Contact **Katya Spear**, Mayors Innovation Project Managing Director, knspear@mayorsinnovation.org.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bennett D, Bellinger DC, Birnbaum LS, et al. Project TENDR: Targeting Environmental Neuro-Developmental Risks The TENDR Consensus Statement. *Environ Health Perspect.* 2016; 124(7):A118-A122.