

Pie in the Sky

MassHousing

Management Innovation: Human Resources

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"We must have a pie. Stress cannot exist in the presence of a pie."
– David Mamet

Pumpkin. Pecan. Lemon Meringue. Key Lime. Blueberry. Cherry. Apple. Custard. Mississippi Mud. Strawberry Rhubarb. Sweet Potato. Everyone has a favorite. Everyone knows someone who makes ***the best***. Just the thought of this simple word – made up of three letters – can instantly bring memories of happiness and comfort and family.

PIE.

MassHousing employees never skipped a beat from the moment COVID-19 hit. Workers were given all of the necessary tools to work from home. And work they did! Despite the pandemic, MassHousing has experienced an extraordinary Fiscal Year 2021, with more than \$700 million in Rental and more than \$740 million in Home Ownership financing. With a few months to go, the Agency is on track to experience its best lending year ever!

However, months of working from home were challenging for Agency employees. Managers were communicating with senior staff that despite their exceptional work performance they were hearing from some employees that they felt adrift. Obviously, MassHousing employees were not alone in this regard. The effects of social isolation on mental health are well documented. MassHousing's Human Resources Division has done a phenomenal job in promoting self-awareness and spotting the signs and potential challenges of work and home life stresses. But, as the holidays approached, and the weeks at home turned into months at home, morale was waning. As Thanksgiving approached, a boost was needed.

Each week, the MassHousing Executive Team meets virtually. The Team wanted to recognize the staff's efforts and start off the holidays with a thank you for all of their hard work. The Executive Team wanted employees to know that their hard work mattered – but as importantly that THEY mattered. While employees sometimes felt disconnected from one another – was there a way to make employees feel cared for and appreciated? One of the Team members said that they wished that they could just bake everyone a pie for Thanksgiving. What could be a better morale booster than a homemade pie?

And from that seed of an idea ... grew an enormous tree of gratitude. This idea launched a massive undertaking and the idea to actually get a home-baked pie to every MassHousing employee who wanted one. How could this be accomplished? Was it even possible?

The potential vehicle for this effort came when MassHousing turned its consideration to our mission – and in turn, the mission of the businesses with whom we work – specifically Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprises (M/WBEs). Unfortunately, we could not find an existing vendor who could accommodate an order of the size the Agency needed. So, we looked for other mission-oriented businesses. We found **Community Servings**.

Community Servings provides home-delivered meals and nutritional services to individuals and families living with critical and chronic illnesses. Made-from-scratch meals are medically tailored – customized to meet the nutritional and medical needs of those fighting illnesses like HIV/AIDS, diabetes, cancer, kidney disease and many others. Additionally, the Community Servings Teaching Kitchen offers a 12-week food service job-training program, focused on those with barriers to employment. Trainees learn basic cooking skills, life skills, food sanitation procedures and receive job placement support. Most importantly, trainees build their self-confidence as they work

alongside Community Servings staff to prepare and deliver meals to the critically ill, giving their job-training experience purpose, and connecting them to the communities in which they live.

Pie in the Sky is the most successful annual fundraiser that Community Servings sponsors each year. For nearly 30 years, over 150 Boston-area chefs, bakers, caterers and restaurants generously donate scratch-made apple, pecan, pumpkin and sweet potato pies to the *Pie in the Sky* bake sale. In 2019, Community Servings sold over 25,000 pies which in turn raised more than \$850,000 and provided tens of thousands of meals to citizens struggling with illness. COVID-19 meant that only the two best-sellers from previous years – apple and pecan – would be available for 2020 – but they were still in business!

We had found our vendor!

MassHousing staff contacted Community Servings who said they could accommodate our request for the pies. The next step was an E-mail from MassHousing’s Executive Director, Chrystal Kornegay to all Agency staff. Chrystal had made a practice of sending newsy E-mails out to staff every few weeks during the pandemic. “Chrystal-grams” as they came to be known – were messages of hope to staff – with fun stories that Chrystal would include about things she had read – or recipes she was trying. In this “Chrystal-gram”, she wrote in part:

“This has been a very eventful year. The history-making events in 2020 seem to never cease. Fortunately, we have important work and caring co-workers to help get us through.

This Thanksgiving is going to be unlike any other we have had in recent memory. Because we have much to be thankful for and you all have been working diligently, we thought we could do something that would make the holiday season a little brighter. We will be supporting a local nonprofit – [Community Servings](#) – in their 26th annual Pie in the Sky fundraiser. And the best part is that each of you who want one, can get a pie.

