

Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy
Advisory Council (IFNPAC)
Report to General Assembly for 2020

MARCH 2, 2021

Acknowledgements

This report and the activities described within is a collaborative effort of the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC), the Hunger Elimination Task Force, and many other community partners.

IFNPAC members

- *Department of Health (RIDOH)*
- *Department of Environmental Management (DEM)*
- *Department of Administration (DOA)*
- *Department of Human Services (DHS)*
- *Office on Healthy Aging (OHA)*
- *Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE)*
- *Department of Corrections (DOC)*
- *Rhode Island Commerce Corporation (RI Commerce)*

Special thanks to these community partners and others who are acknowledged within this report:

- *Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC)*
- *Rhode Island Community Food Bank (RICFB)*
- *University of Rhode Island's Business Engagement/Agricultural Center/SNAP-ED*
- *Farm Fresh Rhode Island*
- *City of Providence, Healthy Communities Office*
- *Health Equity Zone Initiative at RIDOH*
- *Hope & Main*

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Executive Summary

Supporting the growth of the local food sector through meaningful regulatory and policy initiatives is critical to increasing the number of jobs, growing the local economy, and ensuring positive health outcomes. Under Rhode Island General Laws 21-36-3, the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) membership is made up of the directors of the Department of Health (RIDOH), Department of Environmental Management (DEM), and Department of Administration (DOA). Administrators and directors from other State agencies often participate, including representation from the Department of Human Services (DHS), Office on Healthy Aging (OHA), Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), Department of Corrections (DOC), Rhode Island Commerce Corporation (RI Commerce), and the leadership of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC).

IFNPAC was created to find ways to overcome regulatory and policy barriers to developing a strong, sustainable food economy and healthful nutrition practices. IFNPAC submits an annual activity report to the General Assembly. This report has been drafted in accordance with the requirements set forth in Chapter 36, Section 21-36-5 of the *Rhode Island Local Agriculture and Seafood Act*.

The IFNPAC convened four times in 2020: February 20, May 1, August 17, and November 6. Council members listened to and discussed topics presented by public and private partners with a stake in the Rhode Island food system. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rhode Island's community organizations, statewide non-profits, and municipal and state governments came together to coordinate a response to food insecurity and disruption of local food supply chains. The effort successfully met the immediate challenges and revealed the strength of the State's food ecosystem.

The State Director of Food Strategy position has been vacant since December 2019. As such, IFNPAC Council members stepped in to understand and address the issues that have emerged and accelerated food access concerns since COVID-19 struck Rhode Island.

- A COVID-19 Food Strategy Task Force was established to address food access needs and opportunities and was facilitated by IFNPAC Council members, which included representation from State agencies, Congressional delegation, municipalities, and community-based organizations. This group initially met three times a week, moved to weekly meetings, and continues to engage on a biweekly basis.
- The State of Rhode Island Food Access Workstream was established by the Governor's Office. The team consisted of State agency representation from the Governor's Office, RIDOH, DEM, OHA, RIDE, and DHS to assess the landscape of the State's immediate food access needs during the public health emergency and economic insecurity crisis. Should additional federal funding become available, this information will guide the state to identify gaps and resources needed. This information has been shared at the state and community levels. State and community-level stakeholders were interviewed regarding drivers of food insecurity, the response, ongoing challenges, and recommendations.

IFNPAC is focused on implementing the Governor's Food Strategy, *Relish Rhody*. Agendas for meetings were set according to the integrated focus areas of *Relish Rhody*. (See Appendix A for meeting minutes.)

The Council engaged in the five integrated focus areas of *Relish Rhody*, including:

- Preserve and grow agriculture and fisheries industries in Rhode Island;
- Sustain and create markets for Rhode Island food and beverage products;
- Enhance the climate for food and beverage businesses;
- Ensure food security for all Rhode Islanders; and
- Minimize food waste and divert it from the waste stream.

Based on these focus areas, IFNPAC had several priorities in 2020. The pandemic impacted all focus areas. Inter-agency progress was made in each of these focus areas in 2020, with highlights of the priorities of IFNPAC detailed below.

Preserve and Grow Agriculture and Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island

The integrated focus area to preserve and grow agriculture and fisheries industries in Rhode Island is a cornerstone of the *Relish Rhody* food strategy.

DEM and partner organizations led many of the efforts supporting local agriculture and seafood industries. These initiatives included the following:

1. To help foster the continued viability of the Rhode Island commercial seafood industry during the COVID-19 public health crisis, DEM enacted a new, no-cost Direct Sale Dealer License via an emergency regulation filed on April 17, 2020. It authorized commercial fishermen in Rhode Island to sell certain species of finfish and to sell and transport for-sale live lobsters and crabs directly to consumers and licensed seafood retailers from the vessel on which they were harvested.
2. In November 2020, URI received two deliveries of USDA Farms to Families Food Boxes from Vincent Farms in Delaware. Each delivery had 1,152 units. Each unit had 12 pounds of produce, five pounds of meat, and five pounds of dairy, and weighed around 22 pounds. Included with each unit was a gallon of 2% milk. In total, URI received and distributed 2,304 boxes of food and milk to families in Washington County, the intended recipients.
3. Technical support was offered to assist farmers across the state to come into compliance with the federal *Food Safety Modernization Act* – in partnership with RIDOH and the University of Rhode Island (URI).
4. Several IFNPAC agencies and partners worked with dairy farmers to help ensure they could continue to operate within Rhode Island and find markets for their products.
5. The *Local Agriculture and Seafood Act* (LASA) Committee awarded \$100,000 to 12 Rhode Island small businesses. This funding helped farmers and aqua culturists expand within the state by providing small grants for specific infrastructure needs. Private foundation funding for the program ended prior to the end of the grant period and resulted in a 50% reduction of available funding for regrants for fiscal year 2019. This funding loss occurred even though the RIFPC determined that from 2014-2016, inclusion of just 27 recipients created 84 new jobs, increased sales by more than \$5 million, and leveraged \$2.5 million in additional funding. (This does not include the recent funding secured by the Rhode Island Mushroom Company, an early LASA recipient and Innovation Bond participant that is bringing an estimated \$100 million of additional investment to Rhode Island.)

IFNPAC partnered with Polaris to provide low-cost technical assistance and LEAN training specific to food businesses. Several farmers took advantage of the program and used LEAN principles to increase efficiency and profits.

1. In April 2020, Governor Raimondo announced 12 new *Real Jobs Rhode Island* partnerships. This included a new food business sector partnership based at the RIFPC. The RIFPC the Director of Food Strategy, and staff from the Department of Labor and Training (DLT) worked with the Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association and consultants at Karen Karp & Partners (KK&P) to learn from their successful Real Jobs apprenticeship program to build a model for food-sector jobs training and skill building. The RIFPC will hire a Director of Workforce Initiatives to lead this work in early 2020.
2. The RIFPC partnered with DEM, RI Commerce, and the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation to evaluate approaches to eliminating wastewater processing constraints that are inhibiting the growth of seafood processing in the state. The project team also looked at successful models from other parts of the country that could possibly increase wholesale and retail distribution and sales of locally processed seafood in Rhode Island. This project was continued for 2020 and beyond and will continue to be in alignment with efforts of DEM's Seafood Marketing Collaborative.

