

# **Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) Report to General Assembly, 2021**

MARCH 2022

## **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 Member Agencies

*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)*  
*Rhode Island Public Health Institute (RIPHI)*  
*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 (HEZ) at RIDOH*  
*Hope & Main*

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2021 IFNPAC Initiatives and Impact.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2022 Priority Actions for IFNPAC Agencies.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Policy Considerations for the Rhode Island General Assembly.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Appendix: <i>Meeting Minutes</i>.....</b>	<b>13</b>

## Executive Summary

Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) was created to find ways to overcome regulatory and policy barriers toward developing a strong, sustainable food economy and healthful nutrition practices. Since the publication of the 2017 State Food Strategy *Relish Rhody*, IFNPAC has served as a coordinating agency to drive outcomes toward the Strategy.

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, IFNPAC membership is made up of the Directors, or their designee, from the Department of Health (RIDOH), Department of Environmental Management (DEM), Department of Administration (DOA), Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Healthy Aging (OHA), Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), Department of Corrections (DOC) and Rhode Island Commerce Corporation (RI Commerce). Administrators and directors from other State agencies and community-based organizations often participate, including representation from the leadership of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC), the Rhode Island Community Food Bank (RICFB), Farm Fresh Rhode Island (FFRI) and many others.

The 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*.

***Relish Rhody*, the State's first comprehensive food strategy, was launched in 2017 as a five-year action plan centered around three core themes – environmental sustainability, public health and equitable access to food, and opportunities for economic development.**

Within the strategy are five integrated focus areas that drive the strategy:

- 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
- Minimize food waste and divert it from the waste stream
- Ensure food security for all Rhode Islanders

The IFNPAC convened four times in 2021: February 16, May 18, August 25, and November 16. 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.

### **Key Impacts of the 2021 IFNPAC agencies**

- Staffed the State's COVID-19 response to effectively address increasing food insecurity and prepare for even more impact in the years ahead toward a more regional, equitable and sustainable food system
- Helped leverage \$1.7 million in federal and State funding to respond and rebuild the food, agriculture, and fisheries industries in light of the pandemic's widespread disruptions

## IFNPAC Initiatives and Impact in 2021

Our State food system, in aggregate, makes up 7% of the State's gross domestic product (GDP) and employs 75,000 people by some estimates, making it one of the largest employers in Rhode Island. With more than 5,000 businesses and hundreds of non-profit and community-based organizations, it is a significant economic and social engine. In fact, Rhode Islanders are estimated to spend \$5 billion on food each year (RIFPC, 2021).

During the pandemic, Rhode Island experienced the highest level of food insecurity recorded in 20 years. According to the 2021 Rhode Island Life Index, an initiative of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health, 18.4% of households were worried about having adequate food.

In 2021, the pandemic continued to disrupt the food system through supply chain disruptions, labor shortages, and food price inflation. This led to an increase in the number of Rhode Islanders experiencing hunger and food insecurity, and the widespread labor shortages further exacerbated supply chain disruptions and negatively impacted food businesses. Based on these conditions, IFNPAC had several priorities in 2021 to address these issues.

**Interagency progress was made, with highlights, detailed below.**

### **Led the State's pandemic response to adverse impacts on the food system**

#### **a. Staffed the State's response**

- i. Director of Food Strategy (DFS) vacancy was filled in 2021 by RI Commerce, RIDOH, and DEM to lead the implementation of the State's food strategy and coordinate interagency response to increasing food insecurity and negative economic impacts on food businesses.
- ii. Food Access and Equity Manager was hired by RIDOH through a CDC-funded grant in partnership with the Rhode Island Food Policy Council to coordinate State and local agencies that reduce barriers to healthy and local foods, recommend strategies and policies to reduce barriers to healthy food access, facilitate implementation of local initiatives, and monitor and evaluate program progress. The position is funded through a CDC federal grant and will contribute to the strategic plan for the Physical Activity and Nutrition Program at RIDOH which was de-funded in 2017.
- iii. Bi-weekly meetings between IFNPAC agencies were held to coordinate interagency services related to food access, nutrition assistance, and emergency food delivery as part of the COVID-19 response.
- iv. DEM and IFNPAC analyzed COVID-19 impacts on the State's food system after gathering input from stakeholders. This culminated in a proposal for ARPA/State Fiscal Recovery Funds towards *Food Security and Supply Chain Resiliency* on the best strategy to rebuild and recover from the pandemic.

#### **b. Strengthened inter-agency partnerships to address rising food insecurity**

- i. Facilitated emergency food delivery and improved food access
  1. OHA partnered with Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island (MOWRI) and the Elisha Project (EP) to facilitate an increased distribution of culturally appropriate meals and shelf-stable food boxes to reach older adults who were homebound due to the pandemic and older adults in need of food who lived in culturally diverse communities of Rhode Island.

2. RIDE supported continued implementation of universal free meals for all students throughout the state by providing training and technical assistance related to service models and program expansion to ensure widespread food access.
3. DHS continued to pursue and implement waivers to traditional rules related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to support continued benefit access during the COVID-19 public health emergency. These flexibilities included reducing administrative burdens related to required interviews and mid-certification interim reports. Additionally, with the support of our federal delegation and in partnership with RIDE, DHS received authorization to issue both P-EBT and Summer EBT benefits to children whose school meal access was interrupted due to COVID-19.
4. DHS is working with Senator Reed's office to request COVID-19-related flexibilities to become permanent options (permanent rule changes) to expand nutrition assistance for low-income communities including: the postponement of an interview for an expedited applicant; the elimination of the mid-certification interim report; and the expansion of SNAP eligibility to college students whose expected family contribution to their education is \$0.
5. New community agencies contracted with the DHS as SNAP Outreach partners to increase SNAP participation. The agencies are able to provide support in the neighborhoods of potential applicants and at community centers so there are trusted partners available to increase the likelihood that those often fearful of government will seek the food assistance to which they are entitled.
6. DHS has secured authorization from USDA Food and Nutrition Agency to allow for online shopping and payment utilizing SNAP benefits at retail grocery stores to expand access and participation. At this time, the following retailers offer online payment options for Rhode Island SNAP users: Aldi, Amazon, BJs Wholesale, Stop & Shop, and Walmart.
7. OHA collaborated with DEM to provide Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers to OHA Senior Nutrition Programs for distribution to eligible, low-income older adults and adults with disabilities who receive SSDI at local meal sites throughout Rhode Island. The program was improved from a coupon model to a bulk purchase system which will increase participation among coupon recipients.
8. OHA partnered with the Rhode Island Community Food Bank to implement the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) to provide monthly food assistance specifically targeted at low-income older adults. The CSFP is designated to meet the unique nutritional needs of older adults by supplementing diets with a monthly package of healthy, nutritious food provided by the USDA.
9. During the COVID-19 pandemic, since June of 2020, the Health Equity Zones (HEZ) have delivered more than 650,000 meals and have supported residents in quarantine and isolation with food deliveries and monetary resources.

ii. Convened agency partners and community organizations to address food insecurity crisis

1. DEM, RIDOH, and DHS convened regular monthly COVID-19 Food Strategy Task Force calls to increase coordination on emergency food delivery and increased hunger due to the pandemic which included 20-30 attendants from State agencies, Congressional delegation, municipalities, and community-based organizations.
2. Regular monthly Local Agriculture calls were held by DEM to better support agricultural producers during the pandemic.
3. RIDOH collaborated with Rhode Island Food Policy Council to reactivate the Hunger Elimination Task Force, and RIDOH activated the HEZs to assist in food access work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. RIDOH's HEZs and their collaborators addressed food insecurity through various initiatives, including working groups, healthy cooking/nutrition classes, food pantries, provision of meals to residents in need, diabetes/healthy eating learning and classes, farmer's markets and local neighborhood markets, and special programs for specific populations, like the Women of Color Breastfeeding support group. The HEZs are reaching out to the communities to identify and address the food systems needs of the community for the community.

c. **Deepened partnerships and collaborations with community-based organizations**

- i. IFNPAC agencies worked even more closely in 2021 with partners at the RICFB, the RIFPC, Hope & Main, Southside Community Land Trust, the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island, Rhode Island Center for Mediation and many others on strategic initiatives to improve access to fresh and direct more federal and philanthropic funds towards Rhode Island food system businesses and organizations.

