

### **MUSIC IN**

**ROBIN: This is Reimagine Aging – an audio series exploring the innovations that help older adults thrive in Massachusetts, a state that’s committed to being age- and dementia-friendly. I’m Robin Lipson, the Deputy Secretary of the Executive Office of Elder Affairs.**

### **MUSIC SWELL**

ROBIN: We all feel the pinch. Across the country and here in Massachusetts, food prices have risen more than 10% in the last couple of years and are expected to continue to climb. And some communities face additional challenges – limited availability to nutritious food – and food that reflects cultural traditions.

### **MUSIC OUT**

Dai Kim: I think one of these things that we take for granted, is access to food, and food accessibility is something this community wants.

ROBIN: In Lowell, Massachusetts, two unique programs provide nutritious and culturally relevant food to older adults and others living with food insecurity.

### **MUSIC IN - Look Both Ways - Nathan Moore**

ROBIN: Lowell, is a mid-size city of just over 110,000 people. Its nickname "Mill City" comes from its history of textile manufacturing in the 1800s. Waves of immigrants came to work in Lowell’s large brick mill buildings. First, English and French, then Irish and French Canadian. Later Greek, Polish, Jewish, and Portuguese. More recently, the city population has become even more diverse. Today over forty-two percent of Lowell’s population speaks a language other than English, and the city is home to immigrants

from all over the world. Dai Kim is the Director of Food Access at Mill City Grows, a non-profit dedicated to food justice.

DAI: you got a really large population of Southeast Asians in general, Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, Thai, etc. There's a wave of Africans and Middle Eastern that are settling in Lowell as well.

ROBIN: Mill City Grows started in 2012 – the result of a community assessment that showed the gaps in access to healthy food for Lowell's residents. In 2014, Mill City Grows started a mobile grocery market to help fill those gaps.

DAI: Organic fresh produce is so much more than just nourishment in my opinion. I think it's clearly the one language we all speak. You know, a tomato here is a tomato in California is a tomato in Mexico, Japan etc.

ROBIN: Mill City Grows helps build and maintain community gardens in Lowell. They also raise produce on six acres of land throughout the city. Inside their offices in a repurposed mill, the staff teaches cooking classes, and during the winter, they hold a weekly market there. Come spring, they bring fruits and vegetables to neighborhoods across the city using a farm stand on wheels.

DAI: You know both this drops down ....this will drop down and we can set up all this very pretty shelving... display unit just ....if you can imagine your produce shelf at your local grocery store this is just that being towed around.

The mobile market is especially important in communities where food is primarily available at corner stores or bodegas ...and where residents may have difficulty getting

around. In many neighborhoods, there's just no easy way to get to a larger supermarket by public transportation.

### Sound of Market.

ROBIN: On this day, the mobile market has pulled into the parking lot of the Lowell Senior Center. Like many grocers, Mill City Grows can process electronic cards, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP benefits. Doug has come by to shop for vegetables for his salads. He *could* use his card at the grocery store right across the street.....

DOUG: ...but I like these kinds of fruit and vegetable stands like this one here, you know, to support the people that are growing the food and.... and I'm on meager livings now. I'm just on my social security, so I got to stretch my budget.

ROBIN: People who use SNAP have an additional incentive to shop at this *mobile* market rather than at a grocery store. Mill City Grows participates in the Healthy Incentives Program or HIP, a food assistance program funded by the US Department of Agriculture. Grace McKay is a Market Manager for Mill City Grows.

.GRACE: And it's only for fresh fruits and vegetables and then a couple of different things like some dried vegetables, some preserved vegetables, there's very strict rules around the HIP, but we try and make sure that everything on our stand is eligible for HIP.

ROBIN: Through HIP, one or two-person households get \$40 a month added to their SNAP benefits; larger families get up to \$80. Stephanie Chy has stopped by to help shop for her older friends and neighbors. She says she often has to remind them to use their HIP dollars.

STEPHANIE: I mean, it's an incentive that if you don't use it, you lose it. So that's what I tried to explain to the older people because some of them don't know that they have that incentive in addition to what they're getting. So I do try to tell them and just like every month, like okay, use your \$40. What do you want?

ROBIN: The mobile market has culturally relevant produce. ...meaning they grow crops that are familiar to South East Asian or Latine shoppers. Dai Kim says food is more than nutrition; it evokes cultural touchstones, family celebrations, and childhood memories.

