



FY2023

Program Report



women's lunch place



Letter from the Executive Director Jennifer Hanlon Wigon

As we reflect on the past fiscal year, I am proud to share with you the profound impact that your support has had on marginalized women who are facing the challenges of hunger, homelessness, and poverty.

This year's Program Report highlights the strides Women's Lunch Place has made in responding to the pressing needs of our guests, including the addition of an Attorney, Clinical Psychiatrist, and Behavioral Health Clinician, as well as the establishment of a comprehensive recovery program.

Early results of our housing and stabilization efforts prove that what we are doing works. The first three years of data show that 167 of 173 (97%) women housed from homelessness and enrolled in our program have remained stable in their housing, a remarkable accomplishment considering the difficulty of transitioning from a shelter or the street to living in an apartment.

Within this report's pages, you will find compelling evidence of the sustained increase in demand for our programs and the achievements of our staff, partners, and programs. The data presented from both our annual guest survey and internal tracking serves as a testament to the ever-changing nature of our work transforming the lives of vulnerable women.

Thank you for standing beside us. Together, we are making a difference and bringing hope to those who need it most.

With heartfelt appreciation,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer".

Organizational Overview

There are times in a person's life when they may face extreme challenges. Women who are struggling with poverty, unemployment, hunger, and homelessness can find safety, community, and a path forward at Women's Lunch Place (WLP).

Our gender-specific environment serves over 2,000 guests each year. We provide relief from threats of violence and abuse, and our programming is designed to address women's health issues and trauma histories, including a variety of classes built by and for women of color.

WLP's proactive approach and collaborative efforts enable us to effectively relieve food insecurity, prevent homelessness, increase safety and economic independence, resolve legal issues, and secure greater access to health care for vulnerable women in Greater Boston. Our talented team of staff, volunteers, and partners assist our guests with patience, compassion, and expertise in a way that restores their dignity and well-being.



Need & Significance

Since 2015, the number of homeless women in the U.S. has grown by 40%, rising significantly faster than the number of homeless men.

Within our community, women are often living on the margins of society. They are struggling with poverty, rising food prices, and one of the highest rental markets in the country. One in three Massachusetts households must choose between paying for nutrition or utilities, rent, and medical care. Those receiving SNAP

(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits and utilizing food pantries are twice as likely to report anxiety and depression.¹ Food costs remain higher than ever, with a 5.7% annual increase over last year's record numbers as of June 2023.²

12-Month Percentage Change, Consumer Price Index - Food

Source:
U.S. Bureau
of Labor
Statistics.



1 Greater Boston Food Bank.
2 U.S. Consumer Price Index.

A minimum wage job in Boston requires someone to work 104 hours per week to support a studio apartment with fair market rent. There are 313,607 households of four or more in Massachusetts that make less than \$34,300 per year.³

As reported by the Boston Globe, “There are simply not enough affordable units for all the people who need them, and little turnover among people who have them. Applicants who claw their way into a low-cost apartment are unlikely to give it up anytime soon, and a well-documented shortage of housing at all price points simmers below it all.”

With market rate and affordable rental units out of reach, many are forced into homelessness. The most severe effects of these trends continue to be seen at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard (known colloquially as Mass. and Cass). Despite concerted efforts to secure services and housing for the population there, it remains a hotspot for drug and human traffickers, abusers, and predators. Women in this area are particularly vulnerable to these dangers.

Since 2015, the number of homeless women in the U.S. has grown by 40%, rising significantly faster than the number of homeless men.⁴ Research has shown that women have higher rates of diagnosed mental health issues, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and adverse childhood trauma than their male counterparts—yet past and existing solutions often ignore gender-specific criteria in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach.⁵



3 National Low Income Housing Coalition.

4 Department of Housing and Urban Development.

5 BMC Public Health.

Focusing on Women

This is a critical moment in time—shelter capacity for women has decreased as the number of homeless women is increasing.

One of our guests, Sarah, is a victim of sex trafficking by her uncle. She does not feel safe around men and her trauma is a major barrier to her seeking help. By putting women's safety first in our gender-specific environment, Women's Lunch Place helps women like Sarah rebuild their lives.

Trauma and violence are the most common pathways to homelessness for women. We know that a community protected from abuse and trauma is essential for them to advance to other goals. Women's Lunch Place accomplishes this by creating a welcoming community of mutual respect, an emotional support system, and innovative programming that addresses loneliness and isolation and is specifically geared to address women's unique and complex needs.



Our Community in Fiscal Year 2023

Women's Lunch Place has a community reflective of the diversity of lived experience, background, religion, and ethnicity of Boston. We celebrate our differences and work to understand how each woman's experience has shaped who she is today.

Every year we survey our guests to gain a better understanding of our population and identify the services they need the most. Compared to previous years, our guests were older, felt less safe in their communities, and had worsening physical and mental health. These results are not surprising, given the toll that the pandemic and coinciding mental health crisis have taken.

We also saw many guests for the first time. Our data shows that 40% of the 2,000+ women we served last year were new to Women's Lunch Place. With that level of turnover comes destabilizing factors. It takes years to build trust and belonging, and, in many ways, we were starting anew. The needs of our guests are always changing and we are adapting our programming accordingly to meet each woman where she is.

Our February 2023 guest survey revealed:

64%

are homeless

62%

are over 50
years old

84%

are unemployed

73%

have trauma
and/or violence
in their histories

89%

are single

61%

rely on WLP for
most of their
meals

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Dignity is everything.

Our shelter programs and collaborations improve access to housing and healthcare for our majority-minority population; we design programming, recruit staff, and develop partnerships to equitably address the specific needs of women of color. Our service model centers racial equity, embeds behavioral health supports, and is focused on addressing the unique needs of women experiencing homelessness.

In a housing market that is layered with disadvantages for people of color, we found success equitably. The women we housed from homelessness over the past three years are 72% non-white, a figure that is nearly identical to the makeup of our overall community, which is 71% non-white.



Programs

Healthy Meals



113,430

meals prepared and served,
a record number for WLP!

We are proud of this accomplishment, which demonstrates that we have continued to meet the increased need for hunger relief at our shelter and in our community.

When you are hungry, it is nearly impossible to take a clear look at the obstacles in front of you. Even simple tasks can be difficult to accomplish, and complicated issues can seem impossible. Food insecurity is one of the most pressing needs for women in our community.

Last year, we took additional measures to fight hunger and make sure our guests had the healthy, scratch-made nutrition they need.

We purchased fresh fish, produce, and dairy from local providers to reduce our reliance on national food conglomerates. Donations from local farms, gardens, and food recovery groups supplemented these purchases. This past year, our guests enjoyed tending our on-site herb garden and our new vegetable garden at the Dudley Greenhouse. We made vegetable soups that are nutritious and practical for elderly guests or those with poor dental health.

Women's Lunch Place is now an Environmental Partner of 1% for the Planet, a global organization that exists to ensure our planet and future generations thrive.

We are pleased to report that we delivered over 300 healthy meals each week to partners across the city, including St. Mary's Center for Women and Children and Victory Programs. Any leftover meals and food items were distributed to a nearby food pantry.

We worked with our community to increase overall food security and find permanent solutions by reviewing eligibility for SNAP benefits, About Fresh, Project Bread, and other vital resources. Individual

counseling and cooking classes taught guests how to maximize their benefits and prepare nutritious meals at home.

Finally, in celebration of the diversity in our community, we introduced a "Cultural Café" which incorporated signature recipes from the countries and cultures of our community. Guests were able to submit ideas to our creative kitchen staff to consider, and our team thoroughly enjoyed cooking some of their most beloved dishes.

Direct Care



Our community is reviving.

As ever, last year WLP's Direct Care team helped guests navigate the hub of activity from the community floor to Wellness and Advocacy programs. We cultivated a lively, yet relaxed environment of support and acceptance.

The loosening of pandemic restrictions allowed us to swap two-person tables with plexiglass barriers for large, round dining tables. The change in the community was immediate. Our traditional communal setting brought back a conversational atmosphere where women can relate to one another and form lasting friendships. In that sense, things were finally returning to normal.

3,553

showers

2,827

loads of laundry

\$10,975

in MBTA passes

This past year, we also reintroduced monthly community meetings. These informal, collaborative discussions offered a chance for guests to hear updates on programming and provide public feedback about their experiences.

Our Direct Care team was tasked with welcoming a growing number of first-time guests to WLP and assisting them with their most pressing basic needs. Our data shows that 40% of the women we served last year were new to Women’s Lunch Place. Providing immediate solutions (e.g., a new coat or transit pass) built optimism and trust. Many of our new guests arrived in vans as a part of the city’s “Recovery Route,” which is an effort to decentralize addiction recovery services from the Mass. and Cass area.

In response, our Direct Care staff underwent a variety of impactful trainings, including a de-escalation unit that focused on strategies for avoiding and defusing conflict and calming agitated guests, as well as continued lessons in trauma-informed care and motivational interviewing.



Wellness

833

participations in seven recovery groups

1,264

participations in eight therapy groups

Women can recover at Women's Lunch Place.

We expanded our Wellness programs last year to offer a wide and varied array of support options for our guests. These now include emotional regulation classes, mental and physical health resources, and addiction recovery groups six days a week.

WLP added a clinical psychiatrist who created relationships with our guests, conducted soft assessments, and crafted individualized plans. Another clinician who has over 30 years of experience with vulnerable populations led regular therapy groups that were developed by and for women of color who have experienced trauma.

Many of our guests get their primary care at WLP Monday through Friday from our partners at Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP). BHCHP staffed monthly clinics in our community area, including vaccine distribution and mammogram screenings. Women looking to overcome their substance use disorders found help through our partnership with Boston

Medical Center's Metro Recovery Learning Center. We also added an introduction to Alcoholics Anonymous that attracts guests who are pre-contemplative (i.e., they have not yet made the decision to quit).



1,076

BHCHP patients

3,362

appointments



Update from Stacey Zellen, Program Manager:



We've started or restarted so many programs in the past year. There are volunteer-led English Literacy classes that help our many guests from immigrant communities navigate Boston more easily. We have Zumba (the instructor is a longtime guest!), mindfulness exercises, a garden club, reiki, acupuncture, and self-esteem groups. Our friends at Eureka Ensemble brought back the Women's Chorus, which our guests love. They had weekly practices upstairs in the Church of the Covenant's grand chapel and performed concerts both in and outside of Women's Lunch Place."

Advocacy

Each guest is different, and so are the challenges they face.

Our process clearly works, and the word continued to spread—in FY23, the number of guests who requested Advocacy services increased by 7.4%. Our success was rooted in an individualized approach, where we tailored our support to meet each guest's specific needs.

We helped our guests accomplish a variety of complex goals, such as finding housing, fleeing intimate partner violence, and applying for disability benefits. When a longtime guest, Julie, received the keys to her apartment, our entire staff and guest community congratulated her. Everyone understood how difficult the journey can be.



875

clients

7,026

visits

583

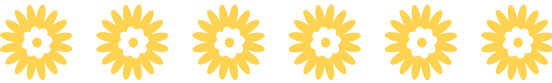
referrals

Legal Services

Working with our team of Advocates, a dedicated Greater Boston Legal Services lawyer tackled cases on behalf of our guests.



Over the past year, in response to an increased demand for help with complicated legal issues concerning immigration, domestic violence, housing court, and eviction notices, we began a new collaboration to add a full-time Attorney for our guests. She has been particularly successful in helping women access emergency shelter, which has prevented multiple families from being separated, as well as in preparing Advocates and their clients for victories in eviction cases.



Empowerment Center

In FY23, we began the process of renovating a room on our community floor into our new Empowerment Center, which will be a dedicated space for workforce readiness, complete with state-of-the-art technology, modular furniture, and a full suite of classes and programming. Our guests will learn digital literacy skills, work on resumes, and prepare for gainful employment.



Housing & Stabilization

We want to end homelessness by finding dignified, stable housing for our guests.

554

clients

3,908

visits

Imagine a woman who has been spending nights in a congregate shelter, the living room of a family member, or on the streets, huddled among a group of people for protection. Nearly all her waking and sleeping moments are spent with other people. There is constant noise and activity.

After months—maybe years—of filling out applications, she lands an apartment with subsidized rent. She's thrilled. Emotions are running high. She gets the keys, and on move-in day she unlocks the door to find an empty, quiet apartment with nothing more than a mattress on the floor. She's unfamiliar with the neighborhood. She's isolated. She wonders if she was better off before.

Our Housing & Stabilization program is proactive and flexible, with a focus on relationship-building between Advocates and their guests. We provide everything that a newly housed woman may need to smooth the transition into housed life. We

ensure that she has appliances, furniture, groceries, and cleaning supplies as soon as she moves in. Her Advocate walks around the neighborhood with her, pointing out transit stops and the local gym, and connecting her with community groups at churches and neighborhood gathering places. We continue to monitor our guests' progress until they stable and self-sufficient.

62

clients went from homeless to housed

250

secured housing or preserved their tenancy

Since the inception of the program in July 2020, we have housed 173 women from homelessness and enrolled them in stabilization services. A remarkable 167 women (97%) have remained in their homes.



All WLP Advocates are trained to view their clients' cases through a clinical lens to build trust in the process. However, because mental health and addiction issues play such a key role in stabilization, **we created a new position** in partnership with Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP), a **Behavioral Health and Stabilization Clinician**, who is tasked with addressing and improving the mental health of women in the program.



Get Involved

This past spring, we honored the inaugural class of our President's Council, an influential group of leaders who have embraced our mission and supported the advancement of vulnerable women through their expertise and philanthropy as former members of our Board of Directors.

As we conclude the celebration of our 40th anniversary this fall and enter our fifth decade of service, we are endlessly grateful for the many ways in which our community has stepped up to help WLP adapt and grow into the dynamic organization that we are today.



We are excited to offer a variety of ways for you to get involved with our mission and assist our guests at a critical juncture when housing, mental health, and food insecurity crises are converging at once. These opportunities include serving in a leadership role on one of our advising committees, connecting your organization to our community, making a donation, or participating in one of our upcoming events:

Ride for Food

October 1, 2023 - a fundraising group bike ride, with 25-mile and 50-mile courses, and a 5K walk option available, around a beautiful course in an effort to end food insecurity.



Spaghetti Dinner

October 20, 2023 - our signature gala, held at the Fairmont Copley Plaza. Tickets, event sponsorships, and raffle donations fuel our work to end homelessness.

eat LUNCH give

Spring, 2024 - our annual lunchtime fundraiser and networking event—an opportunity to bring your business into the fold and align with our mission.



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