**Supported food, agriculture, and seafood businesses to recover and rebuild from pandemic disruptions**

a. **Supported new market opportunities for Rhode Island food and beverage products**

- i. DEM launched a local food brand, *RI Grown*, at farmers markets and farm-to-school programs to increase the value of locally grown food products for Rhode Island farmers and fishers.
- ii. DEM State-run farmers markets increased customers by 22% by increasing vendors and ensuring the market experience was safe and accommodating.
- iii. RIDE, DEM, and the Director of Food Strategy led the launch of the new Rhode Island Farm to School Network in partnership with core external partners. A 15-member leadership team was established, with diverse representation, to expand farm-to-school activities and facilitate more local food procurement among Rhode Island's 37 school districts.
- iv. In an effort to increase opportunities for local food procurement in school meals, RIDE applied for, and was awarded, a large USDA grant to develop a local procurement tracking system and formalized definition of local for use in the school meals programs.

**b. Leveraged federal, state, and philanthropic funding for food sector**

- i. DEM helped leverage and/or administer more than \$1.5 million in federal and State funds to support local food producers and fisheries.
  1. \$371,000 USDA grant assistance for relief for seafood dealers and processors
  2. \$500,000 USDA Farmers Rancher Stress Network grant for agricultural producers to get mental health supports, business technical assistance
  3. \$240,000 of State-funded *Local Agriculture and Seafood Act* (LASA) grants were awarded to 20 small businesses and food organizations to spur growth in the local food sector. More than half of recipients were women or minority-owned organizations
  4. \$147,089 of USDA-funded Specialty Block Crop Grants were awarded to food and farm organizations to support market competitiveness of fruit and produce grown in Rhode Island including the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Rhode Island, Southern Rhode Island Conservation District, and the University of Rhode Island
  5. \$300,000 Saltonstall-Kennedy grant awarded to DEM to increase consumption of Rhode Island seafood by Rhode Islanders through targeted marketing campaign
  6. \$46 million proposed within Governor's FY23 budget to support Port of Galilee infrastructure improvements to greatly benefit Rhode Island's commercial fishing sector
- ii. DEM, Commerce, and RIDE collaborated on federal grant applications to better support local food businesses
  1. \$500,000 potential grant application submitted for the USDA Farm-to-School grant to increase school procurement of locally produced foods
  2. DEM, RI Commerce, and the RIFPC were selected to submit a grant proposal to expand seafood wastewater processing in Narragansett as part of the Economic Development Administration's Build Back Better Regional Challenge Grant for up to \$100 million in Rhode Island's blue economy. Expanding seafood wastewater processing would significantly grow jobs and economic activity for seafood processors and commercial fisheries by bringing more jobs and processing from overseas to Rhode Island
  3. RI Commerce awarded \$240,000 in grants to food businesses for innovation, research, and development. For example, Hope & Main was awarded an Innovation Voucher to help restaurants pivot to retail products following the closure of many foodservice operations.
  4. RI Commerce's SupplyRI initiative, the Director of Food Strategy, and partners at Hope & Main and Farm Fresh Rhode Island hosted a local food tradeshow to connect more small-scale food producers with institutional and wholesale food buyers
- iii. Efforts were made to reduce regulatory burdens for food businesses
  1. DEM and RIDOH extended the no-cost direct Sale Dealer License that allows commercial fishermen to permanently sell certain finfish species and shellfish to consumers directly and licensed seafood retailers. During the pandemic, foreign demand for Rhode Island seafood, which is largely exported, declined, and fisheries were forced to pivot to domestic



markets. This regulatory change has helped Rhode Island fisheries sell their products locally

2. RI Commerce and the Department of Business Regulation (DBR) launched a website on *How to Open a Restaurant* to streamline the regulatory and licensing process

### **Connected to regional and local food system efforts to strengthen Rhode Island's impact**

- a. RIDOH participated in URI's 2021 Rhode Island Food System Summit *Taking the Lead: Improving Food Access in a Global Pandemic* by serving on a panel, *How State Government is Addressing the Growing Food Security Issues as a Result of COVID-19*.
- b. The Director of Food Strategy (DFS) joined the Network Advisory Board for Farm to Institution New England, helping to create more opportunities for Rhode Island food producers to sell to institutional markets across New England and engaging Rhode Island in efforts to achieve the New England Food Vision's goal of 50% local consumption by 2060.
- c. DFS joined the New England Feeding New England Committee, a six-state partnership to better prepare the region for system shocks such as climate-related weather events and public health emergencies.
- d. DFS connected IFNPAC agencies and the State Food Strategy with parallel efforts across the state led by Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA), Office of Energy Resources, and the Department of Labor and Training (DLT).

## 2022 Priority Actions for IFNPAC Agencies

This section prioritizes specific action items for all agencies represented by IFNPAC. The partner agencies have committed to advancing these priorities in 2022 and will provide updates during quarterly meetings.

### Department of Health

Point of Contact: Program Administrator/Policy Liaison, Division of Community Health and Equity

- Focus on health equity and the social determinants of health as they relate to the food strategy.
- Coordinate quarterly updates from agencies on IFNPAC progress.
- Engage with government, education, stakeholders, community organizations, and residents to produce a Physical Activity and Nutrition Strategic Plan for Rhode Island.
- Collaborate with the RIFPC to integrate newly hired Food Access and Equity Manager into the work of the food strategy and oversee the efforts.
- Help define metrics for food access as they relate to *Relish Rhody* goals.

### RI Commerce

Point of Contact: Director of Food Strategy and Director of Small Business Programs

- Ensure RI Commerce's business development tools, such as SupplyRI and other business assistance supports, are effectively utilized to support growth in the food sector.
- Identify high-growth, high-impact food sector opportunities for job creation which contribute to Food Strategy framework or resilience, sustainability, and equity, where possible.
- Identify more opportunities to connect small food, farm, and fish businesses with access to capital and technical business assistance.

### Department of Environmental Management

Point of Contact: Chief of Agriculture and Forestry

- Continue to support and expand programs which preserve Rhode Island agriculture and fisheries, working with partner IFNPAC agencies to grow the local food, farm, and seafood economy.
- Develop and support federally funded programs which sustain, promote, and enhance agricultural viability and resilience.
- Continue to develop resilience and sustainability in the local food system, embracing diversity and equity.
- Work with RI Commerce to address seafood wastewater treatment issue preventing growth for commercial fisheries and seafood businesses.
- Identify opportunities to reduce food waste and divert it from the waste stream.

### Department of Human Services

Point of Contact: Associate Director Policy Analysis, Research and Development

- Increase food security among older adults and individuals with disabilities by increasing SNAP access in the following ways:
  - Seek a waiver from FNS by implementing the Elderly Simplified Application Project.
  - Increase SNAP access through technological improvements and mobile device access.
  - Investigate opportunities for interagency, cross-program outreach and enrollment between WIC, SNAP, and free and reduced-price school lunch programs.

## Office of Healthy Aging

Point of Contact: Community Living Director

- With Rhode Island's Hunger Elimination Task Force, strengthen access to healthful foods for older adults and adults with disabilities. We aim to continue to promote a robust mix of meal programs; explore RIDE partnership to offer intergenerational café program.
- Collaborate with DHS to promote SNAP participation among older adults.

## Department of Administration

Point of Contact: Principal Planner, Division of Planning Education, Administration and Coordination  
Department of Administration

- Provide technical assistance to municipalities in their land use and zoning efforts that are aimed at fostering a more efficient and productive environment for food production, processing, transportation, and distribution.
- Support the continued efforts of IFNPAC and its member agencies in the pursuit of reducing regulatory and policy barriers through the implementation of food system-related land use and transportation strategies and policies within the State Guide Plan.

## Department of Corrections

Point of Contact: Administrator Physical Resources

- Work to address barrier of more local procurement that is tied to lowest responsible bidder.
- Explore opportunities to increase food procurement from Rhode Island food producers and fisheries.

## Department of Education

Point of Contact: Coordinator Child Nutrition Programs, Office of Statewide Efficiencies

- Help increase access to local and nutritious foods in schools.
  - Develop a local procurement tracking system and formalized definition of local for use in the school meals programs.
  - Expand Farm to School activities into the Early Childhood Community.
  - Mitigate the impact of expiring USDA waivers that allow for the service of universal free meals. Support the continuation of alternate service models in school meals (such as breakfast in the classroom) to ensure continued widespread food access in the event of a return to normal operations for the 2022-2023 school year.
  - Expand use of out-of-school-time meals programs for communities that have qualifying sites as overall food access in the state decreases with the expiration of COVID-19-related initiatives.

