

RI FOOD POLICY COUNCIL



RI Hunger Elimination Task Force Q2 Meeting October, 18 2022 | 2:00 - 3:30 pm

Theme: State of the State of Food Security in Rhode Island

- [Click here to watch the recording](#)
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MEETING SUMMARY

The final Hunger Elimination Task Force Meeting of 2022 was held virtually on Tuesday October 18, 2022. Fifty-two participants heard important updates from the RI Community Food Bank, RI Department of Human Services, the RI Department of Education (RIDE), and Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank's Chief Operating Officer Andrew Schiff shared that food pantries in Rhode Island are seeing an increased number of visitors and are distributing more food than during the height of the pandemic. Jessica Patroliia, Coordinator of the Child Nutrition Programs at RIDE shared that school lunch and breakfast participation has dropped since meals are no longer freely available to all students, and that RIDE and its partners are working to capitalize on Federal and state opportunities to improve Child Nutrition programs including increased purchasing of local products, supporting farm to school programming, and exploring state flexibilities to increase participation in the Community Eligibility Provision. Meals on Wheels of RI discussed exciting new pilot programs they've launched as part of their strategic planning process such as delivering medically-tailored meals to their clients with chronic illnesses and delivering meals to pregnant and postpartum mothers. Bethany Caputo from the RI Department of Human Services announced new programs for SNAP participants including the launch of the Elderly Simplified Application Project and the Eat Well, Be Well healthy SNAP retail incentives.

During the breakout session, meeting participants discussed how the HETF has served them in their work this year, and identified key priorities the organization should focus on in 2023. A potential change to the structure of the HETF meetings that would allow for more networking and actionable projects was discussed in several breakout rooms. Task force members wanted to continue to focus on key issues from 2022 such as improving home delivery of meals and groceries and getting more local food into the emergency and supplemental food system. Additionally for 2023, the members wanted to explore new opportunities for advocacy, deeper engagement with state agency partners and the healthcare field, and learn more about additional topics such as universal school meals and relevant federal level nutrition-related activities such as the recent Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health.

MEETING PARTICIPANTS

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MEETING NOTES

2:00 pm **Welcome & Announcements**

- Randi Belhumeur, Program Administrator within the Division of CHE at RIDOH started the meeting, asking everyone to introduce themselves in the chat. Randi reminded the group that the Hunger Elimination Task Force was created in 2017 by the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) and the Director of Food Strategy, as a component of the State's Food Strategy of ensuring food security for all Rhode Islanders. The goal of this task force has remained steadfast in the focus area of reducing hunger and increasing access to healthy, culturally appropriate food for all Rhode Islanders.

- The year 2022 has brought many challenges as the pandemic, inflation, and gas prices continue to negatively impact Rhode Islanders and the organizations that support them. However, there are many reasons to be optimistic and several key opportunities are available that would allow us to continue to build upon the great work of the Hunger Elimination Task Force.
- Juli Stelmaszyk shares that the Biden-Harris Administration recently held a National Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, the first such gathering in more than 50 years. In conjunction with the conference, the administration has also released a [National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health](#) that lays out key steps the federal government will take to achieve their goal of ending hunger in America and increasing healthy eating and physical activity by 2030.
 - In addition to highlighting the role food insecurity plays in the prevalence of chronic illnesses in our country, this strategy lays out several key goals that align with the priorities of the Hunger Elimination Task Force and the Relish Rody Food Strategy. Goals such as increasing the supply of local food available in the supplemental food system, making it easier for people to access federal nutrition benefits and working towards a universal free lunch program in our schools.
- Ines Merchan from the RI Foundation shares information about a newly launched [American Rescue Act grant program](#) for nonprofit organizations in Rhode Island who provide critical food security services in our state.
- Nessa Richman, Network Director of the RI Food Policy Council shared the [RIFPC Data Dashboard](#), an exciting new tool that can inform and help HETF members communicate about their work on food access in Rhode Island.

2:25 pm

Panel: State of the State of Food Security in Rhode Island

- [Andrew Schiff, RI Community Food Bank](#)
 - Andrew notes that unemployment is low. People are working but families are experiencing financial hardship caused by higher rent, higher utilities and inflation.
 - Andrew shares a chart that shows that the number of people utilizing food pantries in Rhode Island has increased. In August of 2021 about 52,000 people were visiting food pantries, and that number has risen to over 63,000 in August 2022.
 - The Food Bank is responding by distributing more food through their 140 member agencies, from 12 tons of food in 2021, to 15 tons of food in 2022.
 - Andrew reminds the HETF that winter weather will make things harder for families as heating bills become due, and important pandemic-era benefits will be ending including emergency allotment for monthly SNAP benefits.

- Jessica Patroliia, RI Department of Education's Child Nutrition Programs
 - The Federal Child Nutrition programs administered through RIDE generally show positive outcomes for students, including reducing the rates of very low food security among students, and increasing nutrient adequacies, attendance and academic performance.
 - During the pandemic, the federal child nutrition programs experienced significant changes. Meals were served for free, to all students, often in a grab and go format.
 - In 2022, Rhode Island did not continue free school meals for all for the school year, and meal benefit applications are now required. RIDE has already seen some of the impacts of returning to a pricing program. Of the 14 school districts that have sent in their numbers for the start of this school year, RIDE has already seen a decrease in the amount of lunches and breakfasts served per day. The pandemic has demonstrated that the need for these meals is there, but now students are not able to access them.
 - Program trends for 2022 include a return to traditional cafeteria style meal service, confusion among families about the return to a pricing program and the need to pay for meals and fill out a meal benefit application. There is increased unpaid meal debt, continuing supply chain issues, staffing challenges, and administrative burden. One positive change is an increased interest in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) programs, and RIDE has added 8 more Local Education Agency (LEA)s to these programs. But RIDE is also seeing a decrease in student eligibility through the direct electronic certification process which impacts a community's ability to participate in CEP in addition to increasing the overall administrative burden of running this program.
 - The local and federal laws and regulations governing these programs are complex. Even something as simple as introducing a new menu item can be very difficult.
 - One positive impact on the pandemic is an increased spotlight on the Child Nutrition Program, and increased funding which will allow for more fresh local food to be purchased, and an increased investment in equipment that will allow more meals to be made from scratch.
 - RIDE is working with partners to create programs and channel investments into efforts that will benefit school meals for the long term. Local priorities include continuing to leverage the statewide foodservice program to improve the nutritional quality and cultural appropriateness of meals, employ a statewide marketing campaign to promote the benefits of school meals, reduce food waste and increase the focus on sustainability, as

well as tracking and increasing the amount of local purchasing and reporting. Local legislation also exists to reform the funding formula to allow for increased utilization of the CEP program.

- Meghan Grady, Meals on Wheels RI
 - The total population of older adults in RI is 260,000. Of that number, 12.4% (about 32,000) are threatened by or are experiencing hunger. In 2021, Meals on Wheels served 357,650 meals to more than 3,000 seniors. In July, Meals on Wheels of RI delivered their 20 Millionth meal.
 - This week, Meals on Wheels launched a new medically-tailored meals program for seniors who are living with a chronic illness. The meals are prepared by Trio Community Meals and nutrition education is also provided to support healthy living. This new program is aligned with the goals laid out in the new Meals on Wheels of RI strategic plan and is funded by the individual's health insurance plan. Meals on Wheels is a benefit for dual eligible older adults that have a long term support services designation.
 - The Meals on Wheels of RI strategic plan lays out six goals. One is to innovate and scale their "More than a Meal" model to further advance health equity. This model covers nutrition, a lifesaving safety check, and an opportunity for socialization. To test some potential programs, Meals on Wheels has been delivering a mobile food pantry to more than 90 individuals in the Providence area, and also started a pilot program to serve pregnant and postpartum women through a partnership with Women and Infants hospital and the Point32Health Foundation. Another goal is to look at our home delivered meal program and how we can continue to support it financially with the rising costs of labor, fuel, and food.
 - The Meals on Wheels Strategic Plan will be released in November and the organization looks forward to working with all of their partners to advance this bold vision.
- Bethany Caputo, RI Department of Human Services
 - The weekly average volume of SNAP applications is currently about 1,116 applications submitted. This has trended down since the beginning of year, with a spike in early February which can likely be attributed to recertification requirements.
 - DHS expects this application volume to remain steady for the next few months.
 - SNAP participation rates have remained steady around 15%
 - When the federal public health emergency ends, the SNAP emergency allotments will end.
 - DHS has an exciting new SNAP outreach partner, mRelief which provides text-based eligibility screening.

- We see an opportunity where more individuals could be deducting their medical expenses and be eligible for SNAP, and will do increased outreach to close that gap.
- The average benefit for a SNAP household is \$280, this does not include the emergency allotments provided during the pandemic.
- Exciting new programs coming soon include a healthy retail SNAP Incentive, named Eat Well, Be Well rewards program which is expected to launch in March 2023. The Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) is tentatively scheduled to launch December 1st. ESAP will make it easier for older adults to sign up for and recertify for SNAP.

2:45 pm

Breakout Session: What should HETF focus on in 2023?

- HETF 2022 Review
 - The stated goals for this Task Force for 2022 were to broaden this network, deepen the collaborative environment for problem solving across the state, reduce food insecurity by providing information that helps member organizations connect individuals experiencing food insecurity with supplemental food delivery services, and; educate decision makers about the policy, investment and regulatory solutions that can increase the resilience of the emergency and supplemental food system.
 - This year, the HETF launched the monthly RI Food Access Bulletin so Task force members can stay informed on each other's activities and relevant opportunities. HETF published a list of RI Food Supplemental and Emergency Food Delivery Providers, and grew our listserv 37% , welcoming new members especially from the healthcare field, small food businesses, and local community based organizations.
 - HETF also piloted several Communities of Practice to continue the work between our quarterly meetings. These communities of practices became important tools for networking between our organizations, problem solving, and sharing important knowledge and resources that help us all in our positions.
 - The Hunger Elimination Task Force is a forum for checking in on our foremost goal of reducing food insecurity in RI and understanding our food security infrastructure. Together we have learned about innovative partnerships between food access providers and the healthcare system, the unique needs of older adults, and how municipal governments can support food security in their own communities. We have accomplished a lot this past year, but we know there is still much to be done. Many of the most prominent food access issues in RI persist, such as lack of transportation for certain populations and a lack of fresh and culturally relevant items in the supplemental food supply.

We have an incredible network here and we look forward to continuing these efforts with you.

3:15 pm Breakout Session Report Out