Sustain and Create Markets for Rhode Island Food and Beverage Products

Relish Rhody's integrated focus area to sustain and create markets for Rhode Island food and beverage products recognizes that Rhode Island growers, harvesters, and makers are businesses that need access to appropriate markets to thrive. In 2020, IFNPAC observed and reported that the pandemic had created a surge in local food manufacturing and increased demand for local workforce development.

Enhance the Climate for Food and Beverage Businesses

In alignment with the integrated focus area to enhance the climate for food and beverage businesses in Rhode Island, IFNPAC tracked and supported other agencies' initiatives to streamline regulations and update rules for food businesses. The RIFPC supported the Real Food Jobs Rhode Island program, by convening employer cohorts to pinpoint industry needs, provide targeted workforce training, and create strategic pipelines into and through the food industry. This program also encourages youth to explore diverse career opportunities in food industries.

Ensure Food Security for All Rhode Islanders

In 2017, IFNPAC created the Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF). In October 2018, this task force released a set of recommendations to IFNPAC and Governor Raimondo. It quickly became evident that due to COVID-19, more Rhode Islanders than ever need emergency and supplemental food.

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank's (RICFB) *2020 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island* found:

- One in four households in Rhode Island lacks adequate food.
- Underlying medical conditions that increase the risk of severe illness from COVID-19 are prevalent among Rhode Islanders experiencing food insecurity.
- Demand for food assistance at member agencies of the RICFB increased by 26% during the pandemic.
- Government aid is critical to protecting vulnerable families from hunger.

In 2020 IFNPAC and HETF worked at the federal, local, and community levels to reach people in need of adequate food:

1. State agencies, including RIDOH, RIDE, and DHS successfully obtained federal nutrition program waivers to increase food access flexibility and benefits. These agencies collaborated on communication efforts to increase outreach and program participation.
2. OHA and other council members and organizations facilitated the distribution of meals to the older adult population.
3. State agencies helped to facilitate and promote food and meal donation events across the state by utilizing Health Equity Zone (HEZ) partnerships.
4. IFNPAC members assisted in the planning of the URI Food System Summit, which focused on the impact of COVID-19 on food security in Rhode Island and across the US, as well as steps that can be taken to address food insecurity. This event took place on January 20, 2021. Follow-up sessions are scheduled to occur throughout the winter and spring 2021.

Minimize Food Waste and Divert It from the Waste Stream

Momentum continues to grow for supporting food waste reduction and diversion within Rhode Island, and IFNPAC directed its focus on how to best support this work. This continued work includes the following:

1. The *Rhode to End Hunger* continues to expand and has saved more than 20,000 pounds of food from the waste stream. This initiative facilitated restaurants that had an abundance of food to donate. This expansion has also helped to reduce food waste and provide food to those in need.
2. The Center for Ecotechnology (CET) offers a variety of services for Rhode Island businesses and institutions interested in improving their waste management, including resources for reducing, recovering, and diverting wasted food. This assistance may include quantifying food waste generated, detailed recommendations for reducing food waste, donation, composting strategies, connections to service providers, and staff training.

CET works with several local partners, including State agencies and non-profit organizations. Thanks to partnerships and support from EPA Region 1, DEM, and Clean Ocean Access, CET continues to provide free assistance to Rhode Island businesses and institutions. Since 2019, CET has helped Rhode Island businesses donate more than 98,000 meals, and Massachusetts businesses donate more than 9,000 meals to Rhode Island food rescue organizations. Additionally, CET has helped Rhode Island businesses prevent more than 10 tons of food waste and helped implement programs that divert more than 1,100 tons of food waste annually to composting, animal feed, and anaerobic digestion.

Summary of Meetings

Complete minutes from meetings held on February 20, May 1, August 17, and November 6 are available in Appendix A.

February 20, 2020

- RIDOH, Room 401, Providence
- RIDOH, DEM, RIDE, Department of Administration (DOA), RIFPC, and RI Commerce representatives were in attendance.
- Peter Allison, Executive Director of Farm to Institution New England (FINE) shared a presentation on *FINE's Regional Trends in New England Farm to Institution Procurement Policy*. Institutions play a major role in local food spending. Recommendations for Rhode Island were shared, followed by a discussion regarding options relevant to Rhode Island farmers and markets.

May 1, 2020

- Virtual meeting (Zoom)
- RIDOH, DOA's Division of Planning (DOP), DOA, DHS, DEM, and RIFPC representatives in attendance.
- This meeting was held in conjunction with the HETF to help coordinate efforts and communication regarding the State's COVID-19 response. The members engaged in a strategic discussion about each agency's actions to increase resources, benefits, and supports for Rhode Islanders and businesses.

August 17, 2020

- Virtual meeting (Zoom)
- RIDOH, Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Hospitals (BHDDH), DOP, DOA, DHS, DEM, RIFPC, and RI Commerce representatives were in attendance.
- Nell Abernathy, from the Governor's Office, provided an overview of State supports and workstreams, including the food access workstream. The team consisted of representatives from the Governor's Office, RIDOH, DEM, OHA, RIDE, and DHS to assess immediate food access needs during the pandemic and economic insecurity crisis. Should additional federal funding become available, this information will guide the State to identify gaps and resources needed. During this meeting Council members also reviewed plans for reopening Rhode Island schools to in-person learning and related food access strategies. Presenters included Steve Carey, MS, RD (RIDE); and Linda Mendonca, MSN, RN, PHNA-BC, NASN, FNASN, RIDOH School Nurse consultant.

November 6, 2020

- Virtual meeting (Zoom)
- RIDOH, DEM, DOA, DHS, RIFPC, and RI Commerce representatives were in attendance.
- A job description for the Director of Food Strategy position was shared as the position had recently been funded. The Council and Task Force attended and participated in two presentation discussions: *Key Findings from Food Access State Stakeholder Outreach* presented by Diane Lynch and Nessa Richman of the RIFPC and *Food Access and Diabetes* presented by Randi Belhumeur of RIDOH. Belhumeur also provided an overview of the Diabetes Equity Challenge and introduced HEZ representatives Robyn Hall of Pawtucket/Central Falls and Albert Whitaker of East Providence to summarize HEZ initiatives in their communities.

Quarterly Updates

To keep IFNPAC members and the Rhode Island General Assembly better informed of food-specific initiatives within member agencies, the Director of Food Strategy will release quarterly summary memos of food strategy implementation actions.

Appendix A: Meeting Minutes

Date: February 20, 2020

Time: 3p.m.-4:30 p.m.

Location: RIDOH, Providence

Council members present: Carol Hall-Walker (RIDOH, standing in for Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott), Ken Ayars (DEM), Steve Carey (RIDE), Amanda Clark (DOA), Catherine White (RIDOH, attending for Ernest Julian)

Other attendees: Diane Lynch (RIFPC), David Dadekian (Eat Drink RI), Kate Balestracci (URI SNAP-Ed) Paul Gonsalves (DOA Planning), Chris Potrowski (DOA Purchasing), Robert DeAngelis (DOA, Purchasing), Peter Allison (FINE), and Pat Raymond (RIDOH).

Call to order: Carol Hall-Walker called the meeting to order at 3 p.m.