## Overarching priorities

Point of Contact: Director of Food Strategy

- Strengthen partnership and collaboration between neighboring New England states toward achieving the New England Food Vision of 50% local food consumption by 2060.
- Lead process to update State Food Strategy for 2030 with a focus on leveraging food systems to address equity and climate change.
- Identify opportunities to sustainably fund critical programs which incentivize local food consumption and improve food access and health outcomes for Rhode Islanders.

## Policy Considerations for the Rhode Island General Assembly

This annual report suggests policy and regulatory changes which the General Assembly may consider in future legislative sessions. IFNPAC is proud of its accomplishments in 2021; however, challenges/barriers still exist and require all levels of leadership to consider so that we can meet our vision for continued growth between the nexus of environment, economic development, and public health. The IFNPAC would welcome continued discussion on any of these topics and looks forward to additional guidance from the General Assembly.

- **Consider cottage food legislation which allows for early-stage food entrepreneurs** to start catered and packaged food businesses out of their home.
- **Consider increased funding to critical agricultural and fishery preservation programs** such as DEM's Local Agriculture and Seafood Program (LASA) and the Farmland Preservation Program. Both programs are critical supports for local agriculture. LASA receives almost \$1 million in grant requests each year and serves a funding gap for new farmers and early-stage agriculture and seafood businesses often excluded from traditional funding streams. The LASA program supports continued innovation, adaptation, and development in local agriculture and food (including seafood) industries.
- **Consider 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.
- **Consider opportunities to leverage local and sustainable food systems to achieve Act on Climate goals.** Agroecological food production and sustainable food consumption can significantly reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The food system is responsible for 30% to 40% of global GHG emissions. Dietary and production changes have potential to mitigate, and even sequester, carbon dioxide and methane associated with food production.
- Evaluate, and where possible, **maximize opportunities for DEM-owned farmland to meet food security needs of Rhode Island.**
- Consider legislation for a state definition of local food to build more value for Rhode Island-grown food products, raw agricultural products, and seafood.
- **Consider opportunities to improve and expand school meals** by disentangling the State's funding formula for federal school nutrition programs from meal benefit applications and to fund a universal free meals program.

## Appendix: *Meeting Minutes*

### Q1 Meeting Minutes

**Date:** February 16, 2021

**Location:** Zoom

**Council members:** Carol Hall-Walker (RIDOH – on behalf of Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott), Ken Ayars (DEM – on behalf of Director Janet Coit), Steve Carey (RIDE), Ernest Julian (RIDOH), Doris Blanchard (RI Commerce), Laurie Cote (DHS), Maria Cimini (DHS), Ann Barone (RIDOH)

**Other attendees:** Diane Lynch (RIFPC), David Dadekian (Eat Drink RI), Kate Balestracci (URI SNAP-Ed), Amanda Clark, (RICFB), Andrew Schiff (RICFB), Sharon Pavignano (URI), Katharine Flynn (URI), Lorenzo Macaluso (CET), Representative Teresa Tanzi, Jesse Rye (FFRI), Cara Mitchell (FFRI), Margaret Read (No Kid Hungry), Erin Bertoldi (RIDOH)

**Presenters:** Diane Lynch, (RIFPC), Katharine Flynn, (URI), Andrew Schiff, (RICFB), Jesse Rye, (Farm Fresh Rhode Island), and George Ortiz, Jr, (The Elisha Project).

Call to order – Carol Hall-Walker called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.

1. Approval of minutes from last meeting: Minutes from November 2020 were approved.
2. Rhode Island food strategy implementation updates since last meeting:
  - Carol Hall-Walker shared the 2020 IFNPAC Legislative report has been drafted and will be reviewed for approval for a March 2021 submission. This report will also include an executive summary of the final recommendations of State's COVID-19 food access workstream, led by Nell Abernathy from Governor Raimondo's Office, in partnership with several IFNPAC members.
3. Director of Food Strategy Vacancy and Plan
  - RIDOH, DEM, and RI Commerce interviewed several candidates for the position and have offered the position and are waiting for a response; Will share the information as soon as it becomes available.
4. Hunger Elimination Task Force update
  - Diane Lynch from the RIFPC provided an update:
    - o RIFPC is very excited to have agreed to assist with the facilitation of the Hunger Elimination Task Force meetings for 2021.
    - o 2021 Q1 meeting was held virtually on 2/9/2021 and was unfortunately zoom-bombed. It was reported and now security measures are in place. The follow up meeting to finish the small group discussions/presentation is scheduled for February 19 at 11 a.m.

Four main objectives identified for the task force this year; Two for near-term and two for long-term:

Broaden participation by outreach to include more non-traditional organizations with a strong emphasis on resident input.

Create a landscape map to put together a profile of the state in terms of order and delivery services, pilot programs, and referrals that are available.

Focus meetings on enabling more medium and long-term problem solving by creating workgroups.

Increase resiliency of food system.

Proposed themes for 2021 quarterly meetings include: incorporating local food into emergency food and engage with organizations running small pilot programs in the community to scale up.

5. Rhode Island Food Strategy Implementation:
  - a. Updates from each integrated focus area:
    - o Sustain and create markets from Rhode Island food and beverage products
    - o Preserve and grow agriculture and fisheries industries in Rhode Island

Ken Ayars provided an overview of the updates in these two focus areas, which are also outlined in the 2020 legislative report:

- 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. 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. DEM also distributed more than three million dollars in NOAA stimulus funds directly to the Rhode Island commercial fishing industry.
- The pandemic created multiple new challenges and opportunities for local food suppliers using existing State resources and new federal funding. A sampling of activities includes:
  - State: DEM called a weekly agricultural meeting that is ongoing and serves multiple farm entities and other stakeholders.
  - State: DEM called a monthly fisheries meeting that is ongoing and serves multiple fisheries agencies and other stakeholders.
  - DEM and RIFPC assisted with a successful application to the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program that provided a contract that paid Farm Fresh Rhode Island to bring thousands of boxes of local food from multiple local farms to food insecure families for four months.
  - The State communicated about programs to assist and guide farmers, including farm loan flexibilities and compliance with COVID-19 health and business operation standards.
  - The State communicated about PPP (paycheck protection program) loans and advances to farm and fish businesses through DEM and RI Commerce, helping scores of small businesses survive.
  - DEM and RIFPC are running an online marketing-intensive pilot for a small number of farms this winter with USDA FSMIP (Federal State Marketing Improvement Program) funding.
  - DEM is preparing for a round of the LASA Grants, which will be entirely State-funded for the first time this year.
  - In the next four or five months, DEM will be directing \$500,000-\$600,000 toward local fisheries economy. Will work with IFNPAC and other stakeholders to strategically and effectively use these funds with a forward look.

Diane Lynch (RIFPC) shared that the direct sales license for fisheries had much success, and is in need of some work. Last week legislation was introduced in the Senate to make it permanent. Senate Bill No. 206 By: Sosnowski, Coyne, Seveney, Felag, Gallo ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING TO FISH AND WILDLIFE - COMMERCIAL FISHERIES (Permits dockside sale of fish by commercial fishing license holders.)

RIFPC will support this and if anyone else is interested please contact RIFPC to learn how to assist: [dianeroselynych@gmail.com](mailto:dianeroselynych@gmail.com) or [nessa@rifoodcouncil.org](mailto:nessa@rifoodcouncil.org)

## Ensure food security for all Rhode Islanders

- o Carol Hall-Walker reviewed the following strategies that are in progress to improve efforts in this critical area:
  - o Reactivating the Hunger Elimination Task Force with assistance from the RIFPC
  - o Securing needed federal support for supplemental nutrition and school meal program waivers.
  - o Increasing support to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank
  - o Identifying strategies for online ordering and delivery
  - o Equipping vendors for SNAP online ordering and delivery services
  - o Engaging business and nonprofit organizations
  - o Providing funding to community-based organizations

Kate Balestracci (URI SNAP-Ed) shared that they produced a food access qualitative analysis report due to come out in a couple of months. This report will be helpful when applying for resources and funding.

