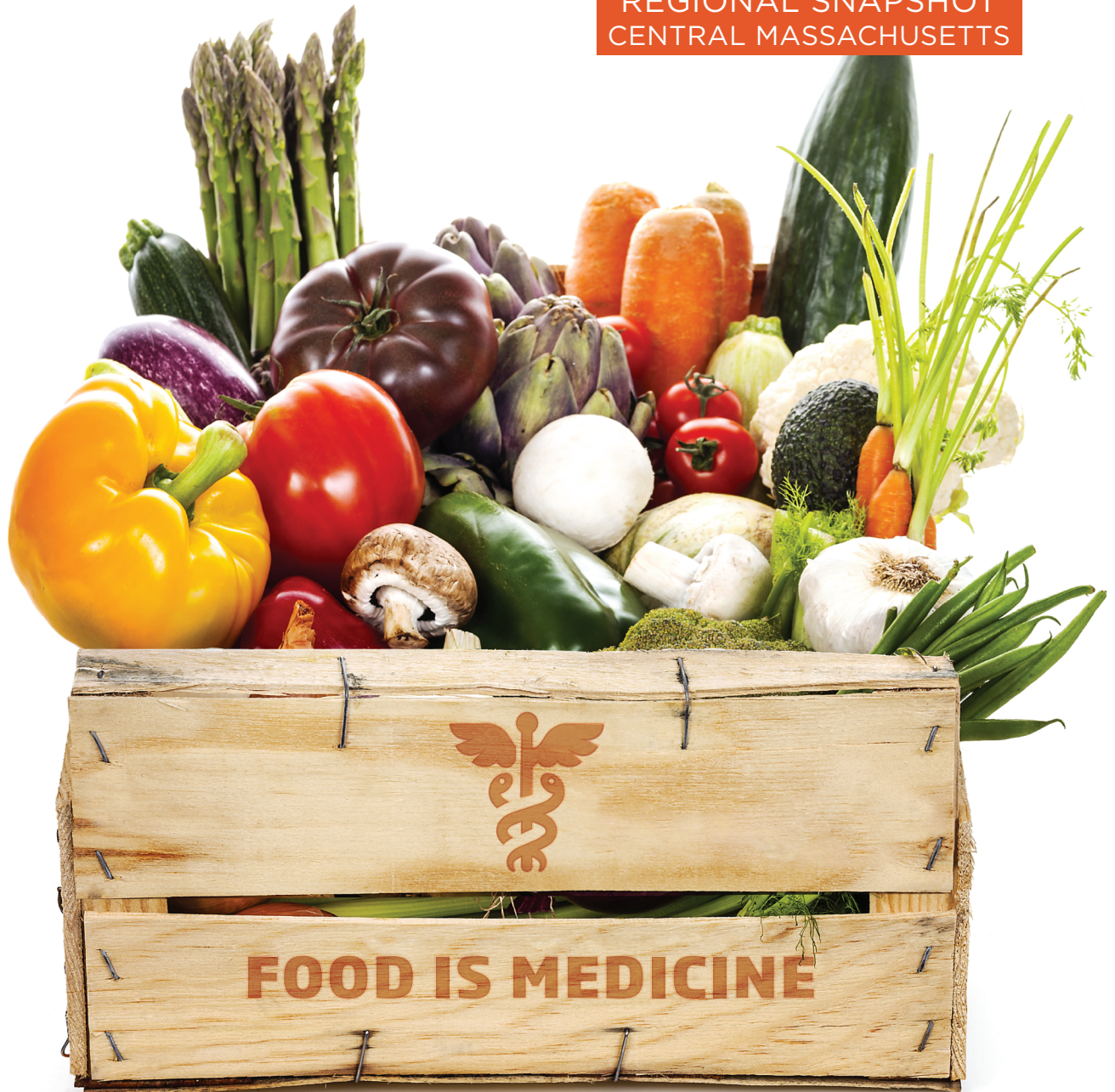


MASSACHUSETTS

# Food is Medicine

STATE PLAN

REGIONAL SNAPSHOT  
CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS



JUNE 2019

# Regional Snapshot

## CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS

### WORCESTER COUNTY

Massachusetts' Worcester County encompasses 60 cities and towns at the heart of the Commonwealth. Within the region, Worcester, Gardner, Webster, Leominster, and Fitchburg are high priority communities for Food is Medicine interventions given their high rates of food insecurity, low vehicle access, and high burden of chronic disease. Across several community health assessments conducted in the region, residents of Worcester County report economic hardship, lack of reliable public transportation, and substance use/abuse as consistent health-related concerns for their communities.<sup>1</sup> There is an abundant range of emergency food providers in this area, yet Food is Medicine programming remains too limited to adequately address the social challenges and health concerns faced by the community. The programs that do exist are generally not available year-round or are targeted only to specific populations, such as the elderly population, leaving the rest of the food insecure and chronically ill population with limited resources.

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### **Economic Hardship**

Many individuals and families in Central Massachusetts struggle financially. Poverty is consistently identified as the leading health-related issue by residents of Greater Worcester and of North Central Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> Worcester has the highest poverty rate across the county at 21.8%, followed by Fitchburg (17.9%), Gardner (16.7%), Webster (16.0%), and Leominster (13.4%). Over 40% of residents in several neighborhoods of Worcester live below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> Families with financial barriers are less likely to have healthy food access and face additional barriers to obtaining care.