1. Approval of minutes from last meeting: minutes from quarter 4 were approved.
2. Rhode Island Food Strategy implementation updates since last meeting
 - a. Updates from each integrated focus area—The group identified a lead point of contact for each focus area to provide written updates for the legislative report due in April:
 - i. Preserve and Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island (Diane Lynch and Ken Ayars)
 - ii. Enhance the Climate for Food and Beverage Businesses (David Dadekian and Diane Lynch)
 - iii. Sustain and Create Markets from Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products (Catherine White)
 - iv. Ensure Food Security for All Rhode Islanders (Steve Cary, Kate Balestracci)
 - v. Minimize Food Waste and Divert It from the Waste Stream (Diane Lynch and Ken Ayars)

Note: The leads listed will reach out to other IFNPAC/HETF members for input.

3. Review of 2019 legislative report: draft will be sent to all IFNPAC members for further input.

Carol Hall-Walker: Public charge and Physical Activity and Nutrition (PAN) funding. Some Public Charge documents provided, and additional documents will be distributed with the meeting notes. RIDOH applied for PAN funding. The grant was approved but was not funded. RIDOH addressed this with the Congressional delegation; however, it doesn't appear that CDC will be funding any new awards in fiscal year 2020. Obesity rates in Rhode Island are increasing. There is a CDC study that Brown University is leading called, JOIN for ME and is focused on reducing childhood obesity in low-income communities of Woonsocket, Providence, and Central Falls. Carol will represent Dr. Alexander-Scott, more details to follow.

Kate Balestracci: Upcoming changes to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility take effect February 24, 2020, that will impact Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDS) in 12 Rhode Island communities. These individuals will no longer be waived from the ABAWD work requirements. (Only New Shoreham residents will continue to be waived.) SNAP, in partnership with the federal government, is working on removing waivers. This will not impact high school students. See handout.

Steve Cary: USDA is making significant changes to food programs in schools. Most of the changes are related to fruits and vegetables. The changes will provide more flexibility and

will make reporting easier, offer other foods, and help to eliminate food waste.

Ken Ayars: Farm Fresh RI food hub scheduled to open by end of 2020 and is looking for co-location as part of structural development. RIAT awarded \$4 million to build an agricultural technical park at URI's Peckham Farm. The job description for the Director of Food Strategy is almost done. It will be posted soon, and group is urged to spread the word once the position is posted.

Robert DeAngelis: Agencies purchase off the Maser Price Agreement (MPA) from local Rhode Island markets, and DOA intends to have MPA for prime vendor continuous recruitment. At present, Rhode Island's small purchase threshold is \$5,000 and agencies are only allowed to purchase off the MPA.

Amanda Clark: E-procurement platform is underway and will issue electronic notifications. E-purchasing rolling out over the next year which will make it easier for schools and municipalities to purchase locally. Proposed legislation is expected soon, and it will increase small purchase threshold to \$10,000. It will be important to have strong support for proposed legislation.

Presentation: Peter Allison, Executive Director of Farm to Institution New England (FINE), presented on FINE's Regional Trends in New England Farm to Institution Procurement Policy

- Institutions play a major role in local food spending.
- Mission – K-12 and others, increase funding to do projects.
- Values – Equity/climate change/collaboration/space/economies of scale.
- Goals--Regional food served, Why Institutions? – they are more stable, large facilities with students, workers, patients, and faculty members. See attached power point for data/details.
- Recommendations for Rhode Island include:
 - Evaluate options to amend or improve efficacy of local preference and procurement laws.
 - Evaluate increasing small purchase threshold.
 - Explore opportunities to integrate regional and local purchasing targets into policies and programs.
 - Look at common local procurement policy levers.

Note: How Institutions can better track, build employment skills to prepare and serve local foods. Example: Centralized kitchen to serve K-12 schools to process and prepare local food – the Rhode Island Public Health Institute is helping with this. Look at Sodexo and others working on this for examples. Farm Fresh RI and Kids First. Vermont got rid of reduced-price lunch policies, gets rid of lunch shaming, reduces administrative headaches. New York is supportive of healthy kids doing some innovative work. Rhode Island is doing great non-profit/business connections work. The data presented will be helpful in advocacy efforts.

Discussion on options relevant to Rhode Island farmers and makers

- Diane asked, "Do schools have the ability to track where their food is coming from"? Peter explained, "One of the bigger challenges has been with the distributors, but this should improve with regional collaborations".
- Steve Cary pointed out that many schools in Rhode Island don't have kitchens, which is a barrier.
- Peter said there is a webinar being planned to show how New York has been successful in improving local food labeling to source identify and collaboration to improve policies

4. Public Comments

5. The HETF will convene in April. Details will be distributed soon.
6. Meeting was adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Date: May 1, 2020

Time: 9:30 a.m.-10:30 a.m.

Location: Conference Call/Zoom (audio only)

Meeting-quarter 2 meeting minutes

Council members call: Carol Hall-Walker (RIDOH, on behalf of Dr. Nicole Alexander -Scott), Director Janet Coit (DEM) Ken Ayars (DEM), Steve Carey (RIDE), Ann Barone (RIDOH), Paul Gonsalves (DOA), Maria Cimini, (DHS), Ananda Fraser (DEM), Paul Gonsalves (DEM), Elise Swearingen (OHA)

Other attendees: Diane Lynch (RIFPC), Nessa Richman (RIFPC), Kate Balestracci (URI Snap-Ed), Kathryn Roy (RIDOH), Erin Bertoldi (RIDOH), Eva Agudelo (Hope Harvest RI), Annie Sherman (Edible Rhody) Thea Upham (Farm Fresh RI), Dr. Taka Yamaguchi (Hasbro Children's Hospital Primary Care), Ken Demaris (Snap Chef), Keith Amoroso and Lillian Berard (RIDOH), Ingrid Fratantuono (USDA, FarmService Agency), Doris Blanchard, (RI Commerce)

1. Call to order: Carol Hall-Walker called the meeting to order at 9:32 a.m.
2. Introduction:
 - This meeting was held in conjunction with the Rhode Island COVID-19 Food Strategy Taskforce, which occurs three times a week and is led by Ken Ayars (DEM) and Elise Swearingen (OHA). The HETF also convened using this format on April 27.
 - Carol Hall-Walker presented greetings and expressed sincere gratitude from the Director in the ongoing food access work, particularly during COVID -19 and encouraged connections to food access throughout the state, particularly within vulnerable populations.
 - The Director of Food Strategy position has been vacant since December 2019. State agencies support and are in agreement that the position will be posted and filled. The posting has been delayed due to COVID-19.
3. Minutes from the 2019 quarter 4 and 2020 quarter 1 were approved.
4. The 2019 IFNPAC Legislative Report was approved and will be submitted.
5. Rhode Island Food Strategy implementation:
 - Updates from each integrated focus area:
 - Sustain and Create Markets from Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products and Preserve and Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island
 - Director Coit and Ken Ayars (DEM) reported the seafood community in Rhode Island has been hit very hard by COVID-19, and DEM is working with RIDOH to adjust regulations to allow fisheries to sell directly off their boat. Fisheries community are just starting to apply for licenses, and DEM will share a list of businesses that have been able to adapt and change quickly. Customers want to support local farmers and fisheries, and DEM is working to assure farmers and fisherman can take part in the stimulus packages. DEM is collaborating with DHS on raising awareness of the importance of the COVID-19 Food Assistance Program. USDA is putting money out so organizations can apply to put together food boxes (domestically grown products) and distribute to those in need. Seafood is not included in the food boxes. The COVID-19 Food Assistance Program application is due May 1, and DEM should be notified of awards next week. Rhode Island has a strong, robust application.
 - Ensure Food Security for all Rhode Islanders/COVID-19 Food Strategy Task Force updates:
 - Maria Cimini (DHS): DHS has secured many USDA waivers, maximized data matching, extended all certification dates by six months, and is close to implementing

telephonic signature to maximize SNAP benefits for March and April. Rhode Island was the first state to offer p-EBT. Farm Fresh and RIFPC have been tremendous partners and assisted with the training offered to farmers to learn how to become EBT providers. Food delivery remains a challenge that is being addressed.