Diane Lynch (RIFPC) said the Council has been successful in identifying available grant funding opportunities and is willing to help. Contact [nessa@rifoodcouncil.org](mailto:nessa@rifoodcouncil.org)

## Enhance the climate for food and beverage businesses

DLT-funded program, Real Food Jobs RI, is committed to continue this program. The workforce trainings have been well attended.

## Minimize food waste and divert it from the waste stream

- Lorenzo Macaluso (Center for EcoTechnology) shared updates on their ongoing collaboration with DEM:
  - o Reached 7,500 Rhode Islanders through virtual workshops and newsletters
  - o Provided direct technical assistance to many businesses in Rhode Island
  - o 150 tons of annual diversion, donation, and compost in collaboration with URI, restaurants, and other locations across the state
  - o 270 tons avoided carbon emissions
- Coordinated with URI to participate in follow-up learning opportunities (detailed in presentation info).

## 6. Presentations:

- *URI Food System Summit: Recap and Key Findings* Katharine Hazard Flynn, Executive Director of the URI Business Engagement Center
  - o This virtual event was extremely successful with great participation and overall feedback.
  - o To continue the important conversation, the following virtual events are scheduled:

February 24, 2021, 10 a.m. – noon; Rhode Island Public Health Institute and Grow Smart RI will join URI with two panel discussions: One which examines the efficacy of 1.5 cent-per-ounce Rhode Island Sugar Sweetened Beverage Tax (SSBT) to fund the Retail SNAP Incentive Program (RSIP); and the second to understand how the State uses equitable transportation as a means to addressing food access.

March 10, 2021, 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.; The Center for Eco Technology and a selection of expert panelists will discuss creative approaches to prevent and divert wasted food.

March 24, 2021, 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.; The USDA Farm Service Agency and DEM will discuss how these agencies can assist both beginning and long-established farmers.

April TBD, 2021, 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.; URI Professor John Taylor, the URI Multicultural Scholars, and Southside Community Land Trust will discuss how they aim to collaboratively improve sustainability and equity in our food system.

May 12, 2021, 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.; URI Cooperative Extension will discuss a new EPA-funded train-the-trainer program on food waste reduction that they are developing for the fall of 2021.

For more info and to register, visit: [web.uri.edu/food-center/foodsummit21](http://web.uri.edu/food-center/foodsummit21)

The Rhode Island Food Center has been completed. Classes are being held there, the Plant Protection Clinic will soon be operational, and the University's agricultural extension agents will have new offices.

[khflynn@uri.edu](mailto:khflynn@uri.edu) and [spavignano@uri.edu](mailto:spavignano@uri.edu) can be contacted directly for any inquiries.

### Increasing food access during Rhode Island's second surge

The following organizations were funded in December 2020 with remaining *CARES Act* funding to provide support to Rhode Islanders impacted by the second surge of the pandemic:

#### Rhode Island Community Food Bank, Andrew Schiff, Chief Executive

- Calls to 2-1-1 for food assistance increased each month from July 2020- December 2020. The *CARES Act*, passed by Congress in March, gave extra financial assistance to laid-off workers, adding \$600 per week to their unemployment insurance compensation. These supplemental benefits ended in July.
- RICFB has seen a 40% increase in new people seeking assistance, increasing annual purchasing from 12 million pounds to 14 million pounds. The State has supplemented previous allocations of COVID-19 relief funds to support a statewide response to rising food insecurity.

#### The Elisha Project, George L. Ortiz, Jr, Co-founder

- In the midst of the second surge, this organization supported Rhode Islanders in quarantine and isolation with delivered food, household needs, and PPE.
- On average, delivered 300,000-400,000 pounds of food per week through partnership with United Way 2-1-1, RIDOH, Office of Housing, Housing authorities, and organizations.
- With the Governor transition in Rhode Island occurring, it will be important for IFNPAC members to engage and determine next steps for the continuation of this work.
  - o Farm Fresh Rhode Island, Jesse Rye, Co-Executive Director
  - o Farm to Pantry partnerships bolster the local and regional food system.
  - o Investment in local food infrastructure means increased food access in times of crisis.
  - o Key Partnerships: Rhode Island Community Food Bank, Providence Healthy Communities Office, Hopes Harvest, COVID-19 relief funders
  - o Impact:
    - Weekly deliveries to 28 hunger relief organizations in Q4 of 2020
    - 52 unique crops ordered from 76 local farmers in 2020
    - FFRI staff align fresh, local supply with specific site needs.
    - Sites have access to network of more than 100 local and regional farmers for fresh produce



## 7. Open Discussion

- The Elisha Project highlighted the critical work that Hope's Harvest has provided in this response.
- There was overwhelming gratitude expressed for United Way and the 2-1-1 program.
- Members discussed the USDA Farmers to Family FoodBox program and the challenges Rhode Island has experienced with it. Ken Ayars is actively talking with the Congressional delegation and continues to voice concerns, feedback, and recommendations for improvements.
- Carol Hall-Walker asked the group what is being done to ensure that culturally appropriate food items are available.
  - The Elisha project works with different vendors and local market to meet such needs through a pilot program.
  - RIFPC has connected Hope's Harvest with Southside Community Land Trust to engage with immigrant farmers.
  - URI has a program utilizing multicultural fellows engaging with the Providence community and is happy to make connections.
  - URI SNAP-Ed Program, comprised of registered dietitians, offered to provide technical assistance to any congregate meal sites to adjust menus to be more culturally appropriate. Contact Kate Balestracci [katebal12@uri.edu](mailto:katebal12@uri.edu)
- Steve Carey (RIDE Child Nutrition Program) acknowledged the public schools food service providers. They all pivoted and continue to provide the essential service of meals at schools, pick-up sites, and in delivery in Providence. They have all done a wonderful job and are essential workers.
- Steve Carey also acknowledged Bethany Caputo of DHS for being the lead on the P-EBT program. This program is in the planning process to expand to children younger than six who are in child care. RIDE working closely with DHS now to determine a plan for this expansion.
- Carol Hall-Walker informed the group that in addition to the Director of Food Strategy position, the State is also advocating for a Food Access Manager at the State level. RIDOH previously had funding for this position and is hopeful with the new administration, CDC will eventually offer funding opportunities.
- Jesse Rye shared that the Farmer's Market program saw a 40% increase in markets from 2019 to 2020, with \$200,000 in bonus bucks.

Meeting adjourned at 10:20 a.m.

## Q2 Meeting Minutes

**Date:** May 18, 2021

**Location:** Zoom

**Council members:** Carol Hall-Walker (RIDOH on behalf of Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott), DEM Director Janet Coit, Ken Ayars, and Makeba Hardy Thomas (DEM), Julianne Stelmaszyk (RI Commerce/DEM/RIDOH), Steve Carey (RIDE), Paul Gonsalves (DOA), Elizabeth Winangun (GOV), Laurie Cote (DHS), Maria Cimini (DHS), Ann Barone (RIDOH)

**Other attendees:** Nessa Richman, Diane Lynch, and Nina Wolff Landau (RIFPC), David Dadekian (Eat Drink RI), Sara Amin (URI SNAP-Ed), Kate Balestracci (URI SNAP-Ed), Andrew Schiff and Amanda Clark, (RICFB), Alethea Dickerson and Dana McCants Derisier (OHA), Lorenzo Macaluso (CET), Jesse Rye and Cara Mitchell (FFRI), Margaret Read (No Kid Hungry), Kerri Connolly (RIPHI), Karin Wetherill (RIHSC), Jessica Petrolia (RIDE), Erin Bertoldi, Nancy Sutton, Randi Belhumeur, Dr. Samuel Zwetchkenbaum (RIDOH), Porschia Davis (ME Relief), Chelsea Gazillo (American Farmland Trust)

**Presenters:** Dr. Amy Nunn, Rhode Island Public Health Institute  
Samantha Levy, American Farmland Trust

Call to order – Carol Hall-Walker called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.

### 1. Welcome and Introductions

- Carol Hall-Walker welcomed the group and announced that Ernie Julian, Chief, Center for Food Protection, RIDOH, recently retired from State service and Cathy Feeney, Chief, who oversees this program area at RIDOH, will attend future IFNPAC meetings. She also welcomed Governor McKee's office, represented by Elizabeth Winangun, Policy Director.

### 2. Review and approve February 2021 Minutes

- Director Janet Coit and Steve Carey approved the minutes.

