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Massachusetts Food System Collaborative

By: Leo Horrigan

When Becca Miller is educating people who want to be food policy advocates, she advises them that one of the main goals is to humanize the experience of interacting with legislators.

“I’m very explicit in advocacy training and just say that legislators are people too,” said Miller, policy director for the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, where she has worked since 2018. “There are a lot of different issue areas that legislators are asked to cover, and it’s our job to educate them on food policy. Because maybe they were inspired to run because of the cost of housing in Massachusetts — it’s a big issue for us, and that’s totally legitimate — and it also intersects with food in a number of different ways that we can use as a way in.”

As a statewide food policy organization, the Collaborative has been providing advocacy training to other FPCs and nonprofits from across Massachusetts.

“[Lobbying] can be intimidating,” Miller acknowledged, “but then if folks see that legislators need to be educated, that can help on both sides — get legislators who are educated and get advocates a little bit more confident.”

It starts, though, with the Collaborative helping new advocates understand how the legislative process works.

It’s also necessary to emphasize that policy advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint.

Miller stressed that there is a “general need for continued communications and outreach to legislators so they keep our issues in mind. It’s something that I really try to impress on folks. And this is the key to our success.”

For some advocacy students, it’s like, ‘Oh, I feel like I’ve done my thing because I sent them an email.’ And I tell them, ‘That’s great. That’s a first step. You can keep emailing



them, keep calling them, keep inviting them out to the Collaboratives' events, etc."

Again, it all starts with the basics. Miller tailors her advocacy trainings to fit the audience, but the material covered tends to include:

- The legislative process and budget process in Massachusetts
- How a bill becomes a law
- The Collaborative's theory of change on how to be successful as advocates
- Advocacy tactics
- How to develop a relationship and make an "ask" with your legislator
- How to get buy-in from your organization or community
- The difference between lobbying and advocacy
- A role play, to make the process more concrete for participants

The Collaborative convenes a network of local food policy groups in the state. Massachusetts is home to about 25 food policy councils or food working groups. They already had strong local coordination and interest in strengthening food systems; what they sought was additional skills and confidence to turn that interest into action in the policymaking world.

Emily Fidanza, the Collaborative's network manager, explained:

"Becca's been able to train many of the food policy councils, and I've seen folks readily sharing the calls to action and the updates that Becca shares. They're adding their own context to them, and they're getting that out to the communities.

"They all really look to the Collaborative – thanks to Becca for much of it – as a thought leader and partner for policy work. And a reliable source of information for it.

"Becca, and past [Collaborative staff] too, have put in a lot of work to educate legislators, and that's a big part of the work. So, I think that's been definitely impactful."

One of the Collaborative's priority issues is the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which increases the buying power of SNAP (i.e., food stamp) recipients when they purchase produce from participating farmers. As with other food policy issues, many legislators needed to be educated about the benefits of HIP for both farmers and struggling families.

"Our advocacy has led them to have a greater understanding of food issues," Miller said. "The House chair of Ways & Means talked about HIP on the House floor twice during the budget process last year."