

# RI FOOD POLICY COUNCIL



## RI Hunger Elimination Task Force 2022 Q1 Meeting February 8, 2022 | 2:00 - 3:30 pm

*Theme: The Role of Municipalities in Supporting Food Access*

[Recording can be viewed here.](#)

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### NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The first Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF) Meeting of 2022 was attended by over 75 participants. Randi Belhumeur, Policy Liaison & Health Systems Transformation Administrator at the RI Department of Health (RIDOH) welcomed the group and noted that though hunger levels for the state decreased slightly from 25% in 2020 to 18% in 2021, they are still double pre-pandemic levels. Randi then introduced a newly hired Food Access and Equity Program Manager, Caitlin Mandel, who will be helping to coordinate food security work for the state in a role created through a partnership between the RI Food Policy Council and the RI Department of Health.

Nessa Richman, Network Director of the RI Food Policy Council reminded the group that the goal of the HETF is to reduce hunger and increase access to healthy and culturally appropriate food for all Rhode Islanders. Nessa then introduced the 2022 HETF plan and potential working group topics to guide the Task Force's work for the year, both of which came from priorities identified during breakout sessions at the 2021 Q4 Meeting. Meeting participants were then dispersed into breakout rooms based on these topics for further discussion of how work could be advanced moving forward. Notes from the breakout sessions are available [here](#).

After the breakout sessions ended, we heard from two different municipalities about how they work to promote food access in their own cities/towns. Anne Marie Roy (Program Director for Social Services Department for the Town of Warren), Maria Ursini (Executive Director of

Benjamin Church Senior Center in Bristol, RI), and Kristen Read (Director, Warren HEZ) discussed how they each work between their own agencies/offices to support their citizens, including connecting people with social services, organize delivery of food to homebound seniors using volunteers, and starting a community garden project. We then heard how a city working with a larger population supports food access initiatives for its citizens. Rachel Newman Greene (Deputy Director, Providence Healthy Communities Office) discussed that her office's official role is to support and promote policies that contribute to healthy citizens but during the pandemic, her office stepped in to serve as a direct support organization, including stepping in to deliver meals. This experience led her to see the need to create an emergency food plan for future potential crises. Her office also works with the RI Department of Education to support free summer meals sites in the City and works to improve food service contracts for their schools. Jazandra Barros (Providence community member/Community Partnerships Manager, Southside Community Land Trust) discussed how she worked with the City through the African Alliance of RI to assess the needs of people participating in food access programs in her community. This survey was intentionally designed to allow community members to describe what food access and health mean to them in their own words.

The meeting closed with Nessa Richman (RIFPC) asking the group, *“What would you like to see your town or city government do to support your food access & equity objectives in 2022?”* Responses (included below) included items such as helping community based service organizations identify clients who need their help, connecting them to potential community partners, helping to streamline implementation of national/state food access programs, and gathering feedback from citizens. Communities of Practice will be established based on the working group themes to advance key food access and equality issues in the state.

***Save the date for the RI Hunger Elimination Task Force 2022 Q2 meeting: May 3rd at 2pm!***

***Participating legislators:***

- Nisa Villareal, Community Outreach Coordinator, Office of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse

***Participating stakeholders:***

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## OBJECTIVES

- Setting the agenda for 2022
- Learning about the role of municipalities and tribes in supporting food access

## MATERIALS

- [2022 HETF Plan](#)
- [2022 HETF Q1 Slide Deck](#)

## AGENDA

- 2:00 pm**      **Welcome and Introductions**
- 2:05 pm**      **Review of Feedback-Based 2022 Objectives and Themes**
- 2:15 pm**      **Breakout Session I: *What role will you play in HETF this year?***
- 3:05 pm**      **Breakout Session Report Out**

**3:15 pm**      **Panel:** *What is the role of local governments in hunger elimination?*

**3:25 pm**      **Announcements and one-question meeting evaluation**

## NOTES

- 2:00 pm**      **Welcome and introductions** (*Randi Belhumeur, RI Department of Health (RIDOH)*)
- The 2021 RI Community Food Bank's Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island indicates that hunger across RI Communities decreased from 25% in 2020 to 18% in 2021, but is still doubled from pre-pandemic levels of 9%.
  - Randi thanks everyone in the network for their hard work their past two years helping with these efforts.
  - Introduced new Food Access & Equity Program Manager, Caitlin Mandel. This role will facilitate collaboration and information sharing across our state's food system stakeholders.
  - (*Nessa Richman, RIFPC*) Thanks RIDOH and the RI Director of Food Strategy Juli Stelmaszyk for their partnership in managing the HETF, and the RI Foundation for funding the RIFPC.

- 2:05 pm**      **Brief review of member input on 2022 HETF objectives and activities, segue into 2022 objectives, themes, work groups** (*Nessa Richman, RIFPC*)
- The goal of the Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF) is to reduce hunger and increase access to healthy, culturally-appropriate food for all RI residents
  - The HETF was created by Governor Gina Raimondo in 2017 to reduce food insecurity. Last year we welcomed over 100 stakeholders from across our food system to four quarterly Hunger Elimination Task Force meetings.
  - The RI Food Policy Council coordinates these quarterly meetings and provides needed support for activities in between them, in close partnership with RIDOH and the Director of Food Strategy.
  - Key Themes Emerged from 2021 Q4 Breakout Groups when asked how the HETF can support members work in the coming year
    - Membership needs to continue to grow and broaden, and we are looking for representation from communities, health care entities, municipal governments, food sector businesses, and communities that are not well served by traditional food access networks.
    - Food Equity is a central lens for this work.
    - Members wanted to engage more fully in policy work, and understand how policy impacts food access in their communities.
    - Members wanted regular presentations by organizations involved in food access programs (SNAP Program, Food Bank, etc.)
    - Annual state of the state was useful.
  - 2022 HETF Objectives

- Broaden the network of actively engaged stakeholders and lift up effective community-based solutions to specific food justice and food access problems
- Deepen the collaborative environment for medium/longer term problem solving across state agencies, NGO's, Community Based Organizations (CBO), industry and other stakeholders.
- Reduce food insecurity by generating and providing information that helps member organizations connect food insecure people with emergency/supplemental food delivery services.
- Solve systemic emergency and supplemental food delivery/distribution problems by identifying and educating decision makers about policy/investments/regulatory solutions that increase the effectiveness and resilience of the emergency and supplemental food system in responding to shocks
- Working Groups
  - In 2021 there was one working group, it had approximately 6 people in it that focused on SNAP grocery delivery, a research intern was hired and RIFPC staff supported the meetings.
  - Proposed 2022 Workgroups (from 2021 Q4 Meeting) are:
    - Improving emergency and supplemental food delivery for homebound people.
    - Getting more local food into the emergency feeding system.
    - Improving SNAP and WIC utilization and operations.
    - Connecting with municipal governments
    - Serving aging populations (in partnership with Age-Friendly RI)
    - Food access and insecurity among students

3:05 pm

**Small Group Breakout Session I: *What role will you play in HETF this year? (work group focused)***

- **Notes from facilitators for each breakout session are available [here](#)**

3:15 pm

**Panel Discussion: Role of Municipalities and Tribes in Hunger Elimination**  
(facilitated by Diane Lynch, RIFPC)

- **Town of Warren, RI**
  - Anne Marie Roy, Program Director for Social Services Department for the Town of Warren
    - Warren Discussion: Warren has a population of 11,000 people, with a pretty high need for food access programs. During the pandemic this need increased. We work with partners including Tap In from Barrington and they helped 174 households, 433 people in 2021. East Bay Communication Action program. We refer community members to these partners when needed.
    - People find out about our services primarily through word of mouth, our brochures and the Town website. We have repeat customers, including multiple generations from the same family.
  - Maria Ursini, Executive Director of Benjamin Church Senior Center in Bristol, RI

- We work with the East Bay Recovery Center, they have a mobile food pantry once a month that is popular in our town.
    - We have a tiny food pantry outside our office which is popular, we refill this with donations from community members and excess food from the food pantry
    - We work with local churches and other pantries as well.
    - At the senior center, Hope & Main has been helpful since the pandemic providing the meals, which helped keep the seniors home and safe. Some months we are delivering to over 300 individuals.
    - We deliver groceries and meals to homebound seniors on a monthly basis, making sure this population has their nutrition is critical.
    - Seniors can get a food voucher that they can use at the farmers markets, which is very popular. Wish the amount could be higher than \$15.00.
    - Not counting meals on wheels we provided more than 20,000 in 2021. This is primarily delivered, primarily through volunteers.
  - Kristen Read, Director, Warren HEZ
    - In a HEZ's first year you are really getting to know your community, building your network and listening to key community stakeholders. The town has been helpful in identifying key individuals to meet with.
    - Small town, so we have a formal and informal system for food access. There is good communication in the town to get help to people who need them. Lots of volunteer supported initiatives.
    - Currently working with the Parks and Recreation department to make other food access connections, e.g. a community garden project, and distributing free KN-95 masks and COVID tests through food access programs.
    - I hope the Town of Warren will help us spread the word and help enroll our families in the free school lunch program, this can be done through Community Health Workers
    - Some students can't get transportation to the Free Summer Meal sites at Burrs Hill, perhaps we can organize a community walking school "bus"
- **Providence Healthy Communities Office**
  - Rachel Newman Greene, Deputy Director, Providence Healthy Communities Office
    - Providence is at a different scale, we have 180,000 residents. Our office is in the City Hall, working under the Mayor. We primarily set policies and evaluate policies that promote public health. For example, the Parks department, we are always looking to investigate communities that are experiencing food systems and particularly providing food that is culturally appropriate.

- In this effort, we support urban farms and gardens, and farmers markets in our cities, particularly those that support food insecure folks, as well as the Providence citizens who farm and are vendors at that market.
- 2,000 kids in Providence are eligible for free and reduced lunch, 86% of students, so we qualify for the Community Eligibility - we work to make sure the food is as high quality as possible. We work with the school district to inform priorities. We work to shape the current food service contract, and work with our Parks department to help with their Free Summer Meals program.
- Before COVID we were not a direct service office, but our staff were delivering emergency and supplemental food, and we realized we were unprepared for this emergency. So we are hoping we can use ARPA funds to develop an emergency food response plan. If you don't have a plan, it's hard to make sure equity is achieved, how do you reach the people that don't already know about or use these services.
- Jazandra Barros, Providence community member/Community Partnerships Manager, Southside Community Land Trust
  - At the land trust, my role is to coordinate and connect various organizations. I started working with the City of Providence through the African American Ambassadors group. The group formed a food disparity committee to survey the BIPOC community in Providence to get an understanding of what the needs are, and how people are currently interacting with the food system. What is important about that survey is that we are not trying to be prescriptive about how we discuss and think about food disparity, but let the people taking the survey define healthy eating and eating well in their own terms.
  - We started a pilot program in 2021 to address some of the gaps in the emergency food system, as well as those who don't qualify for assistance under traditional guidelines but are still food insecure.

3:30 pm

**Meeting Closing: Nessa ended with a question: *What would you like to see your town or city government do to support your food access & equity objectives in 2022?***

**ANSWERS:**

- *Help us identify partner organizations and individuals we could collaborate with*
- *Buy a heated van so we can deliver food to homebound seniors*
- *Create programs for undocumented folks*
- *Remove requirements for students to qualify for free breakfast, lunch, and SFSP*
- *I would like our town to partner with us more closely to refer people who need food assistance to our food programs and let us know what additional needs may be unmet.*
- *Support sustainability efforts through partnerships.*
- *SNAP eligibility be more streamlined.*



- *I'd love to see a farmers market or other opportunity for fresh food in east providence!*
- *Contribute more time and energy into the idea and benefits of Community Gardens and spaces to put them !!*
- *Include affordable shopping center in their new mixed use project on Metacom*
- *Start by acknowledging food insecurity and access is real.*
- *Towns helping to integrate place-based and delivery-based food programs would be good... not quite sure how to operationalize, but I think both channels are helpful, and could tie into one another.*
- *Funding community-led agriculture initiatives*
- *Bring back people to connect with people. Allow our underserved communities to be heard and ask questions.*
- *Genuinely engage the voices of those who are being impacted and who have not been solicited in the political arenas/decision making process.*