- Last week SNAP recipients received P-EBT benefits on their card. This week non-SNAP recipients will receive their EBT benefits if they have children who were receiving free or reduced-cost meals at schools. The Card can be used to buy food, but the Card is not transferable. However, food purchased with the Card can be donated to others.
- There is no risk for immigrant households, as these benefits will not be part of Public Charge.
- DHS approved a third month of the highest-possible amount of SNAP benefits, and the benefits will be dispersed today.
- DHS coordinated with RIDOH to create a one-page flyer reviewing what can be purchased with WIC and what can be purchased with SNAP. This list also contains a link to substitutions that are allowed with WIC for this time.
- RIDOH will push out this information, has already shared with faith communities.
- Steve Carey (RIDE): Almost all school districts in Rhode Island are offering meals to kids either through delivery or meal sites. Rhode Island has received about 20 USDA waivers to make it easier for people to participate. Schools are constantly adapting their models. In the last two weeks of March, 200,000 meals were served, and that number is expected to increase in April. Any child can go to any of the sites to get meals even if it is not within their community. Schools are serving about 50% of what is normally served when school is in session. School districts are doing a great job. The program is available for any child younger than 18, and a listing of the meal sites is on RIDOH, RIDE, United Way 211, and summer meals clearing house websites. Waivers are due to end June 30; however, RIDE expects USDA to extend them through the summer. Food sites listed here:

<https://health.ri.gov/diseases/ncov2019/about/foodsites/>

- Ann Barone, RIDOH, WIC Program:
 - The WIC Program is facing issues related to May 31 deadline for current waivers. USDA is checking to see if waivers can be extended or if we will need to reapply.
 - More waivers are pending, but not able to speak to this currently.
 - Call RIDOH State WIC Office 401-222-5960 if hearing food items are not available.
 - Increased population of people applying for the program.
- Lillian Berard, RIDOH, Food Protection Program:
 - Restaurants are struggling with restrictions.
 - Looking to expand services to sell groceries.
 - Also looking to give out free lunches.
- Elise Swearingen, OHA:
 - Surging all current programs; Meals on Wheels distributing 2,500 frozen meals across the state, and URI is producing 500-700 meals daily.
 - Fidelity Investments is willing to give 500 meals, but they are unable to distribute to the community. A refrigerated truck is needed to assist in the delivery. This program aims to serve undocumented Rhode Islanders or high-risk families in vulnerable populations.
 - Carol Hall-Walker suggested connecting with the Pawtucket/Central Falls HEZ.
 - OHA is working with Family Service of RI on a grocery delivery program that will increase deliveries from 500 to 1,200. They are working with Rent Sons to do deliveries. The program has

received approval from the Governor's office, but still determining logistics and funding stream.

- Enhance the Climate for Food and Beverage Businesses:
No reports in this topic area due to COVID-19.
- Minimize Food waste and Divert it from the Waste Stream:
 - Eva Agudelo (Hope Harvest):
 - First few weeks of COVID, identified opportunities.
 - URI Master Gardener Program supposed to be distributing seeds, but the event was cancelled. Seeds were given to the RI Food Bank.
 - Seedling to go to Food Pantries as well (East Bay Food Pantry Olneyville Food Center).
 - Looking forward to coordinating with farms to obtain surplus

DEM reported there was a rumor that Rhode Island farmers are composting or wasting food. This is a national issue and there is no evidence that there are food waste issues happening in Rhode Island at this time.

6. COVID-19 and the Response to Food Access in Rhode Island:

- Diane Lynch (RIFPC): Questions from small processors: looking for advice on processing line and washing line during COVID-19. Processors should work with RIDOH and should contact Keith at 222-4729. Also, a lot of information on website www.health.ri.gov. DEM is doing work in the area of raw foods.
- Translation Assistance: Please contact Carol Hall-Walker, at 401-263-5313 if you need assistance getting information translated.
- Ken Demaris, Snap Chef: Snap Chef transformed the culinary training center so they could provide meals to the community, and they appreciate donations from local business. They are currently sourcing 3,000-4,000 meals weekly. Ken will email additional information to Carol to distribute to the community
- Dr. Yamaguchi (Hasbro): Dr. Yamaguchi reported that many families this practice serves have transportation issues and do not have access to food delivery services. DHS provided contact information and resources for families who are in quarantine and/or isolation.

7. Action Steps:

- State agencies will continue to work together to share information and resources for a Food Access update during one of the Governor's daily COVID-19 briefings with Dr. Alexander-Scott.

Meeting adjourned at 10:30 am.

Date: August 17, 2020

Time: 11 a.m.-12:30 pm

Location: Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Meeting Minutes

Council members present on call: Carol Hall-Walker (RIDOH on behalf of Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott), Ken Ayars (DEM on behalf of Director Coit), Secretary Womazetta Jones (EOHHS), Steve Carey (RIDE Child Nutrition), Ernest Julian (RIDOH), Paul Gonsalves (DOA), Director Rose Jones (OHA), Director Kathryn Power (BHDDH), Director Courtney Hawkins (DHS), Doris Blanchard (RI Commerce), and Amanda Clark (DOA).

HETF and Community Members: Diane Lynch (RIFPC), Nessa Richman (RIFPC), Sara Amin, (URI-Snap-Ed), Kate Balestracci (URI Snap-Ed), Dr. Alison Tovar (URI), Andrew Schiff (RICFB), Bethany Caputo (DHS), Laurie Cote (DHS), Maria Cimini, (DHS), Angela Downing (EBCAP), Erin Bertoldi (RIDOH), Lauren Conkey (RIDOH), Cathy Feeney (RIDOH), David Dadekian, Eva Agudelo (Hope Harvest RI), Thea Upham, (Farm Fresh RI), Ellen Cynar (City of Providence) Kerri Connelly (RIPHI), Margaret Read (No Kid Hungry), Dr. Taka Yamaguchi, (Hasbro Children's Hospital Primary Care), Representative Teresa Tanzi, Dr. Alicia Cohen (Brown University), Coryanne Mansell (Center for Ecotechnology), Robyn Hall, Wendy Boudreau (Thundermist), Lisa Raiola (Hope & Main), Chelsea DePaula, Allegra Scharff (Central Providence HEZ), Julius Kolawu, Elizabeth Fuerte (Newport HEZ), Lisa Raiola

Presenters: Nell Abernathy (Governor's Office), Steve Carey (RIDE), Linda Mendonca (RIDOH Consultant)

Carol Hall-Walker called the meeting to order at 11:02 am.

1. Welcome and Introduction:

- Carol Hall-Walker presented greetings and expressed sincere gratitude from the Director in the ongoing food access work, particularly during COVID-19.
- All Council members, State agency members, and community members introduced themselves.