You are probably thinking, “What did she write? I can get a pie for Thanksgiving?”. That’s right. Community Servings will bake a pie for you, you can pick it up at one of several locations around the Commonwealth, and MassHousing will make a donation. It’s really that simple. Community Servings has been doing this for many years so they have the process down. And they cook made from scratch, culturally appropriate, medically tailored meals every day for critically ill people across Massachusetts. So we know they can cook as well. The only drawback this year is that, due to the pandemic, they are only offering two pie choices – apple or pecan.

This past year has had many joys and sorrows and we wanted to do a little something to make your holiday season feel a little less challenging. Community Servings says food is medicine. Some psychologists say food is love. I say food is good. So please take this gift in the spirit in which it is given – as medicine for what might be ailing you in these challenging times. As love and friendship from your co-workers. And as good, healthy food for your enjoyment.

Take time for yourselves. Be with your loved ones if you can. And I give you permission, just this once, to have your pie before your dinner.

Be well. Be safe. And I’ll see you soon.”

Because Community Servings had 15 sites all around the state where pies could be picked up, staff would receive a voucher which would allow them to go to the most convenient site two days before Thanksgiving to pick up their pie.

Unfortunately for us, but fortunately for Community Servings, there was a huge surge in pie orders before we were able to place ours. This meant that Community Servings would only have one pick-up location in the City of Boston. This presented a challenge as our employees live all across the state. But if there is one thing we learned in 2020 it was the truth in old adage, “when life gives you lemons ... make lemonade.” A plan then emerged for MassHousing’s Executive Team and Senior Staff to play “Thanksgiving Elves” in a massive pie delivery effort – to each employee’s own home.

Staff members were asked to respond via email with their order – indicating the type of pie that they wanted – apple or pecan – and also to include their cell phone number and home address. MassHousing operation Elves then began sorting the orders as they arrived and mapping out each pie delivery to a designated “Delivery Elf”.

Santa’s famous delivery schedule had nothing on MassHousing this year. Like a well-oiled machine – the Agency cranked into gear on Tuesday, November 24th. At precisely 8:30 AM, two Elves departed MassHousing in the Agency’s van to travel to the Community Servings pick-up site in Boston. They returned to the loading dock in MassHousing’s downtown Boston office tower at approximately 10:00 AM where they were met by more Elves who were tasked and ready to label and sort the pies. Each pie had a printed label with the employee’s name, address and cell phone number.

In less than an hour, delivery Elves started rolling into the Loading Dock to pick up their precious cargo. When they arrived – they were given a detailed delivery list and all of pies were loaded into their trunks along with a carefully packed bag of PPE for each Elf. This included blue paper surgical gowns, face masks, multiple pairs of rubber gloves, hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes and a trash bag. The Elves on the loading dock were dressed in festive attire as they offered their best wishes to their fellow elves on their journey. Delivery Elves were asked to call the staff person using the phone number provided a few minutes before their arrival, so the recipient was ready and waiting for a quick hand off. No Elves were expected to go into a home or building.

The pie delivery was an enormous success! In most cases, the delivery would mark the first in-person interaction most MassHousing employees had with another staffer in nearly nine months! Of course, we had been connecting by Zoom and through TEAM meetings, but this was going to be a face-to-face meeting! The positive feedback that we received from Agency staff was overwhelming. To a one – they were grateful for the pie – and as grateful that Senior Staff took it upon themselves to make these special deliveries. You can’t technically see a smile through a mask – but I think we all realize now that you KNOW when someone is smiling under their mask. Their eyes light up – the edges of their faces change. The emotion is palpable.

In all, well over 100 pies were delivered to employees in 58 cities and towns by the MassHousing Elves and MassHousing’s purchase meant almost 50 more pies were donated back to Community Servings for distribution to their clients.

Deliveries went smoothly with the exception of one interesting journey down a dirt road – courtesy of our COO’s navigation system in her Jeep. But that may be a story better told someday at an in-person gathering during an NCSHA Annual Conference. The main point is that employees felt valued – and they felt connected. It was a shared experience that everyone had – as fellow employees at the Agency. It brought people together and it helped them feel that they were seen and appreciated by the Senior Leadership of the Agency. And you can’t put a price tag on that.



COMMUNITY
SERVINGS
FOOD HEALS

PIE IN THE SKY!

Community Servings is a non-profit food and nutrition program for residents living with critical + chronic illnesses.

28th Annual Pie in the Sky will support meals for residents struggling with an illness such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, for an entire week.

