

RI FOOD POLICY COUNCIL



RI Hunger Elimination Task Force Q2 Meeting

Tuesday May 3, 2022 | 2:00 - 3:30 pm

Theme: Caring for Older Rhode Islanders

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MEETING SUMMARY

The second RI Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF) Meeting of 2022 was attended by over 55 participants. Maria Cimini, newly-appointed Director of the Office of Healthy Aging reviewed the current status of Nutrition Assistance programs serving older adults in Rhode Island. Representatives from three innovative programs that provide nutrition access for older adults ([PACE-RI's](#) In-house Nutrition Services, [RI DEM's Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program](#) Produce Boxes, and the [Bristol Health Equity Zone's](#) Community Cooking Classes) discussed their initiatives, and how they've formed community partnerships to better serve their clients. Discussions in breakout groups identified key challenges and opportunities for addressing the unique nutrition needs of older Rhode Islanders, such as transportation, staffing, internet infrastructure, building community partnerships, and affordable food delivery services.

MEETING PARTICIPANTS

Participating Legislators

- *Karen Bradbury, Projects Director, Office of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse*

Participating Stakeholders

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OBJECTIVES

- *Learn about innovative programs providing nutrition to older Rhode Islanders*
- *Network with others working in food access and equity programs in our state*

AGENDA

2:00 pm Welcome and Introductions

2:10 pm Announcements

2:15 pm Panel Discussion: Innovative solutions to food access issues faced by older Rhode Islanders (*facilitated by Meghan Grady of Meals on Wheels RI*)

- Joan Kwiatkowski, PACE-RI
 - Through their food as medicine program, PACE-RI is working to combat food insecurity and promote good health by creating nutrient-packed, culturally-sensitive and delicious dishes in house, with organic and local fresh produce

- Chris Reuckel, RI Dept. of Environmental Management
 - The RI Department of Environmental Management has partnered with Farm Fresh RI and local Senior Centers to launch a Senior Farmers Market Produce Box program. Learn how this effort will deliver fresh, local, seasonal produce to older Rhode Islanders this Summer and Fall

- Courtney Poissant and Katie Blais, Bristol Health Equity Zone
 - Chef Courtney Poissant has been sharing her considerable talents in the kitchen with East Bay residents for the past 3 years. Learn how her engaging cooking classes help older Rhode Islanders gain kitchen confidence and skills to cook healthy meals using fresh produce

2:45 pm Breakout Session

3:15 pm Breakout Session Key Takeaways

3:25 pm Final Announcements

NOTES

2:00 pm Welcome and Introductions

Caitlin Mandel, RIFPC Food Access and Equity Program Manager opens the meeting by thanking the Hunger Elimination Task Force Core Partners, the RI Department of Health, and the RI Director of Food Strategy, Juli Stelmaszyk for their assistance. She reminds meeting participants that each quarterly meeting has a theme to help the group dig deeper into issues related to nutrition and food insecurity in the state.

2:10 pm Announcements

Maria Cimini, newly named Director of the Office of Healthy Aging welcomes everyone to the meeting, reminding participants that it is Older Americans month and that good nutrition and food access is important across our life cycle. 31,000 Rhode Islanders meet the definition of senior for the SNAP Program (aged 60 and above) and the Department of Human Services is also working to increase food access for older adults. The Office of Health Aging is continuing food access work including Meals on Wheels, providing delivered meals to 2400 RI-ers and with senior center and congregant meal partners, serving 5000 participants in FY 2021, serving nearly 375,000 meals. In partnership with the RI Community Food Bank, the Commodities Supplemental Food Program for Older Adults provides food for older adults at home.

The Federal Food and Nutrition Service administers 14 nutrition assistance programs in Rhode Island through several state agencies. The Office of Healthy Aging focuses their attention on older RI-ers (55+) and will continue to serve the nutrition needs of this population and their families.

Caitlin Mandel reviews the goal and history of the Hunger Elimination Task Force, and reminds the group that the Hunger Elimination Task force is open to any stakeholder. Announces the launch of the RI Food Access and Nutrition Bulletin which is a monthly review of the work being done in the state by the HETF members and will also provide key state agency updates. The first issue is expected to be launched in late June.

2:15 pm Panel Discussion: Innovative solutions to food access issues faced by older Rhode Islanders

Q1. What does your program do in a nutshell and how do people learn about you?

- Joan Kwiatkowski - PACE-RI is a federally sponsored health plan that provides medical and social services to frail older adults that otherwise would be in a nursing home. We are a nonprofit that provides care for folks throughout RI, and now includes a food program. Most folks are referred to us via a physician, word of mouth, or a resident services coordinator from housing.
- Christopher Reuckel - RI DEM - The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program provides low income seniors with access to local nutrition, fresh fruits and veggies grown by a local farmer. My favorite part of the program is connecting seniors to their local farmers. People find out about the program through our partners, seniors centers and senior communities
- Courtney Poissant and Katie Blais - the Bristol HEZ does outreach throughout the community, including outreach to senior centers. For this particular cooking demo program, many people find out about it through Facebook. Our program gives innovative approaches to live and eat in a healthy manner, the different recipes are easier to learn when everything is right there in front of you.

Q2. What are challenges that you face in serving Older Adults and how you've addressed it

- Christopher Reuckel - RI DEM - Accessibility is an issue, providing thousands of seniors who struggle with food insecurity a direct route to receive the nutrition they need. The coupon program was hard, people couldn't always get to their local farmers market. So to address this, we switched over to a produce box program and are now able to deliver boxes of produce to their communities directly through senior centers, senior housing facilities and directly to senior homes through partners such as West Bay Housing. We have also allowed the use of a proxy, a senior can assign someone else to pick up their box for them. Together, we expect to see more local produce getting to seniors this year than ever.
- Courtney Poissant and Katie Blais - The biggest challenge has been the pandemic. Before the pandemic, we were onsite at senior living facilities. We have been doing them virtually, which is a catch-22 - we are reaching thousands more than originally, but it is harder for our seniors to participate. We hope to get back to in person demos one day. For right now, I still go to Franklin Court every Friday, cost efficient healthy meals at a lower cost and we are encouraging healthy options for them and offer delivery services with Benjamin Church Senior Living. Katie adds, I handle the back end coordination - it's been great to widen our reach, but it is a different set of people attending now, and not everyone who watches the virtual class can come pick up the free grocery bag ahead of time.
- Joan Kwiatkowski - we also have an issue with access. Many of our clients are homebound. We serve individuals across the state, and are able to bring food to our four other locations - we partner with Meals on Wheels to deliver to people's homes. People are still staying home due to COVID, we have staff go into people's homes when needed. Every week we notice an uptick in engagement lately, we give out "grandpads" - laptops given out to higher functioning folks and have them participate in a support group lead by a social worker for interaction and reminders to eat and take medication.

Q3. *What do you need most to help you serve seniors?*

- Katie Blais - a car or a delivery service to get food to class participants, and unlimited funds to get great food to people. Courtney adds, we have a lot of extra food, in our small town it's hard to donate this excess food to donate in our town (*editor's note - MEANS database food recovery program reached out after the meeting*)
- Christopher Reuckel - unlimited funds would be great, volunteers at the senior locations is a big one we need right now - to hand out these boxes. Additionally, additional locations to serve seniors around RI - low income senior housing complexes that would like to participate so we can expand direct access.
- Joan Kwiatkowski - I concur about money like my panelists, but add free WIFI and public housing. A more impactful outreach plan throughout the state, so people know about your program. But Wifi is a no brainer for people to learn about your program and get access to the program

Q4. *Can you give an example of a nontraditional partnership that you are leveraging for impact?*

- Joan Kwiatkowski - when we started our food program we did it for two reasons. 1. Weight gain is important for our clients, many are labeled failure to thrive 2. We were getting lots of complaints about the food we were getting from meal prep providers. We took their complaints seriously and bought a new building to install a kitchen. We did

research around food medicine and found that medically tailored meals did not impact them as much because their bodies were so entrenched in their chronic issues it was hard to change that. We instead focused on close relationships in our community - the RI Community Food Bank, Hope & Main, Meals on Wheels. We now have relationships with only local farmers, no 18 wheelers are coming by to deliver food. We also work with a compost farmer which is a source of entertainment for our clients. We have thought of this program as a growing relationship with our community.

- Christopher Reuckel - for the past two years we have partnered with URI's SNAP-ed program to provide fresh recipes and preparation and storage tips for the produce they are getting. It has allowed seniors to try new recipes and perhaps even try a new hobby. We have plenty of other great partners including the Office of Healthy Aging, nutrition program directors, RI senior resident coordinators, etc., without them it would not be possible.
- Katie Blais - the partnership between Bristol HEZ and chef Courtney is nontraditional and very helpful. It's a great service for our community and could be a great partnership model for HEZs across the state.

Q5. As we navigate this "new normal" of serving RI, what is on your mind when serving older adults

- Maria Cimini - Benjamin Church Senior Center Bristol- we hope the State has a plan or is working on taking care of our older population. We need to improve how we will reach these individuals and get them a healthy meal.
 - Meghan Grady - I believe that the Office of Healthy Aging is working on a strategic plan for serving the needs of older RI-ers

Opening it up the larger group for discussion and questions

- *Joan Kwiatowski- need to bring up the workforce issue. I started my career in pediatrics. Kids are easy to attract help for, older adults are not as adorable and are sometimes difficult to work with. Anything we can do to support a strong workshop to support and worship older adults is necessary*
- *Katlynn Kisla - before working for RIDOH I worked with Meals on Wheels out of New Bedford, serving 11 neighboring towns. This pandemic showed us how we really need staff to support older adults, we need to build up resources that are attainable for older adults and easy for them to learn about and access.*
- *Courtney Poissant - we had the food on the move trucks that came to Bristol and would set up in the heart of town, accepted SNAP Benefits, this was a great program, very easily accessible. Sometimes they would come right to Franklin Court. Now that we are in COVID, it would be beneficial to bring the food on the move trucks to these senior centers.*
 - *Kerri Connolly - (speaking from the Food on the Move Market) we are exclusively targeting senior housing sites (funding restricts us to senior living centers in the urban core). We totally agree and would love to expand outside the urban core as funding allows. Transportation is the number one issue/limitation we hear of that our program addresses.*

- *Karen Griffith -the East Bay Food Pantry provides access for fresh produce twice a week and people should know that's available. We serve eastern RI from East Providence to Newport. Just want to make sure people know about us and our services, they can come to us twice a week. We do grocery delivery through our mobile food pantry program for people who have limited transportation or are homebound. We handed out 120,000 pounds of fresh produce last year.*

3:15 pm Breakout Session Key Themes

- **Transportation:** Many seniors lack accessible transportation, and there is a significant need for affordable delivery of groceries and meals.
- **Technology:** Many seniors lack reliable access to the internet and/or the support to use it. With this population, it's important to balance the promise of new technologies and services with accessibility.
- **Culturally and Medically Appropriate Food:** Task Force members discussed a significant need for healthier, more culturally-relevant meal items for seniors. The group also identified a need for enforcing nutrition guidelines to organizations and companies that provide food, particularly when serving older adults with chronic medical conditions.
- **Workforce/Labor:** The nationwide shortage of healthcare workers impacts senior services. Healthcare professionals such as visiting nurses, certified nursing assistants and community health workers can identify seniors that need food assistance and connect them to existing nutrition programs, but staffing shortages and high turnover rate in these industries makes it difficult for food providers to keep in touch with them.
- **It's About More Than Food:** When providing nutrition access to older adults, it's important to remember that this population is vulnerable to isolation. Nutrition programs funded by the Older Americans Act are required to provide opportunities for socialization and nutrition education in addition to meals.

3:25 pm Final Question: Name one thing (besides unlimited money) that would help you provide food access for Older Rhode Islanders?

- *Respondents identified a need for improved communication & coordination between agencies and organizations that serve older adults listing:*
 - "Exposure of services"
 - "Community connections"
 - "More coordinated policy efforts"
 - "Successful models to inspire us"
 - "Improved policies"
 - "One stop shop"
- *Respondents identified a need for more accessible and affordable ways to get food to older adults including:*
 - "A phone line for older adults to call for help signing up for SNAP, dealing with SNAP issues as well as taking food orders for delivery"
 - "Free delivery, including for SNAP recipients"

- “Free grocery delivery”
- “Free delivery services”
- “Transportation”
- “Delivery (with no fee)”
- *Other suggestions to improve food access for older adults included:*
 - “Evaluation”
 - “Social support”
 - “Guidelines around what types of food are best for different health conditions (diabetes-friendly guidelines, etc.)”
 - “Resources”
 - “More staff and larger facility”
 - “Access to edible gardens or education on growing edible gardens”