



## MEETING SUMMARY & NOTES:

### RI Hunger Elimination Task Force Q3 Meeting

November 14, 2023 | 2:00 - 3:30 pm

Theme: State of the State on Hunger

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#### OBJECTIVES

- Review the new report from New England Feeding New England.
- Learn about how food security in Rhode Island has changed over 2023.
- Set goals and strategies for the Hunger Elimination Task Force in 2024.

#### MEETING SUMMARY

The final Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF) meeting of 2023 focused on the state of hunger and food insecurity in Rhode Island. Conversations began with an introduction of the New England Feeding New England project by Nessa Richman, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC). Following this presentation, participants heard from a panel of food assistance experts about the state of hunger and food insecurity in Rhode Island. Participants were then invited to share their input on HETF's 2024 priorities.

#### MEETING PARTICIPANTS

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## AGENDA

**2:00 pm Welcome**

**2:05 pm New England Feeding New England: Rhode Island's Role**

**2:15 pm Panel: State of the State of Food Security in Rhode Island**

- Andrew Schiff, RI Community Food Bank
- Jessica Patrolia, RI Department of Education
- Meghan Grady, Meals on Wheels RI
- Bethany Caputo, RI Department of Human Services

**2:45 pm Question & Answer with Panelists**

**3:00 pm 2023 HETF Accomplishments**

**3:10 pm Looking Forward to 2024**

- NEW Work Groups!
- Poll: Setting Emerging Issues & Priorities

**3:25 pm Poll: HETF Impact**

**3:30 pm Close**

## NOTES

**2:00 pm**

### **Welcome and Introductions (Facilitated by Rachel Newman Greene, RI Food Policy Council)**

- The Hunger Elimination Task Force is a statewide network of food access, nutrition, and public health champions that work to reduce hunger and increase access to healthy, culturally-appropriate food for all RI residents. This task force is owned by the RI State Agencies involved in food system work and is facilitated by the RI Food Policy Council.
- The goal of the Hunger Elimination Task Force is to reduce hunger and increase access to healthy, culturally-appropriate food for all Rhode Island residents.
- Today we are discussing the state of food security and hunger in Rhode Island. We'll begin by reviewing Rhode Island's role in the New England Feeding New England partnership and these regional efforts to increase local food consumption by 2030. After our panel, we will discuss goals for the Hunger Elimination Task Force in 2024.

**2:05 pm**

### **New England Feeding New England: Rhode Island's Role (Overview by Nessa Richman, RI Food Policy Council)**

- New England Feeding New England (NEFNE) is a regional approach to food systems resilience. As a result of the Phase 1 Research and Planning Stage of the project, 7 reports have been produced to document the different aspects of building resilience in our regional food system. Today I will be highlighting some interesting aspects of these reports, and encourage you to review them in greater depth.
- There are six key partners for the project: VT Farm to Plate, Maine Food Strategy, NH Food Alliance, Connecticut Food System Alliance, Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, and the RI Food Policy Council. These partners work in collaboration with Food Solutions New England to bring this project to fruition.
- The project goal is that by 2030, 30% of the food consumed in New England is produced/harvested/caught within New England. Our collective effort will focus on expanding and fortifying the region's food supply and distribution systems in an equitable and inclusive way that ensures the availability of adequate, affordable, socially and culturally appropriate products under a variety of rapidly changing climate, environmental, and public health conditions.