### 3. Rhode Island Food Strategy Implementation

- a. Director of Food Strategy Introduction - Julianne Stelmaszyk
  - Juli has now been in the position for two months. This position is split amongst three agencies: RI Commerce, RIDOH, and DEM. She is located at RI Commerce with a big part of this position focusing on economic development. She has met with many of the people within the group and looks forward to meeting others and learn more about the important work being done in the state and collaborate accordingly.
- b. Relish Rhody progress metrics – 2017 versus 2020
  - Juli reviewed the Relish Rhody state food strategy document with the group. She discussed approaches to update the measures. Juli will meet with members of IFNPAC, RIFPC, and other partners across the state to reassess, update, and align measures with work that is underway. Reviewed the metrics and discussed approaches to updating the measures. Juli will meet with members of IFNPAC, RIFPC, and other partners to assess the 60+ measures and they will be consolidated and updated with collective input. The RIFPC is measuring trends, and some are challenging to track. Some of these metrics are broad and it makes sense to pare the measures down to the metrics

that are trackable and measurable. The state wants to show progress and identify potential gaps. Some of the data that is available is outdated and might not fully reflect impact.

- Questions posed to the group:
  - Are focus areas still priority post-pandemic?
  - Should we establish a baseline?
  - What data do we have readily available?
  - Which metrics are most important for measuring: economic, social and health impacts?
  - What resources are available to track metrics?
- Ken Ayars noted the challenge of relying on federal government data for the metrics. Census is not a real-time measurement. Knowledge and awareness are difficult to measure the impact. There is a resurgence in local agriculture; lots of interest in local food, but we can't track that well. There is a need to create demand for farmers to sell locally on a large-scale basis. We need to build a robust local food system.
- Sara Amin agreed that solid, reliable, data are so important. Some of these focus areas are so diverse that researchers at URI and Brown might be able to come up with creative solutions and indicators to show progress.
- Director Janet Coit suggested this be included in Governor McKee's 2030 plan for Rhode Island. It aligns and will raise awareness for the food economy and food security issues/concerns. Juli to follow up with Elizabeth Winangun of the Governor's Office.
- Lorenzo Macaluso from CET shared that their organization has a high emphasis on tracking impact to reduce food waste. He will set up a follow up meeting with Juli to discuss more.
- The group all agreed that metrics matter in this work and it makes sense to align this work with the Governor's 2030 plan and with the RIFPC/Hunger Elimination Task Force efforts.
- c. Updates from each integrated focus area:
  - Sustain and create markets from Rhode Island food and beverage products
  - Preserve and grow agriculture and fisheries industries in Rhode Island
    - Ken Ayars shared that the markets are emerging out slowly from COVID-19 crisis/emergency mode and the agriculture industry responded. People now think differently about where their food comes from and want to procure locally. The goal is to sustain this and consider what long term structural changes are needed in the food system.
  - Ensure food security for all Rhode Islanders
    - Carol Hall-Walker shared that RIDOH's Center for Chronic Disease is applying for a one-year grant from CDC to address food security and built environment in Central Falls, primarily focusing on the Latinx population. She thanked the RICFB for their annual report, which has current data that will help support the grants strategies and goals to address food insecurity and promote physical activity. The grant is due in July 2021. RIDOH will include a full-time contract employee to serve as a Food Security Manager. To sustain this position, should additional federal funds from CDC become available to address physical activity and nutrition, obesity prevention, this position would become a full-time equivalent within RIDOH. Kate Balestracci (URI-SNAP-Ed) offered support in preparing the CDC Chronic Disease grant proposal.

- Maria Cimini provided an update from DHS. Director Courtney Hawkins recently resigned, and the Acting Director is Celia Blue. She provided an update on P-EBT: Starting in May 2021 with a change recently approved by the federal government, all children younger than six who also receive SNAP benefits are now eligible for P-EBT. Eligibility for this benefit is based on the operating status of the schools near the child's residence. The first payment to SNAP children younger than age six will be issued on or about May 20, 2021. This will be a retroactive payment for October 2020 to March 2021. The next payment (for April 2021) will be issued on or about May 28, 2021. Going forward, monthly P-EBT payments will be distributed during the third week of each month for the previous month's benefit. Benefits will be placed on their existing SNAP EBT card each month. Eligible school-age P-EBT recipients will continue to get their monthly benefits during the second week of the month for the previous month. Using RIDE's monthly list, DHS issued the April P-EBT benefits for eligible school-age children on May 13, 2021. Everyone on RIDE's April list received their benefits.
- Steve Carey (RIDE) shared that public schools pivoted to the Summer Food Service Program, which continues right now. School Meal providers worked very hard this last year and were essential workers to meet children's food secure needs. Their efforts and dedication are very much appreciated. In combination with the P-EBT program, families have had many opportunities to ensure there is food available. Steve shared that he is retiring end of June 2021 and Jessica Petrolia will take on responsibilities until the position is filled.
- Enhance the climate for food and beverage businesses
  - Diane Lynch, (RIFPC) Food businesses adapted to changes in consumer behavior, such as online purchasing and buying local. There is a need to increase advertising for these efforts and build stronger advertising and marketing campaigns to promote these changes.
  - Juli Stelmaszyk shared that there is a new website on RI Commerce that provides guidance on how to open a restaurant in Rhode Island. <https://openarestaurant.commerceri.com/en/>
- Minimize food waste and divert it from the waste stream
  - Lorenzo Macaluso from CET shared that they are continuing to work closely with DEM on a variety of projects and efforts in Rhode Island. They participated in the URI Food Summit. Juli and CET to schedule a meeting.

#### 4. Hunger Elimination Task Force Update: Nessa Richman, RIFPC

- Nessa Richman reported that the second quarter Hunger Elimination Task Force meeting took place on May 12. There were 65 individuals in attendance. Presenters included Andrew Schiff from RICFB and Maria Cimini from DHS. There were community-led discussions focused on food justice. The group is proposing emergency food delivery and creating an open-access tool for emergency supplemental food delivery service. This tool could serve to help providers get information and help stakeholders make decisions. The RIFPC will continue to work closely with United Way 2-1-1 and Age Friendly Rhode Island to ensure there are not duplicated efforts.

**5. Presentations:**

- Dr. Amy Nunn, Rhode Island Public Health Institute: Sugary drink tax legislation as a funding mechanism for the Retail SNAP Incentive Program. Please refer to the PowerPoint presentation attached for details.
- Samantha Levy, American Farmland Trust: January 2020 Report on state school purchasing incentive program, please refer to the New York Model Program, PowerPoint presentation attached.

**6. Open Discussion/Closing of the Meeting:**

- Carol Hall-Walker shared that this will be her last IFNPAC meeting, representing Dr. Alexander-Scott. She is retiring and her last day at RIDOH will be June 30, 2021. Randi Belhumeur, MS, RD, LDN, CDOE, Health Systems Transformation Administrator/Policy Liaison at RIDOH, will represent RIDOH moving forward. Erin Bertoldi, RIDOH's Statewide Breastfeeding Coordinator will assist Randi and Juli in the IFNPAC work as she has done with Carol all along. The group wished Carol well and expressed gratitude for her passion and service.

**Next virtual meetings:** August 25: 1 p.m.-2:30 p.m. and November 16: 9:30 a.m.-11 a.m., details to follow.

## Q3 Meeting Minutes

**Date:** August 25, 2021

**Location:** RIDOH offices, Room 401

*Due to the elevated transmission levels of COVID-19 and the need for physical distancing, it was advised that only Council Members or their designees listed by statute attend in-person. IFNPAC Council Members are leadership from RIDOH, DEM, DOA, DHS, OHA, RIDE, DOC, and RI Commerce, or their designee. All others were requested to join by Zoom.*

**Council members:** Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott (RIDOH), Ken Ayars on behalf of Director Terry Gray (DEM), Maria Cimini on behalf of Director Celia Blue (DHS), Jessica Patroia (RIDE), Paul Gonsalves (DOA), Randi Belhumeur (RIDOH), Julianne Stelmaszyk (RI Commerce), Christopher Abhulime (Gov), Aleatha Dickerson (OHA), Dana McCants-Derisier (OHA)

**Other attendees:** Nessa Richman (RIFPC), Diane Lynch (RIFPC), Allison Montagon (RIFPC) Robert Ballou (DEM), Karin Wetherill (RIHSC), Coryanne Mansell (CET), Deb Golding (RIDOH), Erin Bertoldi (RIDOH), Sara Amin (URI) Kerri Connolly (RIPHI), Cara Karter (mRelief)

**Presenter:** Andrew Schiff, RICFB

### Welcome and Introductions

- Dr. Alexander-Scott called the meeting to order at 1:03 p.m. She welcomed the Council members who were participating in person, as well as the members of the public who were participating via Zoom.
- Dr. Alexander-Scott introduced and welcomed Rhode Island's new Director of Food Strategy, Juli Stelmaszyk to the team. We are fortunate to have Juli's expertise and passion to help to shepherd this body of work.
- Council members introduced themselves.