2. Review May 2020 Minutes:

- Minutes from the last meeting were shared and approved.

3. Director of Food Strategy position vacancy:

- Ken Ayars provided a historic overview of this position and reported that prior to COVID-19, funding and overall support to fill the position had been secured through DEM, RIDOH, and RI Commerce. However, it had been delayed due to the pandemic. From the public health crisis, we have learned how important this position is and the related work within the food system is to the state. This position is a priority for the state, and we will continue to move forward with revising the job description in preparation for filling it. We will share with the group once the position is open for applicants.

4. Food Access Workstream Update:

- Nell Abernathy, Policy Director for the Governor's Office, provided an overview of the state's individual supports workstream, which included the food access workstream. The team consisted of State agency representation from the Governor's Office, RIDOH, DEM, OHA, RIDE, and DHS to assess the landscape of the State's immediate food access needs during the public health emergency and economic insecurity crisis. Should additional federal funding become available, this information will guide the state to identify gaps and resources needed. This information will be shared at the state and community levels.
- State and community level stakeholders were interviewed regarding drivers of food insecurity, the response, ongoing challenges, and recommendations. A few high-level

conclusions:

- Drivers of food insecurity: Increasing economic insecurity is driving food insecurity. But also, the public health crisis disrupted existing food distribution systems and exacerbated long-standing food access challenges.
- The response: State Agencies worked with federal funders to apply/secure specific waivers needed to improve and increase resources. The state had ongoing communication, engagement, and support from Congressional delegation. Rhode Island had phenomenal community level response and assistance. Municipalities and community-level organizations stepped in to assist with many challenges such as: delivery, serving undocumented population, providing culturally appropriate foods and other related issues. To meet immediate needs, the Rhode Island Foundation and United Way provided help to get relief funds out the door. Private philanthropy funding will be important to reach long-term strategies.
- Challenges: No single position in state government was monitoring food access during the crisis, and we will continue to advocate to fill the Director of Food Strategy position which is in the FY 21 budget. We also know that delivery and distribution remain challenges. We plan to continue working on SNAP delivery and working with the broader community to identify issues and solutions to distribution.
- Recommendation Highlights:
 1. Increase staff for long-term food state response. (Hire State Director of Food Strategy.)
 2. Continue to advocate for federal aid and waivers.
 3. Support community-based organizations filling essential gaps, especially in high-risk communities and being culturally responsive in meeting food needs. Work with private and community-based organizations. Efforts should be focused on reaching hard-to-reach populations, the RI Food Bank Corp., connecting to new organizations and to RIFBC systems. Community engagement in delivery and distribution to meet local food access and insecure needs.
 4. Invest in the food economy (workforce development and local agriculture and fisheries). Invest in economic development within the food industry, workforce training opportunities like Back to Work RI, federal investments in local agriculture, fisheries and other local food and beverage industries.

Note: Questions/Comments: Funding is needed to fund municipalities to do food access work. Using CDBG funds to do this work. OHA will continue to work with Senior Centers using Enhanced CARES funding to reach high-risk populations and to be culturally responsive. Work with other New England states on planning for food security. Need a single point of contact to pull the strands together so we are as strategic as possible. Reporting back and getting feedback is critical.

5. Presentations:

- Schools Reopening in Rhode Island and Food Access Strategies - Steve Carey, RD (RIDE, Coordinator Child Nutrition Programs)
 - Meal program in schools will look very different than spring of school year 2019-2020. No School Food Service Program (SFSP) waivers are available. Distance learning is not considered an unanticipated school closure. Meals may only be offered to students, and meal counts must be taken at the point of service. Student school IDs and class rosters will be accepted. These are needed for reimbursement of students enrolled. Claims are to be submitted by student, by student eligibility. To use the available waivers, plans must be submitted to, and approved by, RIDE. A separate

waiver request must be submitted to, and approved by, RIDE if there is a need to use the Meal Pattern Flexibility Waiver. Waiver information was shared, as well as implementation suggestions and best practices.

- Waivers for School Meal Programs during COVID-19 (All expired 6/30/2021)
 - Non-Congregate feeding
 - Meal service times
 - Parent pick up
 - Offer versus serve flexibility for senior high schools
 - Meal pattern flexibility

Note: Questions/Comments: Confirmed that only student IDs will be checked and not IDs of parents/caregivers. Pick up and transportation is an issue for some parents, so there is a need for a back-up plan for that. Waiver and guides that relate to CACFP at-risk meals service (after school programs). At risk meals are available but nothing in writing yet.

Additional Resources:

- No Kid Hungry: This resource covers the major schedule models that districts may adopt for the coming school year, the possible meal service models that work for each schedule model, and the program options and waiver considerations for each model. <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/meal-service-options-school-year-2020-2021>
- CDC: This website offers considerations for ways in which schools can help protect students, teachers, administrators, and staff and slow the spread of COVID-19. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>
- USDA: This site has information regarding the waivers that are currently available. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/programs/fns-disaster-assistance/fns-response-covid-19/child-nutrition-covid-19-waivers>
- Partners shared that Rhode Island KIDS COUNT August 2020, *Equity Analysis of Rhode Island School Reopening Plans* report was released. <http://www.rikidscount.org/>

Reopening K-12 Schools Overview: Linda Mendonca, MSN, RN, PHNA-BC, NASN, FNASN, RIDOH State School Nurse Consultant

Reopening RI/Back to School RI: Health and Safety Guidance to Reopen Rhode Island's Elementary and Secondary Schools, Released June 19, 2020.

- Review of the four Plans that districts and schools need to plan for full in-person, partial in-person, limited in-person and all distance learning.
- School Reopening Readiness: Statewide readiness, municipal readiness, testing readiness, supply readiness and operational readiness.
- Outbreak Response Protocol: Guidance for COVID-19 outbreak response in Pre K–12. This playbook provides guidance on how to respond if a student or staff member exhibits symptoms of COVID-19 or tests positive for COVID-19. The playbook does not replace direct engagement with RIDOH, but rather gives an overview of what will occur throughout that engagement process. The information shared in this document assumes that Pre K-12 and parents/guardians are complying with current RIDOH guidelines and CDC guidance. Go to www.health.ri.gov for updates.

6. Rhode Island Food Strategy Implementation: Updates from each integrated focus area were shared, if not already discussed in minutes above.

