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Food For Free launches Just Eats Grocery Box program to address the urgent need for food in greater Boston

Two local non-profits team up to fill the gap left by the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program by offering local food pantries fresh produce boxes.

Cambridge, MA (December 16th, 2020) - Food For Free, the Cambridge-based, non-profit organization dedicated to providing every member of the Greater Boston community with reliable access to fresh and nutritious food, announced today a new food box program that will provide boxes of fresh vegetables for low-income households in various greater Boston communities. In partnership with Boston Area Gleaners, Food For Free will offer the “Just Eats Grocery Box” program to food pantries and community organizations in Cambridge, Chelsea, East Boston, Somerville, and other local communities for grab-and-go food distribution. The food box program will replace food boxes previously sourced from the USDA’s Farmers to Families food box program which now has very limited availability in Massachusetts.

“For the past few months, the USDA Farmers to Families program was a tremendous resource for local food pantries and community groups and its loss is devastating. When the USDA did not select a distributor in Massachusetts for the program, we knew that we had to find a solution quickly. With the Greater Boston Food Bank under heavy demand and sharply rising rates of food insecurity in the state, the pandemic is stretching the emergency food system to a breaking point,” said Sasha Purpura, Food For Free’s Executive Director.

“We’re looking at a 43% decrease in the amount of food distributed in Greater Boston from October to November without the USDA boxes” said Usha Thakrar, Executive Director of the Boston Area Gleaners. “The collaborative effort is critical in helping fill that gap.”

To fill the void left behind by the USDA program, Food For Free tapped into the innovation that has helped the non-profit steadily fill the gaps in the emergency food system since the start of

the pandemic and reached out to long-time partner Boston Area Gleaners to develop a collaborative approach. “We decided to fund our own version of the USDA’s program that is more aligned to the needs of our community,” said Purpura. “Food For Free’s Just Eats Grocery Boxes will be filled with fresh produce and wholesome pantry staples like rice and beans. Not only are these the foods that our community partners request but they also are more culturally appropriate to a wider group of people.”

Food For Free’s Just Eats Grocery Box program was created to be more in sync with what food pantries know their communities want and need. Fresh produce is highly sought after and often difficult to obtain through the emergency food system. The USDA initially offered similar boxes at the start of the program, during which time Boston Area Gleaners along with local partners distributed over 100,000 boxes. In the fall the USDA switched to a mix of dairy, meat, and some produce. This switch created a logistical problem for local food organizations who often did not have the refrigeration needed to store highly perishable items such as meat, milk, yogurt, and cheese. Produce is considerably less perishable and makes distribution much easier at every step.

Food For Free will fund the Just Eats Grocery Box program with Cambridge Housing Authority making a significant contribution for December. Food For Free has partnered with the Boston Area Gleaners who will source the food and perform all the box packing. The Boston Area Gleaners experience as distributors for the USDA program will help Food For Free grow the initial pilot of the program in December and January to a bigger program in February. The food box program will initially deliver approximately 500 boxes weekly to food pantries and community organizations in Cambridge, Chelsea, East Boston, Somerville, and other communities. Each box will include approximately twenty five pounds of produce and pantry staples such as rice, beans or lentils, potatoes, onions, carrots, apples, oranges, kale, and other produce options. The boxes are designed to be grab-and-go, the preferred method of distribution during the pandemic to keep workers, volunteers, and pantry participants as safe as possible. The program’s first distribution to food pantries and other community organizations began December 4th.

“While the pilot of the program will be limited to certain communities as we work out logistics, it is our hope that we will be able to expand it in February to other communities” said Purpura. “We are very grateful to our community partners, especially the Boston Area Gleaners, and our donors for their support as we continue to provide fresh, healthy food to our local communities.”

“We are seeing unprecedented need in our communities,” adds Thakrar. “We are optimistic that both organizations can scale this pilot to have broad impact in the coming weeks and months.”

“No one should ever go hungry anywhere in our country and certainly not in Cambridge. Food for Free has understood this basic human right and enabled our community to come together and step up where government falls short and fails,” said Representative Marjorie Decker at a ribbon cutting ceremony last week for Food For Free’s new food packing and distribution center in Cambridge. “Food Free continues to play a critical life saving role in helping families and individuals nourish their families.”

Food For Free has worked to bridge the gaps in the emergency food system for forty years. Since the onset of the pandemic, the non-profit has responded swiftly when food pantries and schools closed by creating a free grocery delivery service for those in need, working with local public schools to provide meals and groceries, and helping local housing developments create their own free food markets. Boston Area Gleaners has been serving the food insecure for over fifteen years and has leveraged its infrastructure to support local partners in emergency response during the pandemic

ABOUT FOOD FOR FREE

Food For Free is a Cambridge-based, non-profit organization dedicated to providing the Greater Boston community with reliable access to fresh and nutritious food. Food For Free accomplishes its mission through food rescue, partnerships with schools, colleges, and community food programs, and our own direct service programs. In the last year, Food For Free distributed 2.7 million pounds of nutritious food to more than 30,000 people throughout Greater Boston. To learn more, please visit us at <http://www.foodforfree.org/>, or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

ABOUT THE BOSTON AREA GLEANERS

Boston Area Gleaners is committed to supporting an equitable, just, and sustainable local food system. By working closely with farmers, volunteers, and hunger relief agencies, we work to power a supply chain from farms to those in need, reduce food waste, and promote long-term farm sustainability. To learn more, please visit us at <http://www.bostonareagleaners.com/> or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).