### Approval of May 2021 Meeting Minutes

- Meeting minutes were approved by Ken Ayars and Maria Cimini.

### IFNPAC Purpose, Mission, Membership/ COVID-19 Lessons Learned, Surge Response

- Ken Ayars provided a historic overview of the Council's composition, purpose, and mission. He provided copies of the statute to all members, which can be found [here](#).
  - Council members represent State agencies that all have focus areas relative to food. It was built to have structure in good times and bad. The ultimate goal is to build a sustainable, equitable food system. In addition to the federal programs that exist, there are so many local community organizations who are critically important.
  - There is a need to better support CBOS but there are challenges with funding, particularly state funding.
  - IFNPAC was critical to have at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to be. The pandemic only magnified the issues of hunger and inequity. Focusing on the social determinants of health is critical. There were some reflections/lessons learned shared by Ken about the pandemic response:
    1. Importance of communication and coordination between all food systems actors;
    2. Passion and dedication that exists amongst these actors;
    3. Value of CBOs/HEZs;
    4. Importance of food security; and

5. Prominence of food delivery.
  - HEZ work is an important structure to continue to work with and partner. Interested in how we can better produce a more resilient society with food.
  - Rhode Islanders wanted local food since many did not want to shop in an enclosed grocery store and also due to the scarcity in many grocery stores (supply chain issues). Farmers and fishers learned to adapt, which is a trend that continues. The closer and more local the supply chain, the better.
    - Pastor Christopher Abhulime expressed the need for quality food for all. Underserved communities are sometimes left out of having quality food available to them; location of stores and quality of food that goes into the stores. There is a sense that government should be able to do something. Encourage local food procurement.
    - Dana McCants-Derisier said the work of OHA highlighted the need for culturally relevant food and the importance of checking in on folks in a time of physical and social isolation.
    - Alethea Dickerson shared the importance of building on existing systems to advance this work.
  - Juli Stelmaszyk asked the group if there are any other meetings that are relative to this work. State agencies have been meeting monthly, will increase to biweekly and update contact list to include all IFNPAC council members. She also asked Dr. Alexander-Scott if there is anything this group should be specially doing given the Delta surge.
    - Dr. Alexander-Scott said the Delta variant has changed the condition of what we are working with due to an increased level of transmissibility. It dramatically exposes those communities who are most vulnerable (unvaccinated, those with health/social/environmental concerns). The state is doing everything possible to mitigate continued surges. With the proper mitigation (vaccination, indoor masking, and testing) we have the possibility to flatten the curve and reduce cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in a shorter period of time. The next several months will be a very critical time and it is crucial we focus on those who are vulnerable. We will tap into all aspects of supports within the emergency network response.

### **State of the State of Hunger in Rhode Island, Andrew Schiff, RICFB**

- Trends are improving with hunger. Household pulse survey asking Rhode Islanders if they have had enough to eat within the last seven days has decreased from 15% to 13% to 8%, from July 2020 through January 2021. Unemployment is down, and people are receiving critical benefits through SNAP, in addition to the extra \$300 per week in UI benefits. There is speculation that the reversal of the UI benefits will result in a greater need for more assistance.
- Number of people coming to food bank and pantries has decreased from 68,000 in July 2020 to 49,000 in July 2021.
- Things are getting better... why?
  - The economy is improving, unemployment is down, and more people are back to work. Struggling families are receiving federal benefits such as increased SNAP benefits, P-EBT, unemployment insurance increased benefits. Such programs eased burden, fewer people reporting food insecurity, and less people needing of food pantries.
- Predictions for Fall 2021
  - When extra benefits end in September we anticipate food insecurity rates will increase again.
  - Very happy to see that the Biden Administration is updating SNAP benefits for recipients.

- Maria Cimini said DHS is preparing for increase in Rhode Island Works program for cash support and skill-building supports. The State is committed to request the SNAP supplemental benefit as other federal benefits may go away in time. Will continue to do that when we are still feeling the effects of the long-term public health emergency.

### **Rhode Island Food Strategy Update - Julianne Stelmaszyk**

- Juli re-introduced her role to the IFNPAC membership, reviewed scope of work, and latest priorities.
- Leveraging federal funding: American Rescue Act: Food Security and Supply Chain Resilience
  - DEM submitted a proposal to the Governor's Office which would address food insecurity and build supply chain resilience. *Note:* This proposal is still under review by State and federal agencies, no funds have been approved at this time.
  - This proposal was based on IFNPAC recommendations from Spring 2021 and was reviewed by our State agency partners at RIDOH, DHS, RI Commerce and RIDE. We also received input from many of our community partners on the call today.
  - The proposal was focused on addressing negative economic impacts of the pandemic which disproportionately impacted food producers when supply chain faltered as well as communities who were at risk or already experiencing food insecurity. We know that food insecurity increased threefold during the pandemic to one in four households.
  - What was proposed was a \$36 million investment in four critical areas:
    - Connecting the emergency food system to the local food economy;
    - Supporting urban agriculture and land access for new and beginning farmers and growers;
    - Increasing capital investments to small and mid-sized enterprises; and
    - Investing in farm-to-school initiatives which support the local food economy and increase healthy and fresh food consumption among Rhode Island's school-age children
      - Randi Belhumeur asked about the possibility of farm to institution.
      - Ken Ayars expressed the need to advance and innovate farm to institution in Rhode Island.
      - Currently, universities are buying 20% local.
      - Juli would like to continue to work and build on this idea.
- **Hunger Elimination Task Force**

Randi Belhumeur provided an update on behalf of RIFPC.

- The third quarter 2021 meeting of the Hunger Elimination Task Force (August 18) was attended by more than 55 participants. The meeting began with updates from Randi Belhumeur, Policy Liaison and Health Systems Transformation Administrator at the RI Department of Health (RIDOH).
- Randi announced that RIDOH will be collaborating with the RIFPC to hire a Food Access Manager to help coordinate food access and food security work.
- Deb Golding, Health Equity Project Officer at RIDOH, shared information on the community-based HEZ model and the numerous food access activities undertaken, including distributing 531,658 meals since June 2020.
- Juli Stelmaszyk, Director of Food Strategy, and Ken Ayars, Chief of the Agriculture Division of DEM presented DEM's \$36 million proposal for American Rescue Plan Act funding to address food insecurity and supply chain resilience.
- We then learned about four unique programs that connect local food with emergency food providers across the state.



1. Caitlin Mandel and Lisa Raiola discussed Hope & Main's *Nourish Our Neighbors* program that funds local makers to prepare high-quality meals with local ingredients for East Bay residents experiencing food insecurity.
2. Eva Agudelo described how Hope's Harvest has grown exponentially since its founding in 2018, purchasing and gleaning fresh, local produce from local farms for hunger relief agencies to distribute, recovering more than 200,000 pounds of produce in 2020 alone.
3. Fred Mattera, of the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island, and Kate Masury, of Eating with the Ecosystem, shared the mutually beneficial model of the *Local Seafood to Community* program that pays fishermen for whole, under-utilized species to distribute to people experiencing food insecurity through a group of community-based organizations.
4. Thea Upham talked about Farm Fresh Rhode Island's *Farm to Food Pantry* program which has evolved to enable food pantries to order local produce directly from Market Mobile.

Across all the programs, challenges with supply chain, logistics, and costs arose, as well as the tremendous benefits these models provide for local producers and local consumers.