- This project is important because New England has the capacity, ability, and ingenuity to create a food system that is more self-reliant. The current system presents several barriers to doing so. In order to create a more self-reliant food system, food system development entities must work collaboratively to identify policies and investments that support public and private supply chain businesses and infrastructure. Building a more resilient, strong regional food system would mean more jobs, a healthier populace, and greater stability of our economy, workforce, and supply chains.
- As discussed, we have completed Phase 1 of the project which focused on research. Now, we are simultaneously working on Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the project which includes Convening and Coordination as well as Implementation.
- If we are going to reach 30% local food expenditure by 2030, what does that look like on a household level? RI has the fifth highest per capita food expenditure of any state in the country - \$5606 per year in 2020. That's expected to grow to \$6,950 by 2030, which means that the average household would need to spend \$2,085 on local food each year to reach the goal.
- So what do we have to buy from our region to make up that 30%? This shows the composition of our ag and fisheries sales – you can see that seafood, dairy, and vegetables are high on the list, while fruit, meat, and eggs only make up a small amount of regional food sales. And what manufactured products do we have to buy? Mostly bakery goods, beverages, fluid milk, and seafood, with some produce and meat.
- All in all, our region produces less than 2% of the grains we need, less than 1/3 of the vegetables, less than 10% of the fruits, about half of the dairy, and barely over 3% of the meat. When national and global supply chains break down due to pandemics or climate disasters, our food security is at risk.
- Our state's food system is enormous. It employs over 66K people and brings in nearly \$12B in sales annually. Hourly wages in the food sector are generally low. You can see here that many of them, depicted in the green bars, are just barely above the minimum wage. Taking a closer look at just food system occupations, you can see there that most fall under the living wage for a family of 4, and many fall below the living wage for a household of one adult. These jobs, even at full time, don't allow people to make ends meet, and many of them, counterintuitively, are food insecure themselves.
- So this leads us into considering common challenges in our region.

Although conditions on the ground vary by local contexts, cultures, and ecologies, every food system on earth is grappling with these challenges I'm about to share. I want to note that this research is NOT comprehensive nor all inclusive. It was assembled based on the research conducted AND through 10 focus group sessions we held. A number of them related directly to food access and nutrition security.

- In this conversation, our focus will be on the challenges that relate most to the work of HETF.
  - First, Lack of Planning for Long-Term Food Supplies: There are very few examples of long-term planning for healthy, reliable food supplies. New England Feeding New England marks one of the first regional approaches to food system planning in the country.
  - Second, Ongoing Exploitation of Food System Workers: Food system workers, particularly retail and food service workers and farmworkers, experience some of the lowest wages of any occupational category in New England, as well as limited benefits.
  - Third, Limited Progress Reducing Diet-Related Health Problems: Poor nutrition is the leading cause of death in the United States. Many nutrition-related health trends continue to move in the wrong direction. For example, diabetes prevalence and the percentage of adults and children who are overweight or have obesity have increased. The United States also has the lowest life expectancy of any other wealthy country. The amount of food we eat and the composition of ingredients in our food have changed: ultra-processed foods—high in sugar, fat, sodium, and artificial flavors—comprise an estimated 58% of caloric intake in the United States.
  - Fourth, Limited Progress Reducing Food and Nutrition Insecurity: Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and other communities of color are disproportionately burdened with food and nutrition insecurity and low food access throughout New England.

**2:15 pm**

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

*Andrew Schiff, RI Community Food Bank | Jessica Patroliia, RI Department of Education | Meghan Grady, Meals on Wheels RI | Bethany Caputo, RI Department of Human Services*

- There have been a lot of rapid changes in hunger and food insecurity this year, and in the last three years. Please share some data or trends about usage of your programs this year and since 2020.