11 Delivery Elves

Chrystal Kornegay, Charles Karimbakas, Daniel Morales, Laurie Bennett, Mark Teden, Mounzer Aylouche, Myra Carmona, Nancy McDonald, Rachel Madden, Amy Dominici & Jennifer Foley

2 Operation Elves

Bleyton Barros & Anna Reppucci

104 Pies Eaten

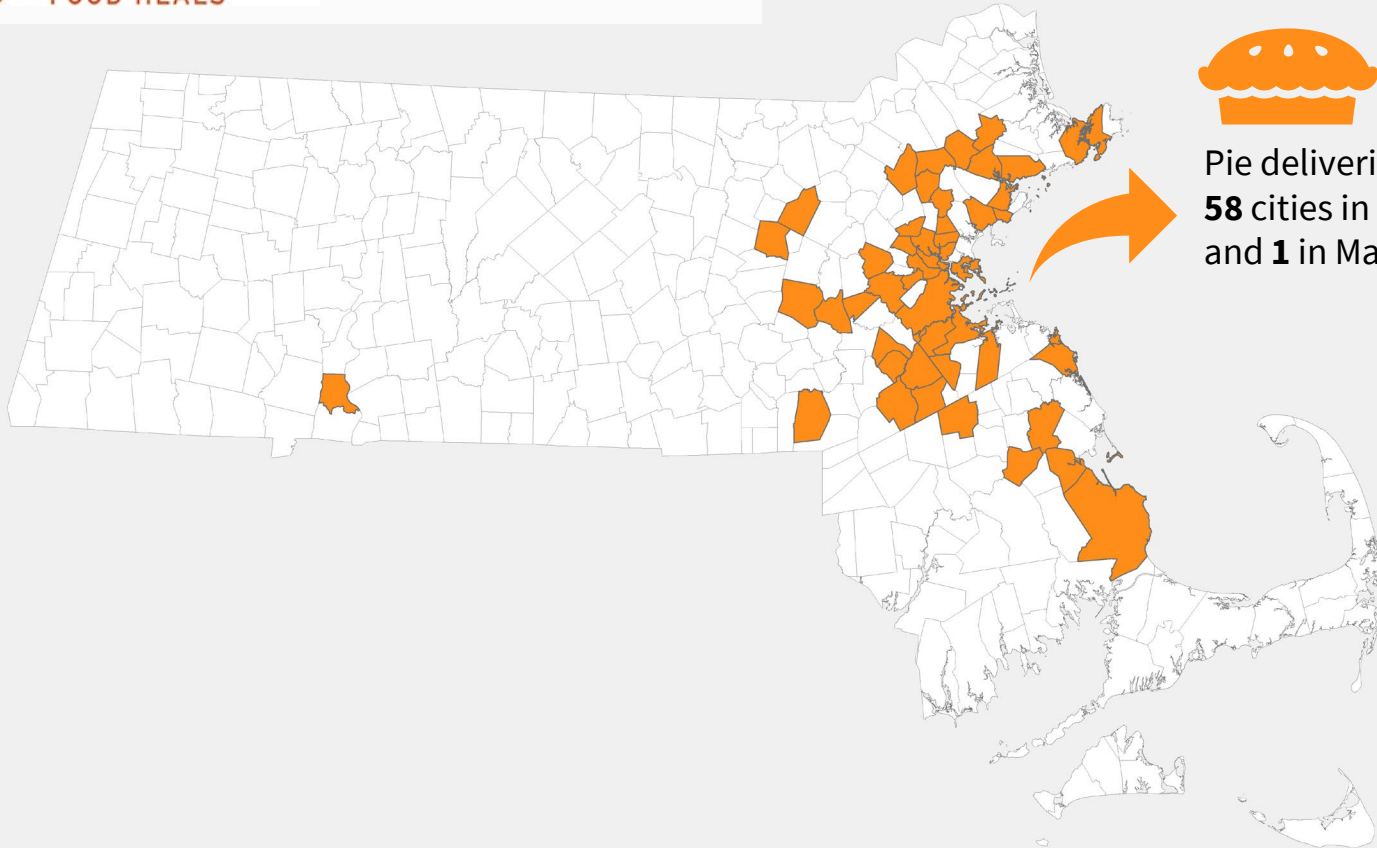


MASSHOUSING



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PIE IN THE SKY!



Pie deliveries to
58 cities in Massachusetts
and **1** in Maine







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FOOD HEALS

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