

Public colleges confront student hunger, housing needs over summer

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WORCESTER – Equipped with new statistical evidence showing the extensive need on their campuses, local public colleges and universities are ramping up efforts to provide safety net programs to students over the summer break.

This year, all four public colleges in Central Massachusetts have launched or plan to launch new on-campus food pantries as a stopgap measure to help students struggling to find meals. Those schools also have introduced or tried to better publicize existing programs aimed at students dealing with hunger, homelessness, or other issues between semesters.

The state's higher education department has also focused its attention on the problem, and is testing ideas of its own that could provide solutions.

Unlike the state's public K-12 schools, which can lean on federal funding to provide summer meals programs and other social service outreach during the long break, the public higher education system, already cash-strapped, is attempting to tackle student poverty without much government assistance.

"I think our public institutions have really stepped up on this, without funding from us, and without prodding from us," said the state's higher education commissioner, Carlos Santiago.

Hunger, homelessness widespread

While local college officials said they have always known some of their students struggle to get by, a pioneering study of the state's public higher education campuses released this spring for the first time provided the stark numbers behind the issue. According to that report, 44 percent of community college students and 33 percent of state university students said they were struggling to feed themselves, while 49 percent of the former and 32 of the latter also had trouble finding permanent housing.

“I’ve gone through it in my own life – I know how it feels,” said Ashley Forhan, a second-year student at Quinsigamond Community College, which is why the Clinton native jumped at the chance to operate the school’s first on-site food pantry, opening next week.

Ms. Forhan, who will oversee the donation-funded pantry through a work-study program at the college, said hunger can put people in a “criminality mindset – you do whatever it takes to get food ... you’re not thinking straight; you’re not thinking clearly.” She and Quinsigamond officials said it was not uncommon for some students to simply steal items from the campus cafeteria.

“They were struggling, and there was an embarrassment factor,” said Theresa Vecchio, Quinsigamond’s dean of students, who said the college now has a policy where cashiers will discreetly comp students who can’t pay for their meal and point them to her office for help if they’re dealing with persistent food insecurity.

Worcester State University offers a similar service to desperate students through its emergency fund program, which provides money for meals and other necessities. Students are developing an on-campus food pantry, which should debut sometime in the next six months, said Julie Kazarian, dean of students.

In addition, the university is working on a plan to offer year-round housing contracts, in an effort to accommodate students who can’t find lodging elsewhere during the summer and winter breaks. Worcester State enrolls several students coming out of foster care, for example, she said. “They don’t always necessarily have somewhere else to go” when the dorms empty out in May, she said.

Both Fitchburg State University and Mount Wachusett Community College have made food pantries available over the summer at their campuses for the first time this year. Officials at the schools said the services have received dozens of visits from students since the spring semester ended.

“It’s clearly a need. We found the same thing over the winter break as well,” said Shelley Errington Nicholson, director of Mount Wachusett’s Brewer Center for Civic Learning and Community Engagement. “We know their needs don’t end just because class isn’t in session.”

Funding hard to come by

At all four public campuses in the region, offices are open throughout the summer to help students connect with and navigate external social service programs like the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Quinsigamond’s food pantry, which is scheduled to have a soft opening on July 10, will have a confidential intake program on site.

But the colleges themselves aren't able to rely much on government assistance to cover their summer social programs. With most public campuses in line to receive negligible increases in their state funding next year, local officials said they are relying entirely on fundraising and food drives to stock their food pantries' shelves this summer.

"I would love to see some sort of funding for a supplemental meal program, similar to what's done at the K-12 level," Ms. Nicholson said, referring to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's nutrition initiatives, which reimburse elementary and secondary schools for the cost of providing free meals to students.

For now, at least, college officials can rely on the state's higher education department to support their efforts, even if it can't provide funding for them. Mr. Santiago said his administration is trying to help. It has worked to convince state-operated housing programs to be more open to accepting college students, for example – and is working on some statewide initiatives of its own.

The higher education department is partnering with state agencies and campus presidents on a pilot program that would allow a small number of community college students to live in state university dorms, for instance, a step toward solving the housing dilemma for a Massachusetts community college system that does not have on-campus residences. While the locations for that proposal have yet to be worked out, Mr. Santiago said, he's been encouraged by the overall buy-in from college presidents.

"I think it's important for us to find the institutional leaders that will lead the way" on the hunger and housing issues, he said. "I've quite frankly put homelessness and food security as one of the things I'm working on."

Erasing the stigma

Money alone can't solve one of the most challenging problems dogging campuses' food and housing outreach efforts. Especially over the summer, local officials said, it's difficult not only to inform students that services are available, but also to persuade them to take advantage.

"There's a lot of stigma surrounding anybody needing help, really," and college students are no exception, said Heather Mazzaferro, who works in Fitchburg State's housing and residential services division.

While she's only been in her position since December, Ms. Mazzaferro recalled instances of hungry students asking to take something from the candy basket in her office, or the time one student "wouldn't make eye contact" out of shame when he asked her for the directions to a free food program going on in her building.

“When he walked out the door, I just started crying, that somebody has to feel that way just about eating,” she said.

Other campus administrators acknowledged that social pressure is especially high on college students to be self-reliant, even though many of them are already pushing themselves just to be able to afford their classes.

“Some of these students are paying for college, they’re paying for their car and insurance – they’re putting themselves through,” said Shane Franzen, associate director of student development at Fitchburg State. “In order to do that, they end up having to couch surf some nights, or get someone to get them into the dining hall to get a meal.”

The particular challenges facing college students – and public college students especially, who are increasingly likely to be first-generation students from low-income and/or immigrant families – makes the location of support services on their campuses especially critical, some local officials said, even if those same services also exist off campus.

“I feel like there’s more of a comfort level when you’re at a place for four years and you can find people that you trust there,” Ms. Mazzaferro said, adding that she hopes the increasing availability of campus-based food and housing programs will help “normalize” the idea of students seeking assistance.

Some college officials said they have started to notice a change already.

“People are talking about it now. They’re coming forward more,” Ms. Nicholson said. “They’re more comfortable asking for help.”

The long-term view

At the same time, campus administrators acknowledged their institutions’ limited means prevents them from singlehandedly solving the problem. Mount Wachusett’s food pantry, for example, which allows students to take up to 20 items a month, is only supposed “to be a Band-Aid,” Ms. Nicholson said.

But there’s also a sense at local colleges that it’s in everyone’s best interests, including the institutions themselves, for them to be more involved in helping students. Several campus officials pointed out that unaddressed hunger and homelessness ultimately prevents students from staying in college and graduating, leaving them without the real solution – a college degree – that could help them permanently climb out of poverty.

“We need to meet their needs, if we want them to succeed,” Mr. Santiago said. “Otherwise, we’re just a revolving door.”