- Sustain and Create Markets from Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products:
 - Lisa Raiola from Hope & Main reported a surge in local food manufacturing which is creating a demand for local workforce development and assistance in getting the word out. Hope & Main has also assisted with the rising demand of restaurant retail, where restaurants are procuring food products to sell. Worked with Commerce to provide resources to assist in this new sector.
- Preserve and Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island
 - Ken Ayars stated that the pandemic has increased interest in local foods. The seafood industry was hit hard when restaurants were closed and wholesalers stopped making purchases, so the state temporarily changed some regulations to allow for fish to be sold directly to consumers, instead of selling exclusively to fish markets and wholesalers. To keep industries alive and well, stimulus funds get distributed to those in need and help farmers and fisheries adapt.
 - Nessa Richman, RIFPC, shared the robust Resource Bank that has been created to aggregate information on available food access and food business resources and opportunities: <https://rifoodcouncil.org/covid-19/>
- Ensure Food Security for all Rhode Islanders
 - Director Hawkins, DHS shared that Rhode Island hopes to take advantage of the P-EBT program, which started in the spring and provided additional food resources to families. It is estimated that about 5,000 SNAP benefits were lost when the additional pandemic unemployment benefits ended. Welcome advocacy to assist with these programs to help Rhode Islanders. Carol will follow up by email to get specifics on advocacy strategies from Director Hawkins/Maria Cimini so the IFNPAC and others involved in food insecurity work can help advocate.
- Enhance the Climate for Food and Beverage Businesses
 - No updates to report
- Minimize Food Waste and Divert it from the Waste Stream
 - Rhode to End Hunger: The latest total food donations through MEANS update will be emailed for the next update by Lillian Bedard, RIDOH via Ernie Julian.
 - Coryanne Mansell of Center for Ecotechnology (CET)
 - CET offers a variety of services for Rhode Island businesses and institutions interested in improving their waste management, including resources for reducing, recovering, and diverting wasted food. This assistance may include quantifying food waste generated at businesses, detailed recommendations for implementing wasted food reduction, donation, and composting strategies, connections to service providers, staff training, and more. CET's Wasted Food Solutions hotline can be reached at: 888-813-8552 or wastedfood@cetonline.org.

CET works with several local partners, including State agencies and non-profit organizations. Thanks to partnerships and support from EPA Region 1, DEM, and Clean Ocean Access, CET continues to provide free assistance to Rhode Island businesses and institutions. Since 2019, CET has helped Rhode Island businesses donate more than 98,000 meals and has helped Massachusetts businesses donate more than 9,000 meals to Rhode Island food rescue organizations. In addition, CET helped Rhode Island businesses prevent more than 10 tons of wasted food and helped implement programs that are diverting more than 1,100 tons of food waste annually to composting, animal feed, and anaerobic digestion.
- Hope Harvest: Since March 2020, 32,000 pounds of food was harvested from farms and distributed to food bank and pantries. The food was unable to be sold to restaurants, so it was purchased and provided to those in need.

7. Public Comments and Announcements: None

Next meeting: November 2020, date/time TBD

Date: November 6, 2020

Time: 1 p.m.-2:30 pm

Location: Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Meeting Minutes

Council Members present on call: Carol Hall-Walker (RIDOH on behalf of Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott), Ken Ayars (DEM on behalf of Director Janet Coit), Ernest Julian (RIDOH), Paul Gonsalves (DOA), Maria Cimini (DHS on behalf of Director Courtney Hawkins), Doris Blanchard (RI Commerce)

HETF and Community Members: Diane Lynch (RIFPC), Nessa Richman (RIFPC), Sara Amin, (URI-SNAP-Ed), Kate Balestracci (URI SNAP-Ed), Dr. Alison Tovar (URI SNAP-Ed), Andrew Schiff (RICFB), Amanda Clark (RICFB), Bethany Caputo (DHS), Laurie Cote (DHS), Ashley O'Shea (EOHHS), Nancy Sutton (RIDOH), Randi Belhumeur (RIDOH), Erin Bertoldi (RIDOH), Lauren Conkey (RIDOH), Cathy Feeney (RIDOH), David Dadekian (Eat Drink RI), Eva Agudelo (Hope Harvest RI), Kerri Connelly (RIPHI), Jesse Rye (FFRI), Coryanne Mansell (CET), Robyn Hall (Pawtucket/Central Falls HEZ), Karin Wetherill, Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition (RIHSC), Margaret Read, Kathleen Gorman (URI), Albert Whitaker (East Providence HEZ), Rita Capotosto (EBCAP), Carla Wahnnon (EBCAP), Brady Dunklee (Care New England), Kristina Contreras Fox (Rhode Island Homeless Coalition), Jean Taylor (Care New England), Michael Rolls, Nina Wolff, Darren Liddell, Dennis Gonzales

Presenters: Diane Lynch and Nessa Richman (RIFPC) and Robyn Hall and Albert Whitaker (HEZs)

Call to order: Carol Hall-Walker called the meeting to order at 1:10 p.m.

Welcome and Introduction:

- Carol Hall-Walker presented greetings and expressed sincere gratitude from the Director in the ongoing food access work and acknowledged all the support that Director Coit has provided as well.
2. Review August 2020 Minutes:
 - Minutes from the last meeting were shared through email for approval.
 3. Director of Food Strategy position vacancy:
 - This position secured funding through RI Commerce, RIDOH, and DEM and will reside in RI Commerce. The job description has been posted: <https://commerceri.com/wpcontent/uploads/2020/10/Director-of-Food-Strategy-Job-Description-10.09.20.pdf>.
 - This was shared with both groups prior to this meeting to assist with recruitment. Ken Ayars reported that so far there are 17 applicants. The group was asked to continue to help share the link to recruit additional applicants.
 4. Rhode Island Food Strategy Implementation:
 - a. Updates from each integrated focus area:
 - Sustain and Create Markets from Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products
 - Preserve and Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island
 - Ken Ayars provided an update on these two focus areas. Overall, direct market remains strong in Rhode Island, where the public seeks to purchase food goods from local farmers and fisheries. The institutional and wholesale markets are still challenged due to the constraints of the restaurant industry, but it is slowly coming

back. There is a strong desire and need for more locally based food and supply chain. Many new businesses have come to the Port of Galilee.

- Jesse Rye announced that Farm Fresh RI's (FFRI) new Food Hub has opened. The first WinterFarmer's Market will begin November 7 at 10 Sims Ave., Providence. FFRI also reported an increase in SNAP summer market participation by 15%.

○ Ensure Food Security for All Rhode Islanders

- Maria Cimini provided an update on SNAP. DHS continues to do everything they can to increase food access benefits to participants. They have secured federal waivers which have helped to provide maximum benefits and extend certification dates and are currently awaiting guidance for P- EBT program. Encouraged all parents of students within the school systems to apply for the school meal program. Currently working on strategies to increase SNAP and WIC enrollment.
- Lori Cote, RFPs for new SNAP outreach contracts are in place. DHS is applying for outreach provider for the Pre-school Development Grant. Kayla Rosen, Ann Barone, and Maria Cimini are working together to leverage WIC/SNAP enrollment to maximize benefits.
- Andrew Schiff, RICFB Farmers Feeding Families Program has been extended (November/December). Vincent Farms out of Delaware will continue helping feed Rhode Island families living in Washington County into the first week of December. URI is the hub for the food distribution.
- Kerri Connelly, Rhode Island Public Health Institute, (RIPHI) reported that they received a \$500,000 USDA grant to fund the Food on the Move program. Regarding the SNAP Incentive project, they also secured a small grant to help fund the technology requirement needed for this pilot program. RIPHI will soon engage stakeholder to see if this is still a viable program to explore, given the challenges of the pandemic.
- Sara Amin, URI and SNAP Ed, shared that the URI/UCONN research data collection project to learn the impact COVID-19 has had on food access, captures 25 stakeholder interviews. The next steps in this project are to analyze the data and plan dissemination strategies.
- Save-the-Date: January 20, 2021 (8:30-12:30pm) the Rhode Island Food Summit which will be hosted by the URI/URI Foundation - virtually and focus on the food access response by the state and local partners during a pandemic. Promotional materials will be shared with all on the call soon.
- Vincent Farms Food Box initiative – working with URI next week. Still looking to learn more about how the initiative is going and who has been participating. Please contact Sharon Pavignano at spavignano@uri.edu to learn more details

