

Grocery costs are higher than ever. That means big demand for food assistance nonprofits.

The Greater Boston Food Bank now serves more than double the number of people it did pre-pandemic

By [Esha Walia](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated April 30, 2024, 7:43 a.m.

A green truck pulled into a South Boston public housing development one recent Thursday morning and opened its doors to a waiting crowd, revealing bins of avocados, eggplants, and plantains.

The portable grocery store run by the nonprofit Fresh Truck was now open. The space was filled with the chatter of several different languages and much anticipation, as the truck is a convenient, affordable staple in a neighborhood that lacks its own grocery store. Shoppers could buy carrots for 75 cents per pound, cucumbers for \$1 each, and broccoli for \$1.75 per pound.

“I love the prices,” said Fresh Truck shopper Joseph Malloy, 52, who works in construction and relies on food stamps and grocery deals.


Fresh Truck, which says its prices are about 30 percent below those of some grocery stores, is among a slew of local nonprofits trying to help low-income residents cope with high grocery costs. These nonprofits are seeing a surge in demand for free and affordable food, since food prices have risen [25 percent since 2019](#) and remained high for years. In fact, the Greater Boston Food Bank now serves more than double the number of people it did pre-pandemic.

Meanwhile, the [YMCA of Greater Boston](#) said it has seen an increase in need for food assistance across Boston since the pandemic started — a need that has yet to dwindle.

“Churches, community groups are asking for more because the need is so great, as the cost of groceries have just skyrocketed,” said Wendy Zinn, chief of Partnerships & Social Responsibility at the YMCA of Greater Boston.

Grocery prices in Massachusetts increased by 6.6 percent from November 2022 to November 2023, according to an analysis by [Consumer Affairs](#), making it the state with the second-highest increase in prices in New England.

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As a result of high prices, many shoppers — 45 percent — feel they have no control over the cost of groceries when it comes to finances, according to a national survey by [FMI, The Food Industry Association](#), which represents food companies.

The high costs hit home, especially for lower income consumers, who have to make difficult choices when it comes to necessities, said Gergana Y. Nenkov, a professor at Boston College who studies consumer decision-making.

“Those consumers have to choose between buying milk or paying their electricity bill,” said Nenkov.

Nenkov says that while lower-income families may buy less food overall or change what kinds of foods they purchase, middle class families are generally switching from more expensive brands to store brands.



Irene Goa loads fresh produce onto a mobile market. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

For Paul Franceschi, 28, a local community garden worker who recently shopped at Daily Table in Mattapan, affordable grocery shopping has only become more difficult since the start of the pandemic. Franceschi said he's noticed a considerable increase in prices, especially when it comes to eggs.

"My roommates and I usually coordinate where we're going based on which supermarket has the most reasonable price," he said.

People squeezed by high food prices may feel pressure to purchase cheaper, processed food, trapping them in a cycle of unhealthy choices that often build upon each other and are hard to escape, like quicksand, Nenkov said.

Yet for food corporations, having consumers buy their product, healthy or not, is vital. Kellogg CEO Gary Pilnick recently drew criticism for [suggesting people eat cereal for dinner](#) to save money. Local grocery shoppers, community leaders, and experts told the Globe they found the claim insensitive, as lower-income families across Greater Boston are already under pressure to make sacrifices and turn to other alternatives for healthy, affordable food.