#### **Concerns over High Substance Use**

Access to healthy food and proper nutrition is especially crucial for individuals struggling with substance abuse and those in recovery. Worcester has the second highest rate of opioid-related overdose deaths in the state. Between 2013 and 2017, the city experienced a 79% increase in opioid-related deaths.<sup>4</sup> The number of drug overdoses, fatal and nonfatal, continues to rise in Worcester amid a statewide decline, with a 202% increase in the five years since 2013.<sup>5</sup> Substance use has been a consistent and leading health concern for Worcester communities, especially when there is a regional lack of access to resources, treatments, and support for individuals struggling with this issue. Often, families must reallocate vital resources to help loved ones in recovery, putting further strain on the emergency food system. Food is Medicine interventions are especially important for this particular population because access to healthy food and proper nutrition is not only important for improving health outcomes but is also crucial for successful recovery.

#### **Lack of Reliable Transportation**

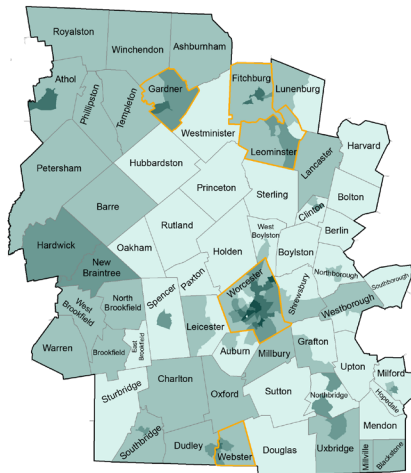
Community health assessments identify transportation as a major barrier to staying healthy and accessing care for residents of Greater Worcester and North Central Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> Lack of reliable and accessible public transportation, especially in rural communities of the region, puts residents at risk for worse health outcomes. Patient surveys conducted at the Family Health Center in Worcester reveal that the health center experiences a 15% rate of missed appointments and that 51% of respondents have some type of transportation issue.<sup>7</sup> Access to transportation was noted most often and as a more significant barrier for residents of rural communities, older adults, Latinos, and persons with serious mental illness.<sup>8</sup>