○ Enhance the Climate for Food and Beverage Businesses

- Take it Outside campaign and the Providence Revolving Fund are taking applications for grants to restaurants, bakeries, markets and other businesses serving prepared food <https://reopeningri.com/take-it-outside-grant-program> and/or <https://www.prftakeitoutside.org/>

○ Minimize Food Waste and Divert it from the Waste Stream/Enhance the Climate for Food and Beverage Businesses

- Hope Harvest was awarded a USDA local food promotion grant which will work collaboratively with the RICFB to divert excess food product to the local community.
- Coryanne Mansell of CET offers a variety of services for Rhode Island businesses and institutions interested in improving their waste management, including

resources for reducing, recovering, and diverting wasted food. This assistance may include quantifying food waste generated at businesses, detailed recommendations for implementing wasted food reduction, donation, and composting strategies, connections to service providers, staff training, and more. CET's Wasted Food Solutions hotline can be reached at: 888-813-8552 or wastedfood@cetonline.org

- CET works with several local partners, including State agencies and non-profit organizations. Thanks to partnerships and support from EPA Region 1, DEM, and Clean Ocean Access, CET continues to provide free assistance to Rhode Island businesses and institutions. Since 2019, CET has helped Rhode Island businesses donate more than 98,000 meals and has helped Massachusetts businesses donate more than 9,000 meals to Rhode Island food rescue organizations. In addition, CET helped Rhode Island businesses prevent more than 10 tons of wasted food and helped implement programs that are diverting more than 1,100 tons of food waste annually to composting, animal feed, and anaerobic digestion.
- RIFPC supports the Real Food Jobs Rhode Island program, which
 - Convenes employer cohorts to pinpoint industry need;
 - Builds relationships that advance high-impact initiatives;
 - Provides targeted workforce trainings;
 - Creates strategic pipelines into and through the food industry;
 - Inspires youth to explore diverse career opportunities in food; and
 - Aggregates and disseminates value-added resources.

5. Presentations

a. Key Findings from Food Access State Stakeholder Outreach, RIFPC, Diane Lynch and Nessa Richman (presentation attached). There was not enough time to dig deeper into this comprehensive presentation, so a polling of IFNPAC and HETF will be distributed to learn which topics folks would like to have a deeper discussion on. Please contact Nessa Richman for more details nessa@rifoodcouncil.org or 401-789-1842.

b. Food Access and Diabetes: Randi Belhumeur provided an overview of the Diabetes Equity Challenge and introduced the HEZ representatives who provided the following summaries of their work: Pawtucket/Central Falls HEZ Robyn Hall, East Providence HEZ, Albert Whitaker (presentation attached). Should anyone want to connect with these presenters, please contact Randi.Belhumeur@health.ri.gov

6. Public Comments and Announcements: None

Meeting adjourned at 2:40 pm.

Next meeting: February 2021 – date/time TBD

Appendix B: IFNPAC Food Ecosystem Recommendations

Executive Summary

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rhode Island's community organizations, statewide non-profits, and municipal and state governments came together to coordinate a response to increased concerns of food insecurity and disruption of local food supply chains. Food insecurity is defined as when people lack access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious foods for an active healthy lifestyle. The effort successfully met the immediate challenges and revealed the strength of the State's food ecosystem. However, the crisis also revealed gaps in the State's existing food security and food industry infrastructure. With record unemployment and ongoing quarantine-related barriers to food access, food insecurity is increasing in Rhode Island.

According to the [Rhode Island Community Food Bank 2020 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island](#), which shows that 25.2% of Rhode Islanders are food insecure. The rates are much higher for Latinx (40%) and Black (36%) Rhode Islanders.

In that context, IFNPAC engaged stakeholders from across State agencies and from external organizations to compile these recommendations. The goal is to identify the potential causes of increasing food insecurity in Rhode Island and begin to outline recommendations for addressing these needs.

Overarching Recommendations

1. Staff the State's response

- a) Hire a Director of Food Strategy that is funded by Department of Environmental Management (DEM), Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH), and RI Commerce.
- b) Hire a Food Access Manager, at RIDOH, to coordinate across State and local agencies to reduce barriers to food access, facilitate the implementation of local initiatives, and monitor and evaluate program progress. This will likely require philanthropic funds.

2. Address Rising Food Insecurity

- a) Secure federal support: RIDOH, DEM, Department of Human Services (DHS), and Department of Education (RIDE) should continue to raise awareness among the Congressional Delegation (CODEL) about the need for waivers to successfully serve Rhode Islanders.
- b) Support the Rhode Island Community Food Bank (RICFB): The RICFB has served as the lead agency for the food response throughout the pandemic. Increasing support for RICFB will, in turn, help pantries in communities across Rhode Island.
- c) Identify strategies to address delivery and distribution issues: A key concern is equipping vendors with needed technology to allow ordering and delivery to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, (SNAP) recipients. Businesses and non-profit agencies should work to support expanded delivery, and the Director of Food Strategy should manage this effort.
- d) Fund community-based organizations that reflect the communities they serve: The State should support the local community organizations that fill in the gaps that the State's response is not able to address. This would require funding, and that funding could be administered by an established community partner that has grant management experience, such as The Rhode Island Foundation or United Way-211.

3. Invest in the Food Economy as an Economic Response

- a) Fund an array of programs and capital investments that support the local food industry, including the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act (LASA) grant program, expansion of seafood processing capacity, and investments in local farming.

Data

The following data are taken from the Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, based on data from the US Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/state-food-insecurity.html>:

- 25.3% of US residents experienced food insecurity from April 23, 2020 - June 30, 2020.
- For the same time period, 20.5% of Rhode Islanders were food insecure, compared to 7.8% in December 2018.
- Food insecurity rates vary greatly according to race and ethnicity:
 - 17.2% among White Rhode Islanders;

- 26.5% among Asian Rhode Islanders;
- 30.7% among Black Rhode Islanders; and
- 32.7% among Latinx or Hispanic Rhode Islanders.

Causes of increase in food insecurity

- The existing safety net has gaps which are particularly acute among workers without access to Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits.
- The existing emergency food system doesn't reach all populations, particularly immigrants, undocumented individuals, and people with special healthcare needs.
- Many individuals are accessing safety net resources and the emergency food system for the first time and are still learning to navigate the systems.
- The existing emergency food system doesn't provide culturally and medically appropriate food for all populations.
- COVID-19 related disruptions in childcare, schools, and transportation exacerbate existing food access challenges.
- Many existing congregate meal-distribution sites cannot operate due to social distancing guidelines.

