

Terry Gray
Director, DEM
Chair, IFNPAC
315 Iron Horse Way
Providence, RI 029

September 19, 2024

Dear Chair Gray,

The Inter-Agency Food & Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) established the Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF) in 2017 to craft recommendations for addressing food insecurity in Rhode Island. The HETF presented those recommendations to IFNPAC and a broader audience over the following years. In 2021, the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC) assumed responsibility for convening HETF on behalf of the RI Department of Health (RIDOH) and the RI Department of Commerce (Commerce). HETF members engaged in a restructuring process during 2023, resulting in the formation of new quarterly Action Groups. These HETF Action Groups work collaboratively to identify specific problems, clarify State Agencies responsible, and recommend particular next steps for those State Agencies in order to reduce hunger in Rhode Island.

Between May and June 2024, the second HETF Action Group gathered to discuss challenges and develop recommendations for **improving emergency food coordination between State, municipal, and nonprofits** in the Ocean State. The Action Group included members of the public, State Agencies, and emergency food providers. Below are the group's recommendations:

- **IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA: Develop communications and coordination plans between State Agencies and nonprofits that provides for clear and quick updates in the event of emergency, especially as it relates to emergency food and nutrition programs.**
- **IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA/RIDOH/DEM/Commerce/DHS: Develop a tiered communication and coordination protocol for State Agencies that describes how responsibilities will transfer in the event of an emergency.** During COVID, RIDOH needed to divert the majority of staff to address the public health emergency. As a result, there was no clearly responsible party to take over communications on RIDOH-related emergency food programs. Many nonprofits were unaware of who had taken over these programs in the interim and were unable to communicate with them.
- **IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA: Convene an annual walk-through of the communications and tiered Agency contact protocol with nonprofits and other community-based organizations.** This walk-through with nonprofits should include an opportunity for feedback on this plan and how it can be the most effective.

- **IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA/National Guard/RIDOH: Improve coordination on leadership transition between State Agencies, the National Guard, and community-based organizations as levels of emergency changes.** During the pandemic, emergency food providers were initially supported by the National Guard to meet community needs. However, there was little conversation between the National Guard and RIDOH throughout this emergency. Resultantly, many emergency food providers were negatively impacted by the sudden withdrawal and change of systems when the National Guard pulled out. State Agencies should have a direct and clear line of communication between them and the National Guard prior to emergencies.
- **IFNPAC/Governor's Office: Charge all State Agencies supporting food and nutrition programs to attend and share regular updates on monthly RI Food Access Office Hour calls.** The majority of State Agencies participated in these calls at the height of the pandemic. However, since the immediate emergency has subsided, there has been a decrease in State Agency participation.
- **IFNPAC/Governor's Office: Increase awareness of the RI Food Access Office Hour calls as the standing structure for community agencies to receive food and nutrition updates during future emergencies.** Lack of consistent State Agency participation in the calls has led to a sense of disconnection for community agencies seeking regular updates. While simultaneously charging State Agencies to participate in these calls, State Agencies should develop and implement strategies to promote these calls amongst their community agency associates to ensure awareness and use during states of regular operation and future emergencies.
- **IFNPAC/Governor's Office: Invest in and widely support resource hubs like 211 to ensure they are properly staffed and supported to refer households to the appropriate services.**

By improving coordination and ensuring relationship-building in non-emergency times, Rhode Island will be more adequately prepared to activate these networks and respond during the next statewide emergency.

The HETF Action Group appreciates the opportunity to share these recommendations with IFNPAC and the broader community. HETF is available to answer any questions you may have regarding these recommendations.

Sincerely,
HETF Action Group Members, including:

Rhode Island Community Food Bank
United Way of Rhode Island
Kinfolk Benefit Trust
Denise Greene | West End Community Center

Elizabeth Amaral
Tara Cimini | Woonsocket & West Warwick
Health Equity Zones
Gemma Gorham