# FOOD IS MEDICINE INDICATORS OF NEED

## CENTRAL SNAPSHOT

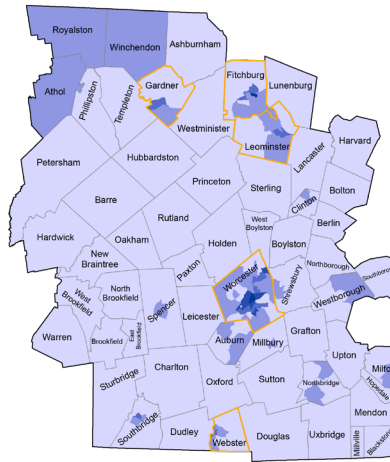
### MASSACHUSETTS 2018

#### FOOD INSECURITY



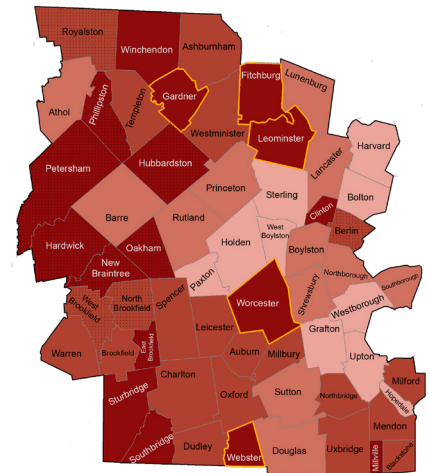
January 2019; Projected Coordinate System: NAD 1983 2011 StatePlane  
Massachusetts Mainland FIPS 2001; Sources: US Census, Feeding America

#### VEHICLE ACCESS



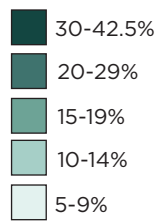
January 2019; Projected Coordinate System: NAD 1983 2011 StatePlane  
Massachusetts Mainland FIPS 2001; Sources: US Census, ACS 2012-2016 5-year  
Estimates

#### DIET-RELATED CHRONIC DISEASE BURDEN

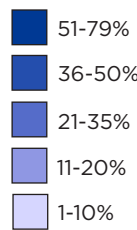


January 2019; Projected Coordinate System: NAD 1983 2011 StatePlane  
Massachusetts Mainland FIPS 2001; Sources: US Census, MassDPH  
(Massachusetts Acute Care Database/BRFSS), Massachusetts Cancer Registry

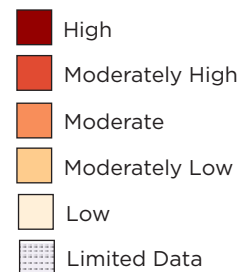
**Highest Census Tract Food Insecurity Rate within Town**  
2016



**Highest Census Tract Percent of Population without Vehicle Access within Town**  
2012-2016



**Town-level Diet-related Disease Burden**  
2011-2017



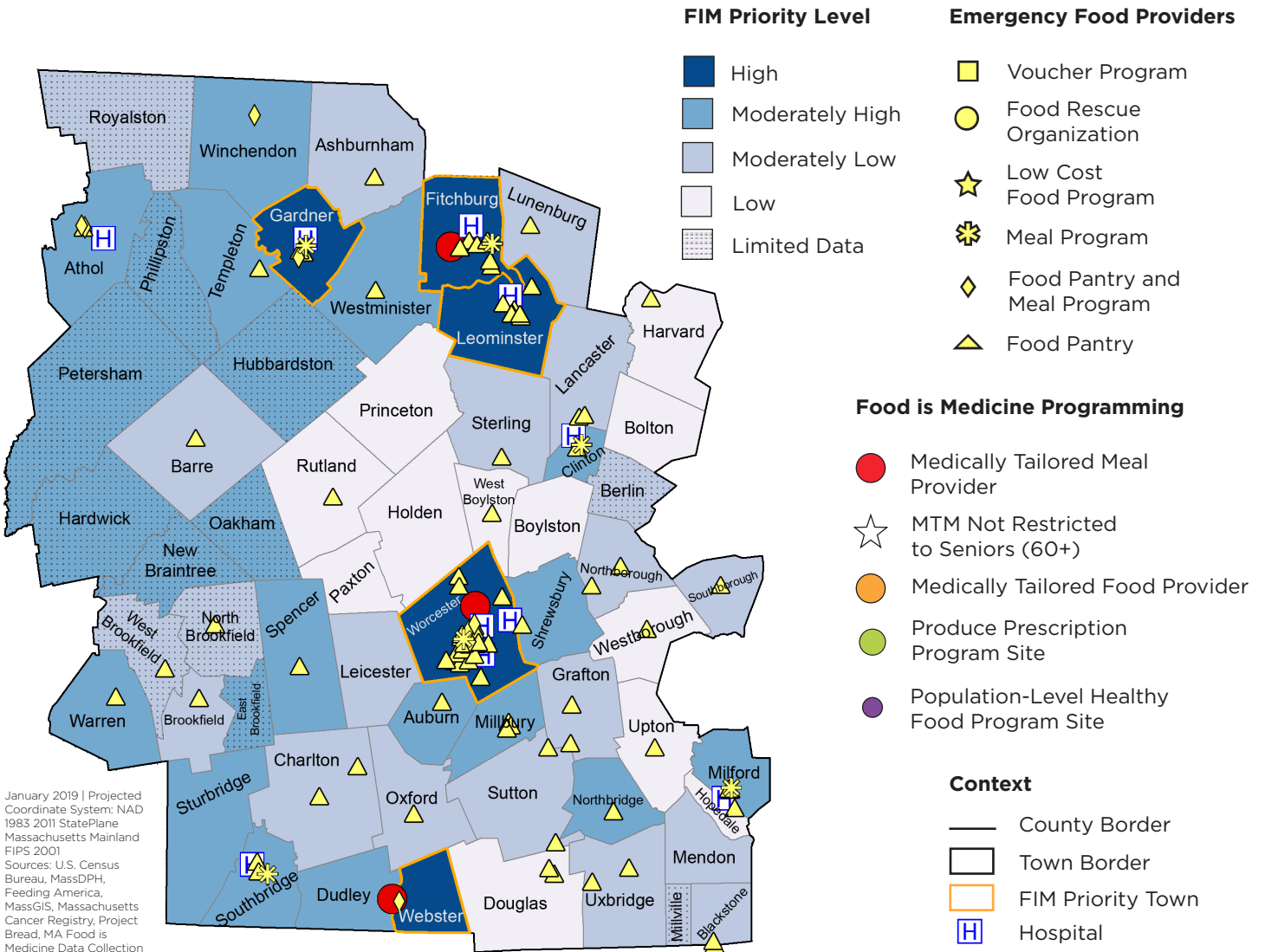
Appendix Table 3: Food is Medicine Indicators of Need, Central Massachusetts

Food is Medicine Indicators of Need	Regional Data
<b>Food Insecurity</b>	Thirty-five percent of the region's census tracts have food insecurity rates higher than the state average (10.9%). The most concerning rates of food insecurity in the region are found in Fitchburg (23%) and Worcester (29.8%). <sup>9</sup>
<b>Vehicle Access</b>	In Worcester and Fitchburg, up to 49% of households lack access to a vehicle. <sup>10</sup> Patient surveys conducted at the Family Health Center in Worcester reveal that the health center experiences a 15% rate of missed appointments and that 51% of respondents have some type of transportation issue. <sup>11</sup>
<b>Chronic Disease</b>	Worcester County leads the state in lung and bronchus cancer rates. <sup>12</sup> Priority cities have consistently higher asthma and diabetes rates compared to the regional averages. <sup>13</sup>

# FOOD IS MEDICINE PRIORITY ANALYSIS

## CENTRAL SNAPSHOT

### MASSACHUSETTS 2018



## INNOVATION IN CENTRAL MA

Many individuals and organizations in Central Massachusetts are working diligently to advance nutrition-focused health care in the region. Congressman Jim McGovern of the Massachusetts 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District is a key champion of the national Food is Medicine movement and founding member of the Food is Medicine Working Group within the U.S. House Hunger Caucus. Congressman McGovern advocates for policies to integrate Food is Medicine interventions into health care payment and delivery systems serving low-income individuals. Additionally, Central Massachusetts has several state legislators who are active in improving healthy food access in Massachusetts, including some who are part of the new Food Systems Caucus in the State House.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 2018 Greater Worcester Community Health Assessment, CENTRAL MA REGIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH ALLIANCE. (2018); 2015 Greater Worcester Community Health Assessment, CENTRAL MA REGIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH ALLIANCE, (2015); 2015 Community Health Assessment of North Central Massachusetts, UMASS MEMORIAL HEALTHCARE, (2015).
- <sup>2</sup> 2018 Greater Worcester Community Health Assessment, CENTRAL MA REGIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH ALLIANCE. (2018); 2015 Community Health Assessment of North Central Massachusetts, UMASS MEMORIAL HEALTHCARE. (2015).
- <sup>3</sup> *Selected Economics Characteristics Table*, AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 2013-2017 5-YEAR ESTIMATES, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU.
- <sup>4</sup> *Number of Opioid-Related Overdose Deaths, All Intentions by City/Town 2013-2017*, MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH.
- <sup>5</sup> Bill Shaner, Drug Overdoses in Worcester Lead to Call For More Services, WORCESTER MAGAZINE, (2019).
- <sup>6</sup> Central MA Regional Public Health Alliance. (2015). *2015 Greater Worcester Community Health Assessment*, [https://www.umassmemorialhealthcare.org/sites/umass-memorial-hospital/files/Documents/About/UMass\\_Memorial\\_CBI\\_Measures-CHAFINAL.pdf](https://www.umassmemorialhealthcare.org/sites/umass-memorial-hospital/files/Documents/About/UMass_Memorial_CBI_Measures-CHAFINAL.pdf); *2015 Community Health Assessment of North Central Massachusetts* [https://www.umassmemorialhealthcare.org/sites/umass-memorial-hospital/files/Documents/Members/5-21-15%20Final%20Community\\_Health\\_Assessment\\_of\\_North\\_Central\\_MA.pdf](https://www.umassmemorialhealthcare.org/sites/umass-memorial-hospital/files/Documents/Members/5-21-15%20Final%20Community_Health_Assessment_of_North_Central_MA.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> Smart Transit for Healthcare. (2016). *Exploring Data at the Intersection of Health and Transportation*, [https://www.umass.edu/sphhs/sites/default/files/SmartTransitHealthcare\\_HealthSummit.pdf](https://www.umass.edu/sphhs/sites/default/files/SmartTransitHealthcare_HealthSummit.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> *2015 Community Health Assessment of North Central Massachusetts*, p. 66, [https://www.umassmemorialhealthcare.org/sites/umass-memorial-hospital/files/Documents/Members/5-21-15%20Final%20Community\\_Health\\_Assessment\\_of\\_North\\_Central\\_MA.pdf](https://www.umassmemorialhealthcare.org/sites/umass-memorial-hospital/files/Documents/Members/5-21-15%20Final%20Community_Health_Assessment_of_North_Central_MA.pdf)
- <sup>9</sup> Craig Gundersen et al. Map the Meal Gap 2018: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2016, FEEDING AMERICA, (2018).
- <sup>10</sup> *Household Size by Vehicle Available [Percent no Vehicle]*, AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 2012-2016 5-YEAR ESTIMATES, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU.
- <sup>11</sup> *Exploring Data at the Intersection of Health and Transportation*, SMART TRANSIT FOR HEALTHCARE, (2016).
- <sup>12</sup> *The Massachusetts Cancer Registry Query Tool*. MASSACHUSETTS CANCER REGISTRY-MDPH, <https://www.cancer-rates.info/ma/> (last visited April 16, 2019).
- <sup>13</sup> *Massachusetts Town-level Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey*, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTIONS-MDPH, (2018).

# MASSACHUSETTS FOOD IS MEDICINE STATE PLAN REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

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