

# 'Food Action' group tackles hunger along Blue Hill Ave. corridor

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With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, unemployment rose and access to social services in Dorchester and the city's other neighborhoods was seriously disrupted. Food insecurity became a critical issue, and disproportionately so in majority-minority neighborhoods. In the face of that development, local organizations organized under the umbrella of the Neighborhood Food Action Collaborative (NFAC) have spent the last half-year or so rising to the occasion.

According to Mariana Cohen, co-founder of Vital CXNs and the Collaborative, NFAC was created early last December in response to unmet needs in Boston neighborhoods.

"Toward the end of last year, there was a report done by the city where they did an assessment to see where the gaps in connections and services are," she told the Reporter. "One of the things that came out of that was community members saying that a lot of the services are disjointed. There's not good communication and coordination happening between the different services in the city. They called for action to ask all these food distributors and organizations doing sourcing, distribution, delivery—all of that—to start collaborating better so that community members could know where to get food without going to so many places and navigating so many systems. Out of that, we brought together what is now called the Neighborhood Food Action Collaborative."

NFAC consists of two groups – Neighborhood Connections in Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury, and a sister group based in Hyde Park and Roslindale.

According to Cohen, "We're taking a very hyper-local approach to the way that we're doing this work. We do have separate groups meeting within these smaller neighborhoods. The collaborative is about coordination. It's about creating relationships between residents as well as organizations that are doing the work of food. We are just there to create the infrastructure. The members of the collaborative are really the experts and the ones doing the work."

One notable organization working to address food insecurity in Dorchester is The Most Worshipful George Washington Carver Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons at its temple on Talbot Avenue. Established in 1847, the Lodge has served as a communi-



Volunteers are shown outside of the Most Worshipful George Washington Carver Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons on Talbot Avenue, which has stepped up its efforts to distribute food to local families. *Katie Pedersen photo*

ty anchor and service organization for more than 170 years. It now collaborates with a sister chapter of Eastern Stars, the women's branch of the Freemasons.

In normal years, the organization provides free Thanksgiving baskets to members of the local community in partnership with the Centre St. Stop and Shop, organizes an annual dinner for senior citizens the Saturday before Mother's Day, and sponsors Christmas and Halloween parties for kids.

In the words of freemason Eddie Woumn, the Lodge "celebrates every holiday in the community." They also provide other essential community services.

According to Eastern Star leader Carrie Dubose, "We are a service organization. A lot of people don't know what we do in the community. We give four or five scholarships away every year to the community. We allow people to have repasts here, especially [family and friends] of people who died of gun violence and didn't have insurance or anything. We allow them to use the facilities."

Confronted with the challenges of the pandemic, the lodge decided to do even more. "We were seeing more need, and we figured that we had the building up here

and we had the space," Dubose said.

Last August and September, the George Washington Carver Lodge donated its facilities for Covid-19 testing. Around the same time, they began looking for ways to distribute food to local families. On Thanksgiving Day, the Lodge fed over 200 families. However, throughout the fall and early winter, members struggled to gain access to more food to donate.

According to Dubose, "From that point on, we weren't able to find out where to get any of the boxes. We went through City Hall, we went through the representatives. Nobody was able to tell us how we could get the grants [for food distribution] in. I was talking to Eddie, and I said, 'We got a big place down here, we got accommodation. We should be able to get the food.'"

In January, the Lodge struck up a partnership with Fair Foods, a local organization that sells "rescued" food at discounted prices. However, Fair Foods dropped out once the Lodge started distributing free adult meals from Boston YMCA and children's meals from City Fresh. "As [Fair Foods] got in the door, they wanted to charge for everything," Woumn said.

The Lodge's partnership with NFAC has

proven much more successful. According to Dubose, a member of the Eastern Stars came across a phone number for the organization on the back of a truck. After calling, the Lodge was connected to Mariana Cohen at the Blue Hill Corridor Group, now called NFAC.

"We got involved in them, and I'm glad we did," Dubose said. "The Blue Hills Corridor Group helped us get the food for the community when none of the state reps, or City Hall, were able to. Everybody else was talking about grants and this and that. The Corridor Group made it happen. City Fresh and the YMCA really stepped up their game. We wrote emails, and we said, 'We've got this Lodge down here, we've got these volunteers,' and nobody responded until I got involved with Mariana. If it hadn't been for them, we would not be getting the boxes of food that we have now. The program could be improved by us having easier access to get the food."

Cohen estimates that since joining NFAC, the Lodge has been able to increase its monthly distribution from around 100 boxes of food a month to roughly 5,000. However, the operation is entirely dependent on members of the Lodge donating their time.

"The community is doing the work for the community," Cohen said. "This is community members distributing food to their neighbors."

When asked how many hours members of the George Washington Carver Lodge have donated to food distribution efforts, Dubose laughed. "We don't even count them," she said. In recent months, Lodge members have volunteered from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. every Monday and Wednesday to unload trucks, advertise the food drive, distribute boxes, organize the site, and clean up.

"We're here Monday and Wednesday. If anyone has any other days they want us to distribute food, we'll talk to the group and become available. This is what our organization is all about. It is all about volunteering. We do all these volunteer hours, and none of us is getting a dime for being here."

Robert Jenkins, a YMCA staffer and collaborative member, spoke up in support of the work that the Lodge is doing in Dorchester and surrounding neighborhoods.

"Since the pandemic, they've been able to use their space in a positive light. They're giving out meals. They're a place for vaccinations. So it's a community base. I hope that when all this dies down, they'll be able to keep it up," he said.

In recent weeks, the NFAC has compiled a resource guide for community members. According to Cohen, "It's a reliable source for people to look at every day to see where they can get food in their neighborhood. It's a resource that we'll continue to build out and get into the hands of residents."

Dubose emphasized the guide's importance, saying, "In September, the extra money is going to stop and the extra

benefits for the food stamps are going to stop, so people are going to go back to being hungry. We need to get it out so that people know where they can get the food."

Anyone interested in getting involved in the ongoing work of NFAC is invited to join a virtual Community Meeting on June 15 at 7 p.m. In addition to updating community members on the Collaborative's work, NFAC will be soliciting feedback on ongoing service gaps to improve food distribution.

Cohen emphasized that any upcoming NFAC plans will be based on whatever feedback residents offer. "We have a lot of really great organizations. We have lots of amazing residents who have stepped up doing the pandemic. It's just about connecting the pieces. When we bring together multiple organizations that are doing similar work, within minutes you can see how we can get more food out in the community just by having the conversations that we're having. What we've seen through this collaborative is the power of bringing people together."

**Note:** Other Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury NFAC members include Dorchester Community Fridge, Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Center, the Boston Public Health Commission, the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, City Fresh Foods, NEU4J, Brigham Health, the Center of Community Wellness, Boston YMCA, Boston Medical, the Mayor's Office of Food Access, Health Leads, Daily Table, About Fresh, Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition, the Urban Farming Institute, and The Boston Project Ministries.



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