- Andrew Schiff: The demand for food assistance in Rhode Island can be viewed as one indicator of food insecurity in the state. We have 143 partner organizations across the state, directly servicing guests. Nearly all are reporting an increase in people coming for assistance. We saw a dramatic rise of people our partners were servicing in March 2023, when the federal government ended the emergency allocation for SNAP participants. In February 2023, our partners served 66,000 people. By March, it was 79,000 people, equivalent to a 20% increase. Households enrolled in SNAP lost an average of \$155 dollars per month. The state lost \$13 million per month in SNAP benefits. This has clearly decreased people's buying power, forcing them to turn to our network for help.
- Bethany Caputo: As was mentioned, this loss of benefits was a big loss for our State's SNAP recipients. Now, there are about 143,000 SNAP individuals, equivalent to 88,000 households. During the pandemic, we saw participation vary from month to month. For example, in May 2020, participation was at a high of 99,000 households, equivalent to 151,000 individuals. Compared to August 2021 to May 2022, those numbers steadily decreased from month to month with minor fluctuations. The average during that time was 139,000. The fluctuation was likely due to changes in the rules regarding unemployment insurance and whether the boosts were countable. It also may have been due to job closures and challenges accessing DHS offices due to staff shortages. Now, we are seeing our participation levels return to pre-pandemic levels and we expect that to remain steady. There may be changes with the implementation of the new Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) time limits. The Farm Bill, which authorizes SNAP, is also up for renewal and what may be included in that may impact participation numbers. In 2020, Rhode Island had the second highest participation rate in the country, with 100% of eligible individuals participating in the program. We are doing good work reaching the people who are eligible, and we will continue to work to reduce access barriers.
- Meghan Grady: Meals on Wheels is not a research based organization. We operated without disruption throughout the entire pandemic. Going into the pandemic, we were serving 1,000 home delivered meals per day. At the height of our services in the summer of 2020, we were serving as many as 4,000 home delivered meals per day. In the summer of 2022, we served our 20 millionth meal. We have learned during this time of serving 20 million meals. The public health crisis also taught

us what is possible for our organization. We are now planning for our next 20 million meals.

- Jessica Patroliia: The Department of Education administers two distinct types of programming - school nutrition and community nutrition programs. During the pandemic, our programs were thrust into the spotlight more than ever before. The number of meals served during COVID is higher than it is now. As the other panelists shared the challenges with food access, we hope that our programs are turned to as a means of food access and assistance. At the same time that the Food Bank is reporting these high levels of participants, we are seeing a decrease in participation in our programs. Our challenges are unique because it is not always about eligibility. We are seeing a 5% reduction in participation of students that are eligible for free and reduced priced meals at school. Pre-pandemic, we were only at a 64% percent participation rate of students that qualify for free and reduced-priced meals. Now, we are down to 59%. When our programs were spotlighted during the pandemic, there was a lot more equity within the program because the meals were offered free to all. Since we have seen a return to a tiered pricing system, we are seeing the stigma of these programs return, preventing people from choosing to participate because they do not want to be labeled at low income. We also see a reduction of participation in the school breakfast program. That program was already significantly underutilized compared to school lunch. During the pandemic, we saw that schools were taking more measures to ensure that students got meals through alternative service models. As we have returned back to these more normal circumstances, we are seeing a return to a traditional cafeteria service, which is creating barriers to participation. Before wrapping up, there are updates regarding community nutrition programs to share. Many people know of the Summer Meal Service Program (SFSP), as we do a lot of outreach on the program. This program has seen significant growth leading up to the pandemic. We relied very heavily on it during the pandemic. It is harder to calculate daily meals average. But July 2023 as compared to July 2019, we only served 62% of lunches that we had served. We are reaching a significantly smaller population than we were pre-pandemic. We are really not sure what the reasoning behind this. However, the most stark reduction seen is in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). This is a program that is not thought of as much by many people, and this can be having an impact on our most vulnerable families, those with young children. In 2018, we had 90 organizations receiving meals under this program. As of

2022, we had 67 organizations, losing 23 organizations. Pre-pandemic we were serving over 4 million meals through that program, and during the last school year, we served just under 3 million. It's our youngest kids that are perhaps not receiving meals. We are seeing providers leave the program because it is onerous and administratively burdensome. We are also seeing them leave child care all together. We are also seeing a crisis in our family home daycare provider side. There has been a really significant decrease, and we have a lack of interest in sponsoring the program. We are at risk of losing our partnership with organizations that support family home daycare providers to access CACFP. Losing that would limit how much we can offer the program in RI. This is a major challenge we are seeing across our programs.

