

Setting the Table

State Priorities and Action Tools for Rhode Island Food Disruptions

December 2024

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- West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation's Sankofa Initiative
- Rhode Island Community Food Bank
- Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM)

Executive Summary

Setting the Table: State Priorities and Action Tools for Food Disruptions is the result of a year-long effort between the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC), leaders of Rhode Island State agencies, local non-profits and community members to answer the question, “How can the State of Rhode Island support our communities in recovering from and being more prepared for food system disruptions than we were in March 2020?”

By prioritizing equity, sustainability, and preparedness, *Setting the Table* is the state’s go-to resource in the event of an extended food access crisis.

Developed through a collaborative process including nearly 250 stakeholders, this plan bridges short-term emergency responses with the long-term goals of *Rhode Island’s Food Strategy 2030*. *Setting the Table* is intended to support the strategies set out in that document.

The *Setting the Table* planning process was made possible through the Rhode Island ARPA Grant Support Program, established by the Rhode Island Foundation, Governor McKee, the General Assembly, and the Rhode Island Pandemic Recovery Office, to distribute funding from Rhode Island’s \$1.1 billion share of the federal American Rescue Plan Act allocation for COVID-19 recovery.

Vision and Goals

Through the planning process, the Core Planning Team developed a vision for Rhode Island’s food system in which *all Rhode Islanders, particularly those most impacted by food inequities, have consistent access to safe, culturally relevant, and nutritious food during times of crisis*. The Core Planning Team established the plan’s goals:

1. Strengthen food availability and access systems
2. Enhance communication infrastructure to improve coordination during crises
3. Establish rapid and sustainable financial mechanisms to address food access disruptions
4. Build a highly trained workforce capable of managing food system challenges

5. Embed strategic governance to align emergency management with food security priorities

This plan is rooted in the understanding that food insecurity affects tens of thousands of Rhode Islanders, with disproportionate impacts on communities of color and low-income households, and that those communities are most at risk when food crises occur. Addressing these inequities is a central focus of *Setting the Table*.

Key Recommendations and Priorities

Setting the Table outlines actionable strategies for State Agencies across five core systems, in pre- and post-disruption stages:

Food Availability and Access

- Pre-disruption:
 - Strengthen local food production to reduce reliance on external supply chains
 - Develop scalable storage and efficient transportation networks
 - Establish community-driven charitable food systems for equitable distribution
- Post-disruption:
 - Rapidly recover local production and ensure equitable access to culturally responsive and nutritious food
 - Mobilize community partnerships to support recovery and long-term resilience

Communication Infrastructure

- Pre-disruption:
 - Create inclusive communication systems for timely dissemination of food-related resources
 - Develop leadership structures to coordinate food security initiatives across sectors
- Post-disruption:
 - Implement real-time, multi-platform communication systems to support coordinated responses and inform communities effectively

Financial Disbursement

- **Pre-disruption:**
 - Establish transparent funding frameworks that ensure long-term food security
 - Foster partnerships with philanthropic organizations to support rapid-response efforts
- **Post-disruption:**
 - Deploy emergency grants and financial support for food banks, meal sites, and local producers
 - Rebuild food supply chains with sustainable funding mechanisms

Training and Workforce Development

- **Pre-disruption:**
 - Build a crisis-ready workforce through specialized training programs.
 - Strengthen partnerships to ensure a coordinated response during disruptions.

Strategic Governance

- Integrate *Setting the Table* into the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency's (RIEMA) Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan.
- Designate state-level leadership within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to oversee implementation.

An additional recommendation emphasizes the importance of local capacity-building: Municipal and tribal governments are encouraged to designate contacts for food security and implement community-specific strategies.

Tools and Resources

The plan includes several critical tools to aid implementation:

- **Visual Playbook**: A comprehensive guide defining roles, responsibilities, and contingency plans for food disruptions.
- **Asset Maps**: Visual resources showcasing key food system infrastructure across Rhode Island, enabling quick access to critical information during crises.

- **Policy Briefs:** Recommendations on governance, capacity building, funding, and communication strategies for effective food system management.

Conclusion

Setting the Table: State Priorities and Action Tools for Food Disruptions offers strategies and tools to state agencies that will build upon the strength of Rhode Island's communities and state/local networks. Implementing the recommendations set here will enhance Rhode Island state government capacity to support vulnerable people and communities and ensure that all Rhode Islanders are able to access the food they need when the Ocean State next faces a food access crisis. Together, these resources will help Rhode Island develop a resilient and equitable food system that can withstand and quickly mobilize to address future food access disruptions.

Introduction

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted food security in Rhode Island, exposing deep vulnerabilities across the state. As unemployment soared and incomes declined, food banks and pantries faced unprecedented demand, serving tens of thousands of additional families. Communities of color, immigrants, low-income households, and essential workers were hit hardest. For families with children, school closures cut off access to free or reduced-price meals, leaving many scrambling for alternatives.

The disruptions varied across regions. Urban areas experienced heightened demand, while rural communities struggled with transportation and supply chain challenges. Shortages and price increases due to strained supply chains made basic food staples less affordable, while small local farmers faced difficulties distributing their goods, further limiting access to fresh, local food. Five years later, food insecurity remains at record levels, with 38% of Rhode Island families affected, including 55% of Latino and 47% of Black households.

Rhode Island's response during the pandemic showcased the strength of its community networks, and the commitment, dedication and at times, self-sacrifice of those working at all levels to ensure health and food security for Rhode Islanders. Health Equity Zones and grassroots efforts were critical in addressing disparities, while public-private partnerships linked local farmers to food assistance initiatives. State agencies utilized data-driven tools to allocate resources effectively, and the Hunger Elimination Task Force coordinated statewide efforts, emphasizing the need for resilient, inclusive, and adaptable food systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unforeseen challenges to food security and supply, particularly in the impacts of social distancing required by the nature of the emergency. Future emergencies caused by climate change, economic disruption, public health crisis, or other still unknown factors will present new challenges. In developing *Setting the Table*, RIFPC and its partners identified ways to build upon, support, and strengthen the State's networks and systems to ensure our communities' resiliency when faced with future

emergencies of any kind that have long-term impacts on Rhode Islanders' ability to access the food they need and want.

The process included the identification of priorities, strategies, and tools to guide the State of Rhode Island in recovering from a disruption to Rhode Islanders' access to the food they want and need, beyond short-term emergency hunger response. The resulting report focuses on Rhode Island communities, families, and businesses most vulnerable to the negative impacts of events disrupting food sourcing, distribution and access across the state. They aim to serve as a strong foundation to ensure a sufficient supply of food that is desirable and accessible to vulnerable and impacted communities following a food system disruption.

Vision and Guiding Criteria

Early in the planning process, the Core Planning Team established a shared vision and guiding criteria for the process and the resulting plan.

Vision

All Rhode Islanders, especially the most impacted, have access to a safe and culturally relevant food supply that is familiar and nourishing in the event of a long-term disruption to the food system.

Guiding Criteria

- Guided by community, prioritizes most impacted individuals/communities to include the most vulnerable and essential workers
- Identifies and addresses food inequities before a long-term disruption to the food system
- Increases the access and availability of culturally relevant food (locations, hours, production, processing, delivery, etc.)
- Identifies and seeks to reduce regulatory and policy barriers to delivering and accessing food (e.g., pre-disruption benefit eligibility, multiplied SNAP benefits for buying fresh produce, etc.)

- Communication and engagement that ensures clarity of process, leadership/point of contact, roles, responsibilities, and handoffs
- Continual testing, evaluation, and updating of resulting strategies and tools

Setting the Table is an essential link between the State’s short-term emergency food response and recovery plan and the long-term RI Food Strategy 2030.

Where the RI Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA) activates the Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) for a man-made, natural, or technological emergency/disaster that disrupts normal conditions, *Setting the Table* takes on the extended period following food disruption – be it days, weeks, months, or years thereafter.

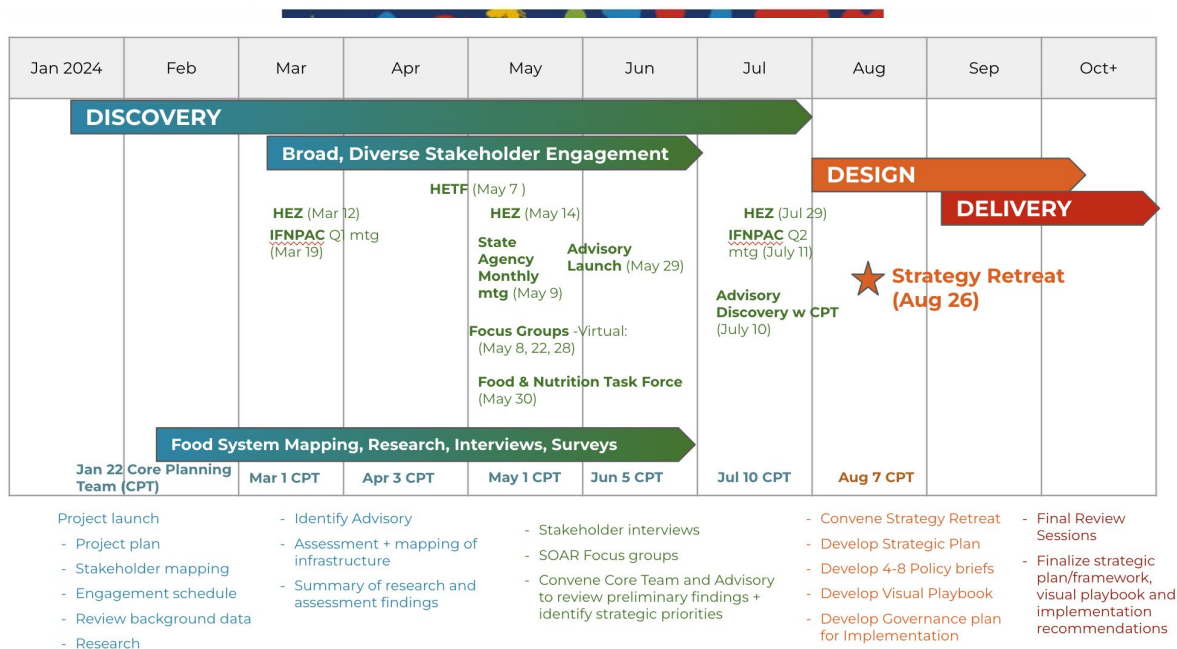
RI Food Strategy 2030, led through the efforts of the Director of Food Strategy at RI Commerce and leadership at the RI Department of Environmental Management and RI Department of Health, is a high-level and long-range strategy to make the entire Rhode Island food system more resilient, sustainable, and equitable. The priorities and tools contained in this document focus specifically on the systems and relationships needed to support vulnerable Rhode Islanders following disruptions to the food system.

Process and Approach

A Participatory Planning Process

A broad and deep research, data gathering, and participatory engagement of the food system in Rhode Island was key to developing a comprehensive food disruption strategy. This called for an inclusive planning process, engaging those who will impact strategy success, as well as those who will be affected by it. Engagement sparked learning, connection, buy-in, and ownership, guided by the principle that people will commit to what they helped to create. The goal is to guide State agencies and local stakeholders/partners and to mobilize the local nonprofit and for-profit food production, processing, storing, and distribution networks, exchanging knowledge, building on each other’s ideas, and mapping more collaborative and resourceful strategies together.

The following timeline outlines our engagement process for Discovery (learning capture), Design (processing of key insights), and Delivery (integration of priorities and recommendations) in the creation of these priorities and tools.



From the start, a Core Planning Team was identified and launched, representative of State agencies, non-profits, and community leaders. This team worked in close partnership with Spartina as ambassadors of the planning process– the eyes, ears, and voices of what to study, who to engage, and how to best engage them to prioritize the Rhode Island communities, families, and businesses that are most vulnerable to the negative impacts of food system disruptions. An Advisory Committee was also established to work alongside the Core Planning Team, bringing specific expertise in the supply chain, emergency management, private sector food storage and distribution, and a wealth of understanding and lived experience supporting the dynamic needs of vulnerable populations.

Throughout the process, over 250 people were engaged, including representatives from Health Equity Zones (HEZs), Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF), the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC), the Pawtucket Central Falls HEZ Food and Nutrition Task Force, and a host of community stakeholders.

Solution-focused, Inclusive, Inquiry-Driven Approach

Diversity, equity, and inclusion across social identities were essential to the outreach, engagement, and ultimate creation of these priorities and tools. More than harnessing lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, this process tapped into the specifics of what worked— emergent strengths and assets— and opportunities to improve preparation for the next food disruption. Some of the State’s highest-level decision makers for resource activation and planning convened alongside the community and nonprofit leaders who are closest to the on-the-ground food disruption preparation and response. Perspectives were voiced from across Rhode Island zip codes and language preferences to ensure relevance while seeding resourceful collaboration and innovation for the way forward.

Data Collection and Engagement

Research: State, County, and Municipal Plans

An important part of the Discovery process included the background review of ten other state, county, and municipal plans. Each plan varied in its approach and depth, addressing issues like food accessibility, infrastructure resilience, and coordination among stakeholders. Many plans specifically targeted vulnerable populations and outlined action steps for climate and non-climate-related disruptions.

Key examples include:

- Montgomery County, Maryland, which established an Office of Food Systems Resilience in 2023.
- New York City conducted a regional food flow study to enhance supply chain resilience.
- Baltimore and Santa Barbara County, which emphasized multi-agency coordination and disaster feeding plans.
- Toronto and Boston focused on infrastructure vulnerabilities due to climate events.

Other emerging themes included last-mile distribution, state and regional planning integration, as well as metrics for readiness assessment. Ultimately, this research provided a range of examples and templates that Rhode Island can use and learn from. At the same time, none of these plans are as ambitious and comprehensive in scope as Rhode Island's Plan.

Focus Groups and Surveys

Over 140 people participated in Discovery focus groups, facilitated in-person and remotely. Focus groups occurred at HEZ Learning Community events, HETF meetings, State agency meetings, and RIFPC Food Disruption Core Team Planning and Advisory convenings.

Surveys were distributed in print and electronically, in both English and Spanish, resulting in over 70 responses from community leaders and residents most impacted by food disruptions, including our State’s most vulnerable populations and essential workers.

Interviews

Numerous interviews were conducted, drawing insight and recommendations from the following government and community leaders:

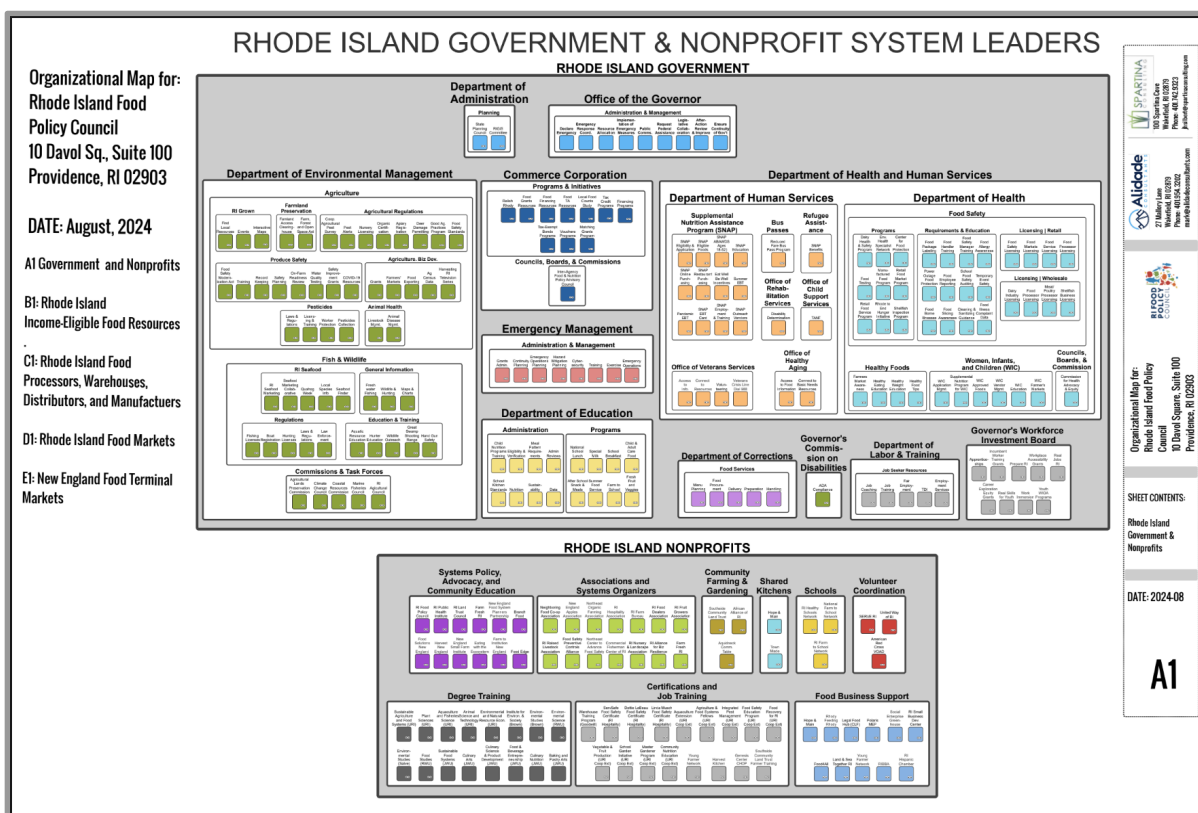
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Heather Singleton, *RI Hospitality Association*
Catherine Taylor, *AARP RI*
Andy Taubman, *Youth Pride Inc.*
Katherine Tennett, *Youth Pride Inc.*
Jen Tomassini, *RI Community Food Bank*
Jim Vincent, *Past Chair of the RI NAACP*

Asset Mapping

The planning process included the creation of several essential maps to provide a clear, big-picture view of the state’s food system. These maps include Rhode Island government agencies and food-focused nonprofits, as well as a town-by-town map of low-income food resources like meal sites, food pantries, and places that accept SNAP benefits. The process also included mapping of food processing sites, distribution centers, warehouses, and every grocery store and market by town. A final map includes all major food markets in New England. Creating these maps involved key interviews, in-depth research, and three rounds of review with food system leaders to ensure accuracy and to make necessary edits. Together, these maps will help leaders quickly see key food resources and important organizations across Rhode Island. In a food crisis, they will give leaders fast access to the resources needed to keep people fed. By focusing on what already exists, these tools support a stronger, more prepared food system for Rhode Island.

A snapshot Asset Map is provided below detailing Rhode Island Government and Nonprofit System Leaders. A more comprehensive set of [Asset Maps](#) and a [Visual Catalog of Data](#) can be found in the Appendix of this report.



Strategy Retreat

On August 26, 2024, over 40 Rhode Island State, municipal, nonprofit, and community leaders came together at the RI Department of Environmental Management (DEM) to process the [Discovery Synthesis](#) and [Key Findings](#) and to integrate their knowledge and wisdom into the development of these priorities and tools. More than generating a clear and compelling vision, guiding criteria, and priority focus areas for food disruption planning, the event was designed to strengthen connections and partnerships between agencies of authority and the very community members poised to implement during a food disruption. These collaborations and partnerships will be the keystone for successful implementation, evaluation, and refinement over time. The outputs of this retreat are detailed in the sections that follow.

Synthesis of Stakeholder Input

Stakeholders provided a range of suggestions and recommendