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## Worcester nonprofit starts urban mushroom farm to address food insecurity



Photo | Courtesy of The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts

Holding mushroom blocks in front of the Southeast Asian Coalition's growing room are (from left) Amanda Dye, Clark University master's program student and part-time Southeast Asian Coalition collaborator; Amie Shei, president and CEO of The Health Foundation; Tuyet Tran, executive director of the Southeast Asian Coalition; and Daniel Germain, The Health Foundation grants and operations manager.

By Mica Kanner-Mascolo

Taking a unique approach to addressing the mounting issue of food insecurity throughout the state, Worcester-based nonprofit Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts has launched an urban mushroom-growing farm to provide access to the nutrient-rich vegetable and promote sustainable harvesting.

The facility, located at Worcester's Printers Building is manned by a three-person team growing mushrooms commonly used in Asian cuisines, including shiitake and oyster mushrooms. The majority of the initiative's produce are being donated to local families, shelters, temples, and senior centers while a portion are being sold at farmers markets with the profits being reinvested back into the farm's infrastructure, according to a Tuesday press release from SEACMA.

SEACMA received a \$120,000 Activation Fund grant provided by Worcester-based The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts in 2023 to purchase and set up equipment for the indoor mushroom facility.

"It's amazing to be able to transform an unused storage space into a thriving food growing space," Tuyet Tran, executive director of SEACMA, said in the release. "I smile every time I go into our mushroom-growing room and see shelves and shelves of mushrooms in various stages of fruiting. I am so grateful to The Health Foundation for making our dream of creating organic and freshly grown food available to our community."

Between 11% and 38% of Worcester residents in 2023 struggled with food insecurity, according to a community food assessment report conducted by Worcester County Food Bank's Center on Food Equity. Food insecurity is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

Having already begun producing its first batches a couple of months ago, the farm today produces hundreds of pounds of mushrooms a week, primarily oyster mushrooms.

The Health Foundation's Activation Fund grant program annually funds local organizations addressing health issues throughout the community, having awarded more \$57 million since its inception in 1999.

"Beyond medical care, we believe that health is influenced by access to fundamentals like nutritious food and economic opportunity," Amie Shei, president and CEO of The Health Foundation, said in the release. "The Southeast Asian Coalition is addressing these core needs in a way that directly benefits the Central Massachusetts community. We are thrilled to see this mushroom-growing initiative take root and thrive."

*Mica Kanner-Mascolo is a staff writer at Worcester Business Journal, who primarily covers the healthcare and diversity, equity, and inclusion industries.*