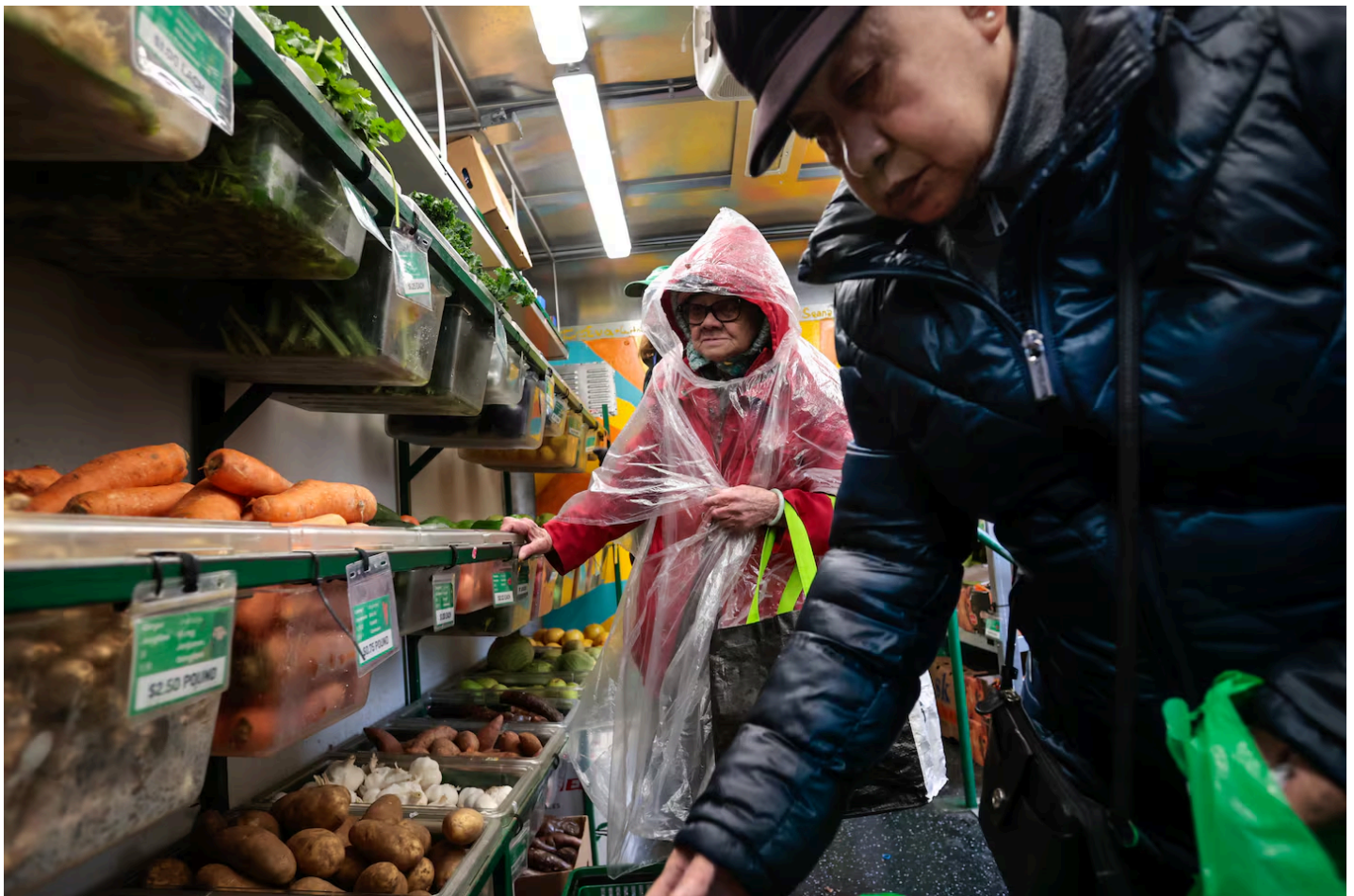
“Cereal and processed foods are more affordable but less healthy,” said Nenkov. “It’s a cheaper solution but ends up being more expensive in the long-term.”

In the wake of high prices, nonprofits and food banks around Boston serve healthy, affordable alternatives.

Fresh Truck has become a staple in 23 low-income neighborhoods every week through its mobile market and online orders, according to Seana Weaver, executive director. In 2023, the nonprofit did about 66,000 transactions, a 60 percent increase over 2019. Meanwhile, sales reached almost \$2.3 million, a nearly 200 percent increase.

In addition to pricing items relatively lower than grocers, Fresh Truck accepts EBT and SNAP benefits, also known as food stamps, making it an attainable option for low-income families.

“Food access isn’t always about location or dollars; it’s about both,” said Weaver. “People are just looking for ways to stretch their dollar in any way that they can.”



My Tran (left) and Lan Quach shop on a Fresh Truck mobile market in South Boston earlier this month. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Another local nonprofit, the [YMCA of Greater Boston](#), has a warehouse where it packs over 5,000 bags of groceries each week for 47 partners across the city. To keep up with the rising need, the YMCA launched a mobile market to expand its reach, which provides free items like fresh produce, pasta, and rice. The mobile markets occur several times per week in neighborhoods including Dorchester, Hyde Park, East Boston, and Roxbury, each time serving 75 to 125 people.

The YMCA receives all its food supply from the Greater Boston Food Bank and is its largest distributor, Zinn said. The two organizations delivered more than 2 million pounds of food in 2023, according to the YMCA.

The Greater Boston Food Bank serves about 600,000 people each month, and it too struggles with high food costs. The nonprofit currently purchases nearly 80 percent of its food supply with some support from state and federal funds.

“The food costs continue to surge. It just becomes more challenging to do the work we’re doing,” said Catherine Lynn, vice president of communications and public affairs at the Greater Boston Food Bank.

As a result of the high prices, Lynn said the nonprofit is seeing many people relying on the food bank for free food — especially for relatively more expensive items like produce and eggs.

Although the pandemic may have subsided, hunger and food insecurity remain. Nearly 200 cities and towns count on the food bank to help their underserved communities survive, Lynn said.

“In the wake of COVID, hunger is not an emergency,” Lynn said. “It’s a lived reality for way too many people.”



A group of women sort their produce after shopping on a Fresh Truck mobile market. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

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