- Many of you shared how your organizations or programs have ramped up to meet the need we are seeing in the State. What has enabled your organization to grow to meet that demand? What do you see as needed in order to sustain your operations to meet the demand?
  - Meghan Grady: During the pandemic, we had a two-fold process. Up to that point, we had 50 years of experience that solidified our "More than a Meal" model. So our work focused on how to stretch that model during the public health emergency. How we sustain this work is the main focus of our 2025 strategic plan. The has three key themes: innovation, sustainability, and capacity building. These three topics have already been discussed today, but you can expect that Meals on Wheels (MOW) will become a broader hunger-focused organization. Many people know MOW for our home delivered meals program, and that will always be the cornerstone of our work. In the future, we will be taking a broader approach. So our next 20 million meals might look differently. We are rapidly growing in the maternal health space. We have a new partnership with Women & Infants Hospital, where we are serving pregnant people and their families at the household level. Sustainability and growth are at the forefront of our minds in this work.
- There are some policy level changes that will be affecting SNAP participating households and their eligibility in the new year. Could you speak to those changes and what families should expect?
  - Bethany Caputo: Recently, there was a change to the upper age limits for ABAWDs. This population has a three month time limit to if they are not meeting the work requirements or are exempt. Previously, the ABAWD age range was 18 to 49, but as a result of



the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, the range was increased in September 2023 to 50 and October 2023 to 52. Next October, this age range will rise to 54. These changes also included three additional exemptions from these ABAWD time limits, including people who are unhoused, veterans - no matter their discharge status, and anyone aged 18 to 24 who was in foster care as of their 18th birthday. We sent a notice at the end of August to inform SNAP participants about these changes and what they need to do to keep their benefits. SNAP eligibility workers have been trained on the new criteria and exemptions to ensure we are screening for those exemptions if we do not already know that information. In order to prevent cases from closing due to the three-month time limit, states have discretionary exemptions that we can use. We are going to apply those exemptions to cases from September to January, so no one will reach the three month time limit, likely until May. At that time, we will reevaluate. That would be the biggest change that might impact SNAP participants.

- What opportunities do you see for your programs and services to coordinate with each other to ensure individuals in need are taking advantage of all the opportunities they are eligible to receive?
  - Jessica Patroli: Rhode Island is a great state, and we benefit from being small and having a tight network of providers. We already work closely with the food bank to include mailers about the SFSP. We also work to provide information on SNAP, and are strengthening our ability to make referrals through the UniteUs platform. There is already progress in this area. Systemically, the issue is the number of different agencies, programs, access points, and applications. It's confusing for families. It would be great if we could work together to reduce these barriers and increase participation. However, given that many programs are federal, there are restrictions on what we can do. We have to continue working creatively together to try to overcome those barriers where there is the legal flexibility to do so.
- How is your work trending? What do you see as the challenges and opportunities in the coming year?
  - Meghan Grady: MOW is really excited about the implementation progress of the first year of our strategic plan. We have added Community Health Workers (CHW) into our model. We have brought back our on-site food pantry. We are piloting a supplemental grocery delivery, and most importantly we are expanding the population we are serving.

- Andrew Schiff: Inflation, as we have seen these past few months, has made items of basic living difficult for households to afford. Those high prices for basic living expenses will hopefully go down, but they won't reduce quickly. In the meantime, we have to figure out with urgency how to ensure people can stay in their homes, keep the heat on, and feed their families. Since Congress is not able to function right now, there is more pressure on the state. This is a long way to say that state-level advocacy is going to be a key focus of our efforts going forward.
- Bethany Caputo: SNAP is excited to announce the launch of the Eat Well, Be Well program SNAP incentive in the new year. There were several technical delays on the retailers' side. We are looking at a January implementation date. That will help SNAP participants spread their food dollars farther, especially given inflation. We requested funding through the Governor's budget to implement Summer EBT next year, so hopefully we will be able to roll that out. We are also always improving application assistance, outreach, and application processing timelines. We have scanning centers in our field offices. These are seeing good results for our participants, who want to deliver their paperwork and ensure it makes it into their files. This will be expanded to a new office. We also have Processing Wednesdays, where we close the call center and focus all of our efforts on processing. It's actually been shown to be really helpful at completing the backlog of work. The goal is that it will reduce the number of clients calling and thus the wait time.
- Jessica Patroliia: Despite the challenges we have in participation, we have made such progress in other areas, especially being able to access the COVID funding streams to support more projects, especially in terms of the RI Farm to School Network. Using funds from the federal government to really bolster our purchasing local produce for school meals. We have a project underway with grant funding to increase the cultural relevance of school meals. So we are doing a lot to ensure that not only participants can access the food, but want to access our programs. We are really excited to continue that work with our partners. We have learned that we can't rely on the federal government to do the things that we know are right for our own local residents. Investment in all of our programs are an investment in Rhode Island's future. The Governor's 2030 priorities include things like supporting small businesses, investing in children and families, and strengthening K-12 education. Those are all things that all of our programs are