- Open Discussion/Public Comment
  - Cara Karter (mRelief) I think the ability to provide and promote remote SNAP outreach and other kinds of remote assistance is so important as COVID-19 continues to surge, something our organization (mRelief) thinks about all the time. We want to make this easier.
  - Karin Wetherill (Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition) Farm to institution also connects with critical area #1, as food procurement for the emergency food system is itself a form of institutional procurement.
  - Nessa Richman (RIFPC) new JWU Dean of Food Innovation and Technology Jason Evans is interested in connecting higher education, local food systems, and environmental sustainability.
  - Pastor Christopher Abhulime reiterated that Rhode Island is getting more and more diverse. Need for culturally appropriate foods for all.
  - Jessica Patroliia agreed that culturally relevant foods are also an area that RIDE didn't realize they had to work on, but they do. Have experience with needing kosher meals. Staffing is always an issue in school food service. There are food and manufacturing labor shortages. Jessica hopes that the State can find a more reciprocal way to access food programs.
  - It was suggested that State agencies can act as a referral vehicle for each other, better coordinating services for eligible individuals and households, and Randi Belhumeur suggested using the community resource referral platform that Medicaid is using - Unite RI so that we don't duplicate efforts or start something new.
  - Maria Cimini noted, in addition to Unite US, there are several initiatives where State agencies do direct outreach to participation lists. Perhaps this could be a future IFNPAC meeting presentation. DHS is using data migration to do direct outreach. Families must know where to go, etc.
  - Ken Ayars provided a LASA grant update. This funding helps entrepreneurial fishers who are trying to find ways for connectivity. Just about to announce 20 grant recipients. Great projects. Excited to let applicants know shortly. Had requests from more than 60 applicants, many more eligible projects but just don't have enough funding for all. If ARPA funding is approved, may be able to fund more.
  - Diane Lynch (RIFPC) noted that a landscape map has been a need; leverage what already exists for a referral system. Referrals came as a widespread need.

Staff at RIFPC would like to know what should be included, talked to 2-1-1, explored how to leverage. Strong need for that.

- Sara Amin shared food access stakeholder voices.
  - Randi to find out if HEZ should be included for HEZ connection.
  - Lisa Raiola from Hope and Main brought forth the Issue of ramping up the pathways for small farmers and producers.
  - Deb Golding mentioned many people on the phone had a hard time hearing.
- Look forward to meeting minutes.

Meeting adjourned at 2:28 p.m.

## Q4 Meeting Minutes

**Date: November 16, 2021**

**Location: RI Commerce offices, Narragansett conference room**

*Note: Due to the elevated transmission levels of COVID-19 and the need for physical distancing, it was advised that only Council Members or their designees listed by statute attend in-person. IFNPAC Council Members are leadership from RIDOH, DEM, DOA, DHS, OHA, RIDE, DOC and RI Commerce, or their designee. All others were requested to join by Zoom.*

**Council members (present):** Randi Belhumeur (RIDOH – on behalf of Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott, Ken Ayars (RIDEM – on behalf of Terry Gray), Makeba Hardy-Thomas (DEM), Jack Sisson (DEM), Julianne Stelmaszyk (RI Commerce), Terrence McNamara (DOC), Maria Cimini (DHS on behalf of Celia Blue) Doris Blanchard (RI Commerce), Daniela Fairchild (RI Commerce), Christopher Abhulime (Gov), Paul Gonsalves (DOA), Jade Borgeson (DOA)

**Other attendees:** Diane Lynch (RIFPC), Allison Montagnon (RIFPC), Juliana Esposito (RIFPC), Gemma Gorham (RIFPC), Sara Amin (URI SNAP-Ed), Kate Balestracci (URI SNAP-Ed), Hannah Ornburn (URI SNAP Ed), Amanda Cantrell (RICFB), Andrew Schiff (RICFB), Coryanne Malacuso (CET), Jesse Rye (FFRI), Cara Mitchell (FFRI), Margaret Read (Share Our Strength), Erin Bertoldi (RIDOH), Deb Golding (RIDOH), Bob Ballou (DEM), Alyssa Gleason (East Prov HEZ), Karin Wetherill (RIHSC)

**Presenters:** Nessa Richman, RIFPC; Pat McNiff, Pat's Pastured; Margaret DeVos, Southside Community Land Trust

### Welcome and Introductions

- Randi Belhumeur called the meeting to order at 9:33 a.m. She introduced herself as Dr. Alexander-Scott's designee and welcomed those joining in person and remotely.
- She provided an overview of the agenda
- Council members introduced themselves and participants in Zoom did so in the chat.

### Approval of August 2021 Meeting Minutes

- Minutes from August 2021 were approved by Maria Cimini and Juliane Stelmaszyk.

### Hunger Elimination Task Force Update

- Randi Belhumeur provided the following overview/background to introduce Nessa Richman, RIFPC:
  - In an effort to advance one of the five pillars of the Relish Rhody food strategy ensure food security for all Rhode Islanders", the IFNPC convened the Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF) with the goal to reduce food insecurity in 2018.
  - With recent changes in leadership in the last year and a limited capacity to manage the taskforce, the RIFPC entered an agreement with RIDOH and partner State agencies to facilitate the HETF which they have done quite effectively for the past year. She reminded attendees of the three main objectives established for this past year as we reflect on what has been accomplished and lay a path for what should be priorities for 2022.
  - Co-led by State agency partners, RIDOH, DEM, RI Commerce and the RIFPC (through an MOU) provides a quarterly meeting space for CBOs, State and municipal government, and the food industry to work together to reduce hunger and increase access to healthy, culturally relevant food.
- Nessa Richman provided an overview of the HETF Goals and 2021 Objectives:  
*(Presentation included as an attachment of meeting minutes)*

- Broaden the network of actively engaged stakeholders;
- Deepen the collaborative environment for medium/longer-term problem solving; and
- Collect data for the creation of a statewide hunger/food delivery landscape resource.
- HETF 2021 output and outcomes were presented
  - Enhance medium/longer-term planning approach
  - Facilitate communication and consensus-building
  - Educate/broaden everyone's knowledge base
  - Ensure community input into medium/longer-term plans
    1. DEM and RIFPC ARPA recommendations
    2. Invest in urban and rural agriculture land
    3. Increase support for emergency food providers
    4. Support local Farm-to-School
    5. Long-term investment in food access/equity staff
  - Emergency and supplemental food delivery work group update
  - Work group objectives:
    - Improve access to delivery services by building an up-to-date database/landscape map and identifying ways to share as widely as possible with communities in need
    - Identify gaps and potential areas for increased State/non-profit support, short or longer term
  - Key Finding: Utilize platforms such as: Unite RI, 2-1-1, Integra
  - Map was reviewed to showcase the number of emergency and supplemental home delivery providers active in each town.
    - Overall strengths
      - Diverse range of providers, consideration of multiple cultures. Most options are free, or donation based, focus on seniors and disabled individuals
    - Challenges
      - Staff capacity and volunteer supply, gaps in Burrillville, Foster, Gloucester, Scituate, and Smithfield, little focus on newly immigrated families, knowledge gap surrounding local or community-focused operations that act as a last resort
    - Providers dealt with:
      - Inadequate staffing, staff capacity, volunteers, inadequate funding, transportation challenges, access to storage, access to materials/supplies (e.g., boxes)
    - Recommended next steps:
      - Share data with food access platform developers
- Primary food security indicators were reviewed

## Relish Rhody Implementation Updates

### Ensure food security for all Rhode Islanders

#### *Responding to emergency hunger relief*

DHS (Maria Cimini)

- DHS continues to focus on hunger and nutrition through SNAP. Focusing on maintaining COVID-19 flexibilities. SNAP increased benefits will continue through month of December. Continue to work through p-EBT program. Example: Pilgrim high School. Requesting ongoing waivers to continue beyond December for the recertification process and do any communication services via remote. But also preparing if the requests are denied. Continuing to issue benefits monthly to SNAP recipients.
- Enrollment collaborations ongoing with SNAP, Heating Assistance, WIC, and child care.
- DHS website will soon have Rhode Island SNAP State plan posted.

Office of Healthy Aging (OHA) *unable to attend; updates were shared by Randi Belhumeur*

- During May – September 2021, OHA utilized supplemental funding from the Administration for Community Living to deliver additional home-delivered meals to individuals age 60 or older, statewide, via Meals on Wheels resulting in 1,341 total clients served and 23,859 total meals served.
- Through a pilot project, The Elisha Project delivered culturally relevant hot meals and food and supply boxes to individuals living in households and communities with the greatest social and economic need statewide with a focus on the core cities. Those eligible for the service included: individuals age 60 or older, those with disabilities, adult caregivers and spouses, and grandparents or caregivers age 55 or older and caring for grandchildren or foster children younger than 18. This effort resulted in 3,933 total hot meals served and 6,856 total food/supply boxes distributed.

### **Hiring a Food Access Manager**

RIDOH (Julianne Stelmaszyk/Randi Belhumeur)

- In partnership with the RIFPC RIDOH was able to secure COVID-19 funds to hire a full time Food Access and Equity Manager which will be co-managed by our team at RIDOH and the RIFPC. Job posting can be found [here](#). The role will lead implementation of food access-related aspects of the State Food Strategy Relish Rhody and coordinate food security and food access programs across the state.
- We continue to co-host monthly calls with State agency partners and CBOs to help coordinate emergency food relief and food access initiatives (typically 20-30 organizations attend).

### **Sustain and create markets for Rhode Island food and beverage products**

#### **Connect Rhode Island products to Institutional Markets**

From Jessica Patroliia, (RIDE) - *unable to attend; updates were shared by Juli Stelmaszyk.*

- The [RI Farm to School Network](#), established in 2019, has reorganized for its new launch in 2022 and is currently [looking for new members to join the Leadership Council](#) which serve a one-year minimum term, helping to provide strategic guidance and serve as part of the overarching decision-making body for the Network. The new Network format is made up of action committees and communities of practice for producers, institutional buyers, and educators. As a reminder, there are more than 138,000 public school students in Rhode Island and 69% school lunches served are free or at reduced price. Almost 90% of schools claim to serve local food, however it is a small percent of their total food spend at just 9% (FINE, 2019 & USDA, 2020). The newly reorganized Rhode Island Farm to School Network will engage partners across the state to develop, expand, and strengthen local procurement, education, and school gardens all of which supports local farmers and leads to healthier and better students. If you know someone who may be a good fit for the Leadership Council, please reach out to Julianne or Jessica Patroliia at RIDE. We are looking for expertise or experience in education, distribution/supply chain, food access, school community and school-based initiatives.

- USDA FY22 Farm to School grant funding has nearly doubled to \$12 million with up to \$500,000 in grants available to State agencies. RIDE is exploring a potential collaborative proposal with DEM, RI Commerce, RIDOH and others.
- This fall RIDE was awarded a Technology Innovation Grant for three years to develop an electronic Farm to School local procurement tracking platform which will be integrated with current administration of federally funded child nutrition programs. RIDE has been working with the Rhode Island Farm to School Network for two years to develop a local definition and identify food purchasing data to be tracked. This system would help lay the groundwork for a possible local purchasing incentive legislation and will improve program evaluation and expansion.
- Relish Rhody and SupplyRI will be co-hosting a [RI local food show for institutional buyers Dec. 7th](#) with Hope and Main and Farm Fresh RI as part of continual efforts to connect more RI food producers with large food purchasers in state. We expect to have over 25 institutions and 20 RI food producers and farms.

### Preserve and grow agriculture and fisheries

- Ken Ayars (DEM) - DEM is administering stimulus funds in agriculture and seafood. FR-SAN to support producer mental health, health and wellness, business planning. Formed a partnership to administer that, which will happen in the very near future.
- Anticipate receiving a grant announcement from USDA ~ 1-1.5 million to buy food from local growers to support the emergency food system. Will work with RICFB and FFRI. Hopefully it will be more than just a one-year program. Proposal in for ARPA funding. Those are being considered by legislature and Governor. This will be for many of the local and community organizations that were mentioned by the RIFPC. Identified critical issues that need support in Rhode Island. Hope to be able to support that network of food delivery.
- Looking at the infrastructure bill to see what impact that has on the overall food system. Supply chain is currently constrained. DEM administering funds to help seafood processors affected by COVID-19.
  - Bob Ballou (DEM) – DEM was awarded a \$300,000 federal Saltonstall-Kennedy grant by NOAA Fisheries to strengthen the local seafood market through a multi-year marketing campaign. The majority of the more than 80 million pounds of seafood landed in Rhode Island, valued at \$100 million (ex-vessel) is exported out of state and most of what is consumed is imported. This initiative will involve a multifaceted approach to promoting the consumption and sales of seafood in Rhode Island. This should benefit a range of interests in Rhode Island, including businesses, consumers, and the State – a stronger local food economy. ([See recent press release](#))
  - Marketing campaign to promote *Rhode Island Grown* foods: There are current discussions between DEM and RI Commerce to re-engage a pre-pandemic initiative to promote food tourism under a unified brand message and image, a goal stated in the Food Strategy. This will likely kick off in 2022.
  - Seafood wastewater processing continues to be a bottleneck for increasing local processing of squid, our largest state food export. A proposal to fund pre-treatment incentives for seafood processors has been included RI Commerce and URI's Build Back Better Grant Application for blue economy and technology.
  - Growing year-round food production: Several vertical and controlled-environment farming businesses are interested in expanding to Rhode Island. There is collaboration between DEM, RI Commerce, and DLT to support the growth of this industry.

### Minimize food waste and divert it from the waste stream

Coryanne Mansell, Center for EcoTechnology (CET),

- A nonprofit of more than 40 years, helps people and businesses save energy and reduce waste. Thanks to our partners, including EPA, USDA, DEM, and 11th Hour Racing, we are able to offer [Wasted Food Solutions](#) to businesses and institutions in the state. To date, we have helped entities with surplus food reduce, recover, or divert more than 1,000 tons from the landfill.
- On November 17, we are hosting a [virtual workshop](#) geared to K-12 schools [centerforecotechnology.org], which will also include a presentation from Rhode Island School Recycling Club. This workshop focuses on the opportunities to implement programs to reduce, recover, and divert food scraps within the institutional sector.
- CET is working with Clean Ocean Access and Zero Waste Providence to offer a series of meetings for restaurants across the state from January to March of next year. This series of meetings will encourage peer-to-peer learning, showcasing that the interest and need for more donation and composting efforts is not unique to one organization or one part of the state.
- We would like to develop Part Two of a [training video](#) we just produced for Middletown, CT, and their Feed the Earth initiative. Part 1 video focused on the downtown effort to source separate food scraps for the nearby anaerobic digestion. However, this follow-up video will focus on best practices for donation in Rhode Island and will be developed in the coming months.
- With support from USDA, and in collaboration with Clean Ocean Access, we are offering assistance to sites that may be interested in pursuing food scraps composting. This includes evaluating best practices and overall considerations to this endeavor.
- As part of our work with EPA to build awareness and understanding of anaerobic digestion (AD) as an option to process wasted food, we are just about to finalize a two-pager on anaerobic digestion for Rhode Island School Recycling Club to incorporate in their conversations with schools they are working with in the state. The goal is to familiarize folks with the technology and support its use, when applicable and appropriate.

### **Overarching food strategy**

Julianne Stelmaszyk (Director of Food Strategy)

- November 16, RIFPC testified on ARP stimulus investment in food system (link to recording [here](#))
- URI and JWU will be hosting two food-related conferences this winter. The 6<sup>th</sup> Annual URI Food Summit on January 20 and JWU CFIT Food and Innovation Symposium March 7-9.
- Regional Partnerships – Director of Food Strategy now serves in advisory capacity to these initiatives:
  - Rhode Island Farm to School Leadership Council
  - Farm to Institution New England (FINE) Network Advisory Council
  - New England Feeding New England Food Partnership between six states
- The 2017 food strategy Relish Rhody is set to expire in May 2022, therefore we will work on updating the plan beginning in January 2022. Preliminary conversations with stakeholders have already begun and we expect that the IFNPAC will serve as an advisory committee to oversee the process. Please reach out with any ideas or suggestions for how we can continue to use it as a tool to achieve our state’s food vision and expect the preliminary work to begin in January.

### **Open Comment/Discussion**

- Margaret Read, representing Share our Strength, shared that she would be happy to have a conversation with anyone to discuss the *Build Back Better Act* in relation to nutrition, child tax credit, etc. She can be reached at: [mread@strength.org](mailto:mread@strength.org)

- Rhode Island Farm to School Leadership Council [Recruitment Flyer](#)
- USDA Farm to School [grant opportunity](#)

Randi Belhumeur acknowledged and thanked all of the State agencies and community partners for attending, both in person and virtually.

The meeting adjourned at 10:55 a.m.