Barriers and challenges exacerbated by COVID-19

- The inability to rely on public transit, congregate meal sites, and traditional food distribution systems has exacerbated long-standing food security issues. Concerns around delivery and distribution are particularly acute for:
 - Most SNAP recipients and *all* WIC participants are unable to access online ordering or delivery due to federal regulations that prohibit it.
 - Many older adults, disabled, and people who live in high-risk congregate settings rely on Meals on Wheels and other meal-delivery services.
 - Families who normally rely on food banks cannot travel to food banks due to lack of transportation or requirements to quarantine and/or isolate.
- Pantries and community-based organizations are struggling to meet distribution challenges due to:
 - Lack of food distribution partners;
 - Limited amounts, and types, of local produce (especially off-season) and the higher price of local food;
 - Lack of storage for perishable food items;
 - Difficulty transporting large amounts of food; and
 - Lack of capacity to rapidly scale up operations during an emerging crisis (funding, staffing, cold food storage, etc.), particularly for small local agencies and/or municipalities who are not equipped to make large-scale purchases.
- Confusing and changing federal guidance:
 - There was a lack of initial guidance and waiver continuation approval from the federal government.
- Communication barriers in disseminating information
 - Methods
 - Languages
 - Speed of translation
 - Technology availability

Recommendations

Staff the state effectively

1. Hire a Director of Food Strategy (DFS). The position of DFS should be filled. The immediate goal of the DFS should be to:
 - a. Prepare and oversee response to increasing food insecurity and potential surge;
 - b. Work with RI Commerce to support outreach and engagement with Rhode Island's food industries; and

- c. Develop initiatives to support Rhode Island’s local food economy through institutional purchasing, including through the emergency food system.
2. Hire a Food Access Manager. This full-time employee would work at RIDOH to monitor and engage Rhode Island community groups responding to increasing food insecurity. Key duties of this position include:
 - Monitor statewide response and serve as the State liaison among local food access initiatives and organizations, the RICFB, and State agencies.
 - Support frontline organizations, identify gaps in emergency food services, and recommend solutions.
 - Track and maintain a working knowledge of community-driven food access initiatives, particularly programs that have emerged in response to COVID-19.
 - Engage with HEZs and municipalities to collaborate and identify food access opportunities, needs and resources, including strategies that support undocumented individuals.
 - Provide overarching coordination and monitoring for State contracts with RICFB to ensure that food pantries across the state are adequately stocked to meet the high demand for food assistance.
 - Recommend programs and policies aimed at reducing barriers to food access for consumers, including but not limited to, participants in greatest need of food access, such as undocumented individuals and other underserved groups.

Address increasing food insecurity

1. Secure supports from federal government:
 - Work with CODEL to secure necessary waivers, particularly for schools, to maintain flexibility. In March, schools received waivers from USDA to operate according to Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) guidelines, allowing needed flexibility to provide grab-and-go meals for eligible students.
 - Work with CODEL to maintain Pandemic EBT benefits (P-EBT). This is a high priority if schools close or if students are staying home. P-EBT proved essential to addressing food insecurity when schools closed in the spring, especially if lack of transportation created obstacles to being able to get grab-and-go meals.
2. Increase funding to the RICFB to meet demand for emergency food.
 - RICFB has seen a 40% increase in new people seeking assistance and has increased its annual purchasing from 12 million pounds to 14 million pounds. The state has supplemented its previous allocations with \$675,000 in COVID-19 Relief Funds.
3. Address statewide barriers to food delivery and distribution
 - Improve availability of food delivery for SNAP recipients. Community partners should work to implement expanded ordering and delivery systems for SNAP recipients to ease SNAP purchasing restrictions at grocery stores that serve a high proportion of SNAP recipients. Current SNAP delivery partners are Farm Fresh RI (to limited locations), four Walmart locations, Amazon (non-perishables only). Roch’s market is able to deliver but cannot facilitate online purchasing.
 - Fund community-based delivery for individuals in quarantine and isolation: The state should continue to fund delivery of food to individuals who are COVID positive or are quarantining after a close contact.
4. Support community groups effectively responding to crisis.
 - Fund local community organizations: Philanthropic partners and the state should increase support to frontline community organizations that fill existing gaps. Establish a fund of \$1 million for disbursement to hyper-local frontline organizations engaged in serving hard-to-reach populations, eliminating logistical challenges, and providing culturally appropriate foods.
 - Funds should prioritize programs that:
 - Represent the communities they serve;

- Serve populations not traditionally served by the RICFB, namely undocumented individuals;
- Bring food and produce directly to individuals in high-need communities, via mobile food trucks, to address food-access gaps; and
- Overcome other transportation and delivery obstacles.

Invest in food industry as a key partner of economic recovery

1. Facilitate connection of food industry and the local food system for immediate response.
 - Fund purchases of surplus product from local farms for distribution through the emergency food system. Philanthropic organizations and the state should support this effort.
 - Advocate to make waivers that support direct sales a permanent benefit. Support transition of the emergency direct sales license program for commercial fishermen to a permanent regulatory change and viable market opportunity.
 - Educate restaurants, other licensed food establishments, and caterers about the *Rhode to End Hunger* initiative. Encourage these entities to sign up for the initiative if they have safely stored food and can donate it to those in need.

2. Build long-term jobs and industry.
 - Increase funding to DEM's LASA program. The LASA program supports continued innovation, adaptation, and development in local agriculture and food (including seafood) industries. On average, LASA receives \$1million in project requests each year and only have \$200,000 of funding to distribute. The projects have shown an 80% success rate in sustaining businesses. Doubling funds to this important initiative would support local business.
 - Expand wastewater treatment for fisheries by providing funds to improve wastewater treatment capacity for the fishing and seafood industries in Rhode Island. Fish processing capacity is currently limited at the Port of Galilee and other locations due to wastewater treatment constraints. Funding would be used for planning, designing, and constructing fish processing wastewater projects (pretreatment options), protein recovery from fish processing wastewater and other food-grade production wastewater, and/or other alternatives. Enhancing wastewater treatment capacity will allow private fish processing businesses to expand their operations and will directly benefit the State's economy through increased employment and economic activity. Increased processing capacity also means greater demand for seafood products from processors and will likely result in increased number of landings in the state. In 2019, total landings across Rhode Island exceeded \$100 million in value. Furthermore, a recent URI analysis found that the fishing industry contributes approximately \$420 million to the state's economy each year and supports nearly 4,400 jobs. The project may involve partnering with public or private entities located at Galilee, Quonset Development Park, or elsewhere.
 - Support fisheries infrastructure projects by providing funding to rehabilitate and modernize infrastructure at the Port of Galilee and other essential locations to ensure that the Port of Galilee remains one of the leading fishing ports on the east coast. Additional State bond funding would allow DEM to accelerate rehabilitation of the most seriously deteriorated areas of the North Bulkhead. The existing bulkhead and piers in Galilee are in poor condition and need immediate replacement to ensure the long-term viability and success of the businesses located there.
 - Support community gardens. Community groups and the state should maximize opportunities and support for urban, community, and backyard gardening with the goal of encouraging self-sufficiencies in local food production and access.
 - Evaluate, and where possible, maximize opportunities for DEM-owned farmland to meet food security needs of Rhode Island.
 - Develop and fund a permanent program linking local food producers with the State's emergency food system. This program could be modeled after the federal government's recent Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), in which food producers and distributors submit competitive proposals to the state to provide local food boxes to the emergency food system and are awarded contracts that can be used to fund growing, processing, packaging, and/or distribution of fresh and/or processed local foods in a form that meets emergency food system needs.

- Develop and fund a permanent state incentive program to support institutional purchasing of local food. This program could be developed and managed by RI Commerce, possibly alongside the Supply RI initiative. This program could take a phased approach to implementation and set a sliding scale of per-meal subsidies that are awarded to institutional buyers who meet state-set targets for percent of total food purchases that come from local producers and processors. Targets could vary for different cohorts of institutions (public schools, universities, hospitals, correctional institutions, etc.). Both New York and Michigan have had good success with using these types of incentives, and their results can be used to guide program implementation.