DAI: One of the stories I keep thinking about is this crop called a husk cherry. And one of my colleagues had told me that there was a customer who broke down and cried when they saw it at our market because she hadn't seen it much since she was a little girl. And I was like that's such a powerful story that kind of confirms our existence in so many ways.

### **Music transition - Lucky Sound - Circles of Life**

ROBIN: Culturally relevant food isn't just a nicety. For some older adults, access to familiar foods is important to staying healthy. AgeSpan, a non-profit Aging Services Access Point, works with older adults in the Merrimack Valley. Leigh Hartwell, a nutritionist at the agency, says AgeSpan serves thousands of home-delivered meals and congregate lunches at municipal Senior Centers.

### **Music fades under Leigh**

LEIGH: We serve a lot of people every day. (laugh) Which is amazing.

ROBIN: Yet, says Leigh, while talking to older adults, AgeSpan realized the meals being offered didn't always appeal to the Latine and South East Asian populations in the Merrimack Valley.

LEIGH: So we wanted to expand our cultural meals. And so one of the ways that we decided to do this was to partner with restaurants that serve food that was more representative of the cultures that we weren't serving.

ROBIN: Leigh and her colleagues found restaurants that met AgeSpan's goals. Nutrition was important, choice was important, and it needed to be a place where older adults felt welcome.

### **Sizzling Kitchen sound...**

Sizzling Kitchen was chosen as the pilot restaurant. Their usual menu is a mix of Asian and Italian. Leigh collaborated with the owners on the program which included making a special menu for AgeSpan consumers. Those enrolled in the program use an electronic key card voucher.

LEIGH: So they can come in, .... they can order anything off of this menu. It's been translated into three different languages. ....and everybody who participates in the program gets two meals per month so they'll come in, scan their keycard, and then sit down, order anything off the menu, and the only thing that's not covered is gratuity.

ROBIN: The restaurant is owned by Tuyen Nguyen and her husband, Lowell. Lowell grew up in the city and after cooking in many other kitchens, he decided to start a restaurant in his hometown. Tuyen says this program allows them to give something back to the community that has supported them.

TUYEN: With the program, we would just be happy to have the seniors come out and see the community if they don't normally go out to eat. so just kind of like helping them getting them to go out and-meet other people.

ROBIN: One reason AgeSpan decided to try a restaurant program was to increase social opportunities and engagement for older adults. The first customer to use the voucher program was Pheck Chia. She usually gets lunch from the Senior Nutrition Program and eats alone. Today she orders Pork Mee Katang, a Cambodian rice noodle dish with carrots, mushrooms, and Chinese broccoli. Her friend Rasmee drove her to the restaurant and translates for her.

Rasmee and Pheck: She like it very much. She very happy. She wanted to say thank you and to have good food.

ROBIN: Pheck says she not only likes the food but also likes the idea of coming here with friends.

(Pheck speaking Khmer) she says she like come with few people... It's better than alone. Yeah, make the food more delicious. When we have more people ....you know?

ROBIN: Rasmee has decided he'll sign up for the restaurant voucher program too, and plans to tell his friends about it. Leigh hopes Rasmee's recommendation will inspire others to join. Seeing people come and eat with their friends is one way AgeSpan will know this program is successful.

LEIGH: You know, it's a work in progress. This isn't a set thing. This isn't a set program. This is something that we're trying and experimenting with. And so that's why we're really open to feedback and hoping to make it better.

**MUSIC IN - BRANDER - WALKABOUT**

ROBIN: AgeSpan hopes to enroll two hundred people in the program pilot at Sizzling Kitchen. AgeSpan will also partner with a restaurant in Lawrence to serve that city's large Latine population.

ROBIN: A growing number of programs across the Commonwealth use food as a way to foster community. From Cape Ann to Boston to Worcester and Springfield — lunch and supper clubs, mobile markets, and restaurant vouchers connect people and address isolation.

ROBIN: **To hear more age- and dementia-friendly stories in this series visit [reimagineaging.net](https://reimagineaging.net). And to learn how your community can become more age- and dementia-friendly, visit [mass.gov/reimagineaging](https://mass.gov/reimagineaging). This story was produced with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs and the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative. Funding was provided by Point32Health Foundation. I'm Robin Lipson. Thank you for listening.**