



RHODE ISLAND FOOD DISRUPTION PLAN

POLICY BRIEF 1: State-Level Leadership for Long-Term Disruptions to the Food System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Currently, operational responsibility for implementing the Rhode Island Food Disruption Plan has yet to be assigned or determined. While RIEMA is broadly responsible for these functions under Emergency Support Function #6 – Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing, and Human Services and Emergency Support Function #11 – Agriculture and Natural Resources, operational responsibility for addressing food-related needs in the aftermath of an emergency, particularly for vulnerable populations, has not been defined in the State of Rhode Island. The State does have a position for Director of Food Strategy, which is located in the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation. Nonetheless, it is not clear that that responsibility falls under this position, as the core duties of the role are to *lead the state's implementation of Relish Rhody 2.0 and deliver on the State's food and beverage business attraction, expansion, and retention goals*. This policy brief examines how other states and counties have organized to determine and define state-level leadership to address mitigation and recovery efforts related to food emergencies. Recommendations are also provided for Rhode Island.

We recommend that the State locate an office and/or designated official to lead the State's implementation of the Food Disruption Plan within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS).

INTRODUCTION

According to the [Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans Comprehensive Preparedness Guide \(CPG\) 101 Version 2.0](#), published in 2010 by FEMA, *"effective plans tell those with operational responsibilities what to do and why to do it, and they instruct those outside the jurisdiction in how to provide support and what to expect. Plans must clearly communicate to operational personnel and support providers what their roles and responsibilities are and how those complement the activities of others. There should be no ambiguity regarding who is responsible for major tasks. This enables personnel to operate as a productive team more effectively, reducing duplication of effort and enhancing the benefits of collaboration."*

This policy brief highlights the importance of having a point person or office designated to coordinate emergency food response in the future and defining and



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communicating one state agency touchpoint for food in the event of a future emergency.

THE CHALLENGE

The importance of leadership in response to the food insecurity crisis during COVID-19 was identified by numerous stakeholders during the listening tour that informed the development of the State's Food Disruption Plan. Some individuals pointed to overall leadership at the level of Governor. Others highlighted that key individuals at the state level stepped in and up as it related to addressing food access and food security. As effective as this response was in the eyes of many, it was still ad hoc and relied on the tenure and experience of a few key individuals. Feedback from stakeholders included the following:

- The State did not have a strong, cohesive approach to addressing problems, leading to ineffective responses and missed communication.
- Empowering a clear decision-maker or convenor is crucial to prevent uncoordinated activities and misunderstandings between organizations.
- Determining who leads, controls resources, and initiates federal emergency assistance is unclear, leading to inefficiencies.
- A key lesson learned is the absence of a convening body or working group that could plan ahead and coordinate efforts more effectively.

Or, more simply put by one stakeholder, *"leadership is key. We need a person or place where decisions are made."*

In the words of Winston Churchill, *"let our advance worrying become advance thinking and planning."*

D. Emerging Best Practices

Some states and jurisdictions have designated offices or departments to be responsible for addressing food and nutrition needs in the event of a disaster or state of emergency. For example, the [Disaster Services Branch \(DSB\) of the California Department of Social Services \(CDSS\)](#) supports counties and Tribal Nations in providing temporary shelter, feeding, and other services for persons affected by a disaster or emergency. The mass care and shelter disaster response function is delegated to the DSB through an Administrative Order issued by the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). The mission of the DSB is to serve, aid, and protect individuals and families affected by disasters and emergencies by



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supporting local government to provide excellent training, preparedness, response, and recovery services for mass care and shelter activities.

In accordance with the California State Emergency Plan, the CDSS leads the California Emergency Support Function 6 (CA-ESF 6): Mass Care and Shelter for disaster response. The DSB serves this requirement by working with impacted local and Tribal Governments, private and non-profit organizations, and other state agencies to provide disaster survivors with needed services such as sheltering, feeding services, family reunification, and human social services in support of emergency response and recovery efforts. In addition to implementing the CA-ESF 6: Mass Care and Shelter Annex, DSB partners with many agencies for planning, response, and recovery from disasters. Key partnerships include the Cal OES, the California Department of Public Health, Emergency Medical Services Authority, American Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Small Business Association, as well as local social services departments, and other CDSS Divisions.

In Louisiana, the [Department of Children and Family Services](#) is tasked with working to keep children safe, helping individuals and families become self-sufficient and providing safe refuge during disasters. In accordance with the State Emergency Operations Plan, the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services has primary responsibility for coordinating with local, parish and tribal governments, state and federal entities, supporting agencies and non-governmental organizations to address non-medical mass care, emergency assistance, housing and human services needs of disaster victims.

Their emergency preparedness strategic goals are to:

- Develop and maintain a good working relationship with Local, State and Federal stakeholders.
- In coordination with the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, the American Red Cross, and local Office of Emergency Preparedness directors continue to identify potential locations and resources to reach in-state shelter independence for citizens that will need government-sponsored assistance to evacuate the coastline of the state.
- Improve / Maintain staff readiness in ESF-6 responsibilities.
- Sustain / Improve logistical readiness.
- Establish and develop a program within DCFS to respond to Recovery Support Function missions stated in the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Framework.



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Notably, both California and Louisiana have dedicated websites that articulate the roles of these departments with respect to emergency preparedness and disaster response.

At the same time, it is important to consider an equity lens with respect to the roles and responsibilities of leaders in the event of an emergency or crisis. In FEMA's [Local Elected and Appointed Officials Guide: Roles and Resources in Emergency Management](#) published in 2022, the following guidance is provided.

Understanding potential disaster consequences begins with knowing who in the area might be affected, especially those disproportionately impacted. It is vitally important for senior officials to understand the demographic composition within their communities such as historically underserved populations, individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs since they may require additional assistance during a disaster. Resident income levels, population density, employment rates, types of housing, homeless population and major physical infrastructure are examples of important data that are generally available. In addition to analyzing the data, equitable planning includes identifying, involving and understanding the distinct perspectives, concerns and characteristics of underserved communities. Jurisdictional policies and initiatives should be seen through an equity lens and routinely informed by how they will impact underserved communities. For example, positioning and allocating necessary resources before an incident can accelerate support to these underserved populations and reduce disaster impacts.

E. Recommendations

States have typically identified either their emergency management office (e.g., Florida, North Carolina, Colorado, and Virginia) as the lead entity to manage the state's food-related response to emergencies and disasters or their health/human/social service agency (e.g., Michigan, Oregon, Washington, New York).

While RIEMA certainly has an essential role in activating the State's response to a disaster or emergency and accessing essential federal funds to respond and remediate the situation, the food access and production ecosystems are highly networked and decentralized and have already developed natural connections and relationships with the State's health and human service agencies.

As such, it is recommended that the State locate an office and/or designated official to lead the State's implementation of the Food Disruption Plan within the Executive



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Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS). EOHHS interacts with and oversees a multitude of programs that reach virtually all of the State's vulnerable populations, including young children, older adults, immigrants and new arrivals, and many more. EOHHS's reach, resources, and coordinating role make it uniquely suited to assume this leadership responsibility for the State.