

# Reducing Food Insecurity with Collaborative Partnerships and Increased Capacity



*More than one thousand volunteers each year work with Preble Street staff at the Food Security Hub to help prepare meals and grocery boxes. Photo courtesy of Preble Street.*

Since COVID-19, the need for food in Maine has grown substantially. To accommodate this high and urgent demand, the social services nonprofit Preble Street had to pivot quickly to meet the need of hot meals served and the amount of grocery meals and boxes provided to the community. In response, Preble Street launched its new Food Security Hub, a sustainable, comprehensive, and collaborative approach dedicated to ending hunger in Maine.

The Preble Street Food Security Hub operates from a 30,000-square-foot, mixed-use office building with a small cafeteria kitchen in South Portland, Maine. Construction is underway that will allow Preble Street to evolve to meet the growing need for food and scale efforts in collaboration with partners to end hunger in Maine.

“We are building the Preble Street Food Security Hub so that five, 10, or even 20 years from now, we will have the capacity and flexibility to respond to emerging needs,” said Mark Swann, executive director of Preble Street. “We don’t know what changes we’ll see in that time frame, but we know that we need to be able to serve many different populations, work with many different partners, and have the infrastructure ready to meet the needs in case of another pandemic, economic crisis, or natural disaster.”

Preble Street identified the need for a loading dock to continue the growth of the Food Security Hub and to meet an increasing demand for prepared and pantry meals. With the construction of the loading dock, Preble Street will not have to turn away large truck donations and can now receive a significant increase in pallets of bulk food ingredients. They estimate they will be able to receive up to 25% more bulk food deliveries, in turn loading food for delivery more efficiently as it exits the facility.



*At the Food Security Hub, Preble Street staff use nutritious ingredients to create meals for Maine's most vulnerable citizens. Photo courtesy of Preble Street.*

Once operational, the hub will be able to serve the needs of community members by producing and distributing at least 1 million hot, nutritious meals each year, integrating culturally appropriate foods, collaborating with local farms, and working with community partners to solve the root causes of hunger. These efforts will result in a decrease in food insecurity in the community.

The hub will also promote long-term sustainable solutions to improve food security and achieve food justice while supporting local agriculture. It is estimated that 75% of the products preserved at the hub will be Maine-grown, and the processing lab will preserve 180,000 pounds of product within the first 18 months and steadily increase to support the community's needs. It'll be able to process up to 5,000 pounds of local produce every day, up from the current 5,000 pounds each week.

In addition, the hub will allow for increased food access and capacity, expand production and distribution of local, nutritious foods especially to vulnerable populations, and improve the nutrition and overall suitability of Preble Street meals with the use of blanchers, blast freezers, and dehydrators.

“There are already so many different people and organizations from the community who help get the food out every day – volunteers, farmers, staff, food organizations, and other partners. It is a community of people feeding our own community,” said Dani Walczak, chef at Preble Street Food Security Hub.

The Preble Street Food Security Hub is already increasing food security in Maine, creating strong and effective community partnerships and bolstering local agriculture and environmental sustainability. Federal funds dedicated to addressing gaps in the public health system that contributed to health inequities and disparities uncovered by the COVID-19 pandemic are helping the hub further combat food insecurity through partnerships and collaborations throughout Maine, bringing more meals and grocery boxes to people in need.

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