



RHODE ISLAND FOOD DISRUPTION PLAN

POLICY BRIEF 2: Capacity Building for Municipal and Tribal Governments to Address Long Term Disruptions to the Food System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

One of the key learnings from this planning process is the important role that local communities play in helping to prepare for and respond to disruptions that impact and impede food access. In terms of preparation, only three municipalities currently have a full-time staff person dedicated to emergency management functions. In virtually every other community, this responsibility falls to a municipal leader (frequently a fire chief) who already has a full-time job or is in a part-time position in local government. While Providence has recently completed a food emergency preparedness and recovery plan, the capital city is the only jurisdiction in the state that has such a plan. Municipalities throughout Rhode Island have a variety of models and roles responsible for social services including housing, heat assistance and food security. As in the brief regarding state leadership, identification of and support for clear leadership roles in times of food disruption, and connection of those roles to the State leadership, is necessary.

With respect to recovery from disruption, the state's municipal and tribal governments would benefit from increased capacity, including a dedicated full-time person within the local government who is engaged with and focused on the issue of food security. Therefore, this policy brief will examine and share exemplary practices in building the capacity of local and tribal governments so that they are better prepared and positioned to prepare for and respond to a long-term disruption to the food system in the future.

B. INTRODUCTION

Much of the input received from the listening tour that informed this plan focused on the importance of focusing on the "local." As one stakeholder shared, "we have to think as locally as possible." This focus on local is important because of the diversity of our state, our history of local control and autonomy, and the local networks that have emerged within each of our communities. In many ways, the genius of our 39 cities and towns and one tribal government located in a state that is 40 miles by 40 miles is this focus on local communities.

As such, planning and responding to long term disruptions to the food system necessitates a focus on local capacity, resources, coordination, and capacity. Given that only three communities have a full-time, dedicated person responsible for



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emergency management functions within their individual communities, and that a variety of capacities exist in RI's municipalities for addressing food security concerns,

there is both a need and an opportunity to increase the support and resources available to these communities so that they can effectively prepare for long term disruptions to the food system and support the ongoing work of recovering from such disruptions.

C. The Challenge

Stakeholder interviews surfaced challenges related to emergency preparedness and management capacity across the state. For example, one stakeholder shared, *"all of the cities and towns can operate independently, and some have their own emergency management agencies. For those with strong EMAs like Newport and Smithfield, we could work with the cities and their EMAs. Some cities and towns do not have that structure. We would get a lot of organizations calling and there was no one locally coordinating this."*

Another said, *"one of the important pieces is that we have vastly different municipalities in terms of skill and capacity. Of our 39 cities and towns, 3 have single-hatted EMA people. Everyone else is either part-time or a dual-hatted position for a fire chief."*

This situation is not unique to Rhode Island. [A 2019 International City/County Management Association survey of US municipal and county chief administrative officers](#) found that only about half of responding local governments have designated a single person and/or interdepartmental body to oversee and coordinate post-disaster recovery and remediation. Other findings included the following:

- About two in five local governments have conducted disaster training exercises that cover post-disaster economic and community recovery and restoration scenarios.
- About one-third of local governments have conducted a risk analysis to determine which local assets are most vulnerable to a major disaster.
- Only half have identified a "recovery leader/manager" position that will oversee their community's post-disaster recovery and restoration
- Only two out of five have designated an interdepartmental task force/committee that will mobilize to coordinate post-disaster recovery and restoration.

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- Only about a third have created a public engagement strategy that is inclusive of the whole community for implementation during a post-disaster environment.
- Only about a third have mutual aid agreements with neighboring jurisdictions related to social and human services.

While the survey was conducted pre-pandemic and may not reflect current realities, the above data still strongly suggests the need for increased support and capacity building for the many Rhode Island cities and towns, as well as tribal government, in the area of emergency management and preparedness.

D. Emerging Practices and Models

While the State of Rhode Island provides financial resources, training, and technical assistance to local EMAs, other states have been able to provide additional support in areas that Rhode Island may want to consider. These include the following

Some larger states have *regional emergency management offices or field coordinators who provide localized support to counties and municipalities*. These regional offices offer day-to-day assistance, help implement state policies at the local level, and coordinate emergency management activities across multiple jurisdictions. This structure allows for more localized support. While Rhode Island does not have a county government system, the state could think regionally in terms of how it supports municipalities around how to prepare for and respond to long term disruptions to the food system.

New York and Massachusetts have developed comprehensive programs that focus not just on emergency response but also on *long-term resilience and sustainability*. [New York's Office of Resilience and Sustainability](#) helps localities implement climate adaptation strategies. Massachusetts runs the [Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness \(MVP\) Program](#), which provides grants and technical support to cities and towns to build resilience to climate change, for example.

Florida and North Carolina have *advanced logistics and supply chain management programs that help local governments* during disaster response. They have pre-established contracts and partnerships with private vendors to ensure the timely delivery of critical resources like food, water, and medical supplies during emergencies. Florida's logistics program, for example, includes a state emergency operations warehouse network, which allows the state to distribute resources rapidly to localities in need.



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Massachusetts has developed a [statewide resiliency plan](#) containing priorities for increasing resilience and reducing the Commonwealth's risks and vulnerabilities related to natural hazards and projected climate changes. Rhode Island established such a plan in 2018 but it has not been updated since it expired in 2021.

In Rhode Island, two of our larger communities have built their own capacity to address a long term disruption to the food system. Providence has a dedicated office of human services and recently completed its own preparedness plan in the event of a long term disruption to the food system. In Pawtucket, the city hired its first public health and equity director during the COVID-19 pandemic, whose duties included in part leading the city's response to the disruption to the food system.

In terms of an equity lens, several states have incorporated equity principles and practices into their capacity-building efforts. For example, the Oregon Department of Emergency Management has implemented a comprehensive [Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility Plan](#) to address the disproportionate impact of disasters on historically underserved and marginalized communities. The plan focuses on creating an internal culture that prioritizes inclusion and equity, while also seeking to remove barriers to equitable community input in disaster planning.

E. Recommendations

- Pursue and identify opportunities to support municipalities in increasing local emergency management capacity.
- Explore developing and encouraging regional efforts to plan and prepare for long term disruptions to the food system.
- Provide grants and technical support to cities and towns to support local capacity to address long term disruptions to the food system.
- Encourage local municipalities to identify roles to participate in statewide drills and exercises that test and promote the Food Disruption Plan
- Promote a sample job or role description with essential functions and duties for an individual to provide local leadership in the event of a long-term food disruption.
- Pursue and identify opportunities to support municipalities in developing and increasing the capacity of municipal roles to address food security following disruptions. For example, cities and towns could establish health districts (like CT) or health commissions (see MA) to provide local capacity and infrastructure in the event of a long term disruption to the food system.



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- Build the capacity of the Health Equity Zones (HEZ's) to serve as key points of contact, connection, and coordination with respect to a long term disruption to the food system.