



RHODE ISLAND FOOD DISRUPTION PLAN

POLICY BRIEF 3: Enhancing Communication Before, During, and After Long-Term Disruptions to the Food System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A key takeaway from the planning process was the critical need to share and convey information between and within state government, municipalities, and community-serving organizations, as well as with the community at large about decision-making, allocation of resources, coordination of efforts, and other information vital to ensuring food security following a disruption to the food system. This policy brief will examine model practices other communities have adopted to support and enhance communication during emergencies, particularly cross-jurisdiction communication.

INTRODUCTION

Communication was one of the most frequently identified strengths and opportunities that surfaced during the community input and listening process that informed this plan. In addition, the RI Hunger Elimination Task Force, in its memo dated September 19, 2024, recommended the following initiatives to strengthen communications and communication systems in the event of a long-term disruption to the food system:

- Develop communications and coordination plans between State Agencies and nonprofits that provide clear and quick updates in the event of an emergency, especially as it relates to emergency food and nutrition programs.
- Develop a tiered communication and coordination protocol for State Agencies that describes how responsibilities will transfer in the event of an emergency.
- Convene an annual walk-through of the communications and tiered Agency contact protocol with nonprofits and other community-based organizations.

THE CHALLENGE

Stakeholders shared several opportunities to strengthen communication systems and processes based on lessons learned from the pandemic. Some representative statements are below:

- *People (residents) do not get information the same way. We need to look at nontraditional ways of communication and how to communicate in each of the minority communities. How can we communicate better and more effectively in terms of differences in how people receive and transmit information?*

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- *Communication worked, but what would happen if we had an agreed-upon understanding in the future of roles and responsibilities? It would make for a better state in general. Better communications with HEZs, farm fresh, farmers, etc. will make our work better when there is not an emergency.*
- *Having a way of letting folks know where they can go and get food is really important. There is no app that tells you where you can go in your community. We need a collective way to identify where people can go.*
- *The ethnic media is too narrow in breadth and reach -- it is under-resourced. There are other resources that might be more impactful or influential, but we have what we have. That needed to grow exponentially during the pandemic. While we had mainstream news in English, the bandwidth of Latino and Cape Verdean radio stations was limited. How do we get information out to the community when there is no wide system to get it out? It will happen again every time because there is no outlet that is really strong enough to get the message out.*
- *To work with local communities, you have to have communication in place. From a public health standpoint, we have to build that out now so people are oriented to what they are supposed to do. The further you were from being engaged, it was harder -- and then misinformation occurred. We need a public health response and infrastructure needs to be cohesive in terms of what the plan is and how we disseminate it to the street level.*
- *The communication piece -- make sure that it is centralized. I am not sure where in the state this work lives. If I were a resident trying to figure out information or an organization, I would not know where to begin. We need to centralize communications and give people a clear source.*
- *What I would like to see is a communication plan. Weekly announcements about what is available and what is not so that individual families and those not connected are getting public information.*

EMERGING BEST PRACTICES

At the individual level, some jurisdictions are exploring [Community Information Exchanges](#) (CIEs). In the State of Michigan, they have defined [CIEs](#) as a localized effort to create and sustain the technology and relationships required to support the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) needs of both individuals and communities. CIE maximizes a person-centered approach by ensuring social care information is collected only as needed and is stored safely. CIE also promotes streamlined access to health-enhancing non-clinical services (e.g., social services and supports), helping to coordinate care across a variety of clinical and non-clinical



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partners, while using data on existing community resources, needs, and gaps to drive policy change.

Within the State of Rhode Island, there are at least two of these types of platforms that are starting to be used in some areas to address and/or monitor social determinants of health (including food security, homelessness). [bosWell](#) is a client management software for food pantries and social service organizations to register clients, check them in for visits, and automatically generate reports that is currently working with Medicaid in Rhode Island. [Unite Rhode Island](#) is a coordinated care network consisting of healthcare, government, nonprofit, and other organizations that use shared software to track individuals across their health and social service journey.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine issued the [following recommendations](#) based on lessons learned from the pandemic as it relates to communications:

- Messaging must be tailored, culturally congruent, and delivered by trusted messengers. Participants identified several challenges in messaging about COVID-19. Some shared that the messages they saw were often confusing, contradictory, unapproachable, too academic in their framing, dismissive, and/or delivered by messengers who were not always trusted by audiences.
- Crisis communications must be bidirectional. Participants in the convening expressed concerns about the top-down nature of much of the messaging about COVID-19. They observed insufficient engagement with community-based organizations in shaping the messaging drawing on their unique insights about what their communities needed and wanted to hear, and how best to communicate with them. Participants also recognized that few community-based organizations had the resources and capacity to develop their own messaging, leading many to rely on messaging developed by others, including federal and state agencies or private sector collaborations.
- Communications infrastructure needs new or revitalized convening and coordinating bodies. A centralized convening body (in addition to a coordinating body) would allow for building ongoing relationships, sharing lessons learned, and more effective coordination. Such a centralized convening body could facilitate bidirectional coordination and compile and aggregate communications materials, messaging, and best practices to benefit everyone. It could also leverage existing assets to benefit community-based organizations without the resources to develop their own and provide a mechanism to identify and respond to misinformation in

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real-time. See Appendix I for a table depicting the difference between a convening and coordinating body.

In its [COVID-19 After Action Report and Playbook](#), the State of Illinois highlighted the following principles related to communication for future long-term disruptions:

- **Comprehensiveness:** Continue to revisit and update shared understanding of vision for response, key decision points, knowns, and unknowns, etc.
- **Action-oriented focus:** Particularly in upward communication, the response team should strive to present information in the form of a cohesive proposal that tees up a clear decision point for executive leadership.
- **Wide dissemination:** Particularly in downward communication, response leaders should drive shared situational awareness across all relevant state staff (including those working on non-emergency activities) – e.g., by circulating minutes after key meetings.
- **Tailoring to forum:** Form of communication (phone call, email, live meeting, etc.) should be selected to achieve engagement goals – e.g., cross-agency discussion on reopening guidelines for schools or businesses likely best accomplished live.

They also created a template for internal communications.

Internal communication process | Common Operating Picture template can be used to make internal comms. consistent

Consistent structure and clear language can help keep executives informed and drive situational awareness

Executive's Intent — strategic vision from the top to drive and enable coordinated and timely decision-making among leaders

Prioritized, current information —

- What do we know?
- What are the impacts?
- What decisions & actions are required or in process?
- What are our priorities?

Decision tracker — central view of what has been done and what needs to be done to drive downstream alignment across response team; to be updated after key go / no-go meetings (e.g., hourly, daily, or weekly depending on cadence of response)

Common Operating Picture template

Event Summary			
Executive's Intent		Strategy for the response	
WHAT (FACTS)			
Known knowns, latest data		Known unknowns, data gaps	
SO WHAT (IMPACTS)			
Near-term		Long-term	
NOW WHAT (DECISIONS & ACTIONS)			
Past and planned, tracking			
Action item	Owner	Relevant stakeholders	Considerations and impacts

In the State of Washington, their after-action [report](#) recommended creating a *readily accessible comprehensive centralized database system that consolidates contact*

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information, partnerships, and relevant data to enhance information management, streamline communication, and facilitate more efficient engagement with partners. This database should be designed to accommodate real-time updates and ensure data accuracy, serving as a valuable resource for future public health emergency responses.

Finally, stakeholders noted the fact that the RI Public Broadcasters Association website, text alerts, and postings on television, which are predominately used to report closures due to snow events, are trusted, credible, and seemingly deep and far reaching resources of information. However, it was unutilized during the pandemic; stakeholders recommended that it be used as a key information source/platform in the event of a future long-term disruption.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This planning process identified and highlighted the need for convening a body through which communication to community-serving agencies, municipalities, and other key partners can flow, in advance of the next long-term disruption to the food system.

In the next year, the State should prioritize the establishment of a “convening body” with a regular and consistent meeting structure, and conduct a campaign to significantly increase awareness of this body by municipalities, community-serving organizations, and other vital partners. The State Food Access Calls and the Hunger Elimination Task Force could potentially play this role more formally. This structure will help the State overcome one of the biggest challenges to communications it faces – the lack of a vibrant media source that reaches BIPOC and other vulnerable populations. It is strongly recommended that the State conduct a formal after-action review from the pandemic to identify lessons learned and its recommendations for strengthening communications between and among state government, local government, and community-based organizations.

In addition, the State should adopt the other recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, namely that

- Messaging must be tailored, culturally congruent, and delivered by trusted messengers. This involves identifying, engaging, and enlisting cultural brokers among vulnerable populations to advise the State on how to best (credibly and effectively) communicate with these populations.
- Crisis communications must be bidirectional. Meetings of the convening body need to incorporate, not just announcements and available resources, but

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opportunities for partners from these communities to update State Agencies and offer feedback.

Appendix I

Convening Body	Coordinating Body
• Encourages bidirectional communications planning and development of messaging. • Provides a forum for diverse voices and perspectives to identify and elevate issues of concern, needs, unique considerations, etc. • Allows for relationship building and the sharing of lessons learned. • Creates a space to discuss communications strategies, messaging, materials, and best practices to the benefit of everyone. • Solicits data and feedback on how well communications strategies, messaging and materials are working, where iteration or course-correction might be required and what issues are emerging. • Identifies the subsets of essential information needed by different audiences.	• Can effectively coordinate communications, ensuring bidirectional flow. • Gathers the existing data and information needed to be the authoritative source. • Develops templates for different kinds of messages, in standard formats, based on the science of risk communication (which includes ways of communicating potentially difficult topics and ways of efficiently conducting the testing that all messages require) and uses those templates for national messages. • Leverages existing assets to benefit community-based organizations without the resources to develop their own. • Disseminates materials to community partners for tailoring to their audiences, including brief formative testing. • Provides a mechanism to identify and respond to misinformation and disinformation in real time.