proven to support. The more that we can invest in our program, the better we are all going to be for it.

## **2:45 pm      Questions and Answers with Panelists**

- Could you talk more about the role of CHWs at Meals on Wheels? Why is that such an important role?
  - Meghan Grady: We have two certified CHWs on our team currently. They are in training. We have an incredibly narrow focus in our first 50 years at MOW, which was to provide home delivered meals to older adults. But it was almost like regardless of their needs, we were offering a one-sized solution. We knew there had to be a better way. That is when we started piloting CHWs to have them support individuals opting into our medically tailored menu and for managing chronic disease.. Now we're actually in a five year research study to help us understand as we start to enhance our More than a Meal Model what it means for participants' health outcomes. We are very new in this journey, and there is a lot happening in the CHW space. We look forward to really growing our work in this sector.

## **3:00 pm      2023 HETF Accomplishments**

- The first objective is to leverage and communicate the position of the HETF as a key piece of the IFNPAC and the State's Food Strategy. Our HETF membership voiced that you want to engage more closely with state agencies involved in administering the nutrition programs. We saw this as an opportunity to align the HETF communities of practice with the state agencies. Recall that, right now we are reorganizing the two communities of practice and have been on hiatus for the past few months. RIFPC is looking at ways that any CoPs or working groups can be action oriented in responding to some of the issues that everyone wants to address.
- The second objective is to improve nutrition security by identifying and educating network members and decision makers about policy, investment and regulatory solutions to improve food security supply chain logistics. In quarter two we heard about food recovery efforts happening in RI. RIFPC has also led the development of the Rhody Feeding Rhody Alliance with funding from the USDA.
- The third objective is to reduce food insecurity by developing a centralized source for nutrition security resources for RI residents, in partnership with on the ground HETF members and state agencies. Most of you are familiar with the Food Access Bulletin which stems from these quarterly meetings. In newsletter format, we update the

membership on updates from the key state agencies, from the Health Equity Zones and from other community organizations working in this space.

- Our final HETF objective for 2023 was: With support from a consultant, creating a food security plan for Rhode Island by engaging the HETF network and resources. Everyone knows Rachel in her new role (and over the years in her previous roles, as well!) And Rachel has begun the process of creating this plan, which will be an accompaniment to the State's Food Strategy, 2.0.

**3:10 pm      Looking Forward to 2024**

- The HETF objectives for 2024 are:
  - Support cross-sector efforts to end hunger by lifting up effective community-based solutions and connecting smaller programs with information to overcome barriers to scale and remain sustainable.
  - Create opportunities for HETF members to learn and connect with other community-based organizations, non-profits, state agency staff, and government officials regarding hunger relief efforts throughout the state.
  - Broaden HETF membership through targeted outreach to build a strong network of actively engaged stakeholders and actors including engaging more representatives from community-based organizations, Healthy Equity Zones (HEZs), and community members.
- New for 2024 are HETF Action Groups. These groups will bring individuals together for 2-3 short meetings to develop a list of policy recommendations to improve food access that will be presented at the Inter-Agency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Committee (IFNPAC). The Quarter 1 Action Group will focus on Food Delivery.

**3:25 pm      Poll: HETF Impact**

- Zoom poll launched.
- Members who could not be in attendance were invited to complete the polls through the RI Food Access Bulletin and the Community Food Access Call.

**3:30 pm      Close**

- Thank you for attending!

*We will see you in 2024!*