

OPINION

KATHRYN C. BURNS: WE CAN WAGE WAR ON FOOD INSECURITY

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We've all seen the news stories — long lines outside food pantries in communities across the country. Cars backed up for miles as families wait for a bag of groceries that will keep their children fed for another week, and older adults, a high-risk population, worrying about their next meal.

The problem of food insecurity can feel overwhelming — and it's almost always a sign of other unmet needs and systemic inequities which lead to health disparities.

Here in Lynn, assessments conducted by [Lynn Community Health Center](#) (LCHC) found an average of 74 patients faced food-insecurity concerns every week over a six-month period. At [Greater Lynn Senior Services](#) (GLSS), we estimate almost a third of those who utilize our services are at high risk of insufficient nutrition.

Part of the challenge in addressing the food-insecurity crisis comes from the fact that many communities have inadequate transportation systems and limited access to grocery stores.

It can be difficult to access programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and special supplemental assistance for women, infants, and children (WIC).

In Lynn, there is no central way for an older adult, a single parent, or a part-time worker to learn about and access the nutrition services they need. GLSS, along with our community partners, have set out to solve that problem — and create a new, innovative model along the way.

With support from [Tufts Health Plan Foundation](#), [Mass General Brigham](#), and many grass-roots donations, we are creating the Phoenix Food Hub, which we will launch over the next month.

The Food Hub will be in a central, accessible location, and outreach will be culturally and linguistically appropriate for the diverse populations we serve. Support services will also be available onsite to address other important needs that clients may have, as well.

The idea seems simple but is surprisingly revolutionary — and requires the partnership of many organizations in Lynn: Use the space we have to create a place where people cannot only access affordable, nutritious food, but also other critical support services to help stabilize their lives and provide economic opportunities.

In addition to a food pantry, our 8 Silsbee St. site will offer housing access, mental-health counseling, stress management, and mobility training as well as healthy cooking classes, nutrition screenings, and benefits counseling to those eligible for SNAP, WIC, and other nutrition-based resources.

The idea for creating a hub including a range of programs is a new one for the region. For GLSS and our partners, it made all the sense in the world. Our space once housed the Lynn Senior Center. As we considered how to repurpose that facility, it became clear the site could be used to address health disparities and meet the needs of older adults and many others in a community where access to food is limited – and few markets are located within walking distance of housing complexes for older people.

Importantly, it also represents the opportunity to think about a systemic solution and to work collaboratively with other social-service organizations to change conditions in the community.

GLSS is the lead agency in developing and managing Phoenix Food Hub's operations, but we have important allies among the Lynn Food Security Task Force's 14 organizations.

In particular, the City of Lynn, Lynn Community Health Center, Leading through Empowering Communities (LEO), [New American Center](#), [The Food Project](#), Mutual Aid Lynn, and [Lynn Grows](#) are key partners. In addition, [Catholic Charities](#) is also working with us to develop the hub's full scope.

This comprehensive, community-based response puts critical services within reach of those living in the Greater Lynn area. At a time when so many nonprofit agencies are managing dramatically increased demand with fewer resources, this program offers more.

No one organization will be able to solve the food-insecurity and health-disparity problems – even in one community like Lynn. The truth is our system is frayed and difficult to navigate.

By working together, we can improve access and collectively increase our capacity to help older adults, families, and children. Each community faces its own unique challenges. We hope our efforts to remove barriers to comprehensive services – including nutritious food – can become a model for other communities across the country.

Every day, the end of the pandemic is closer – but disparities and food insecurity will remain. The Phoenix Food Hub is one way to address that long-term need. We welcome all in the community to learn more and visit once we are open.

Kathryn C. Burns, MHA, is the chief executive officer of Greater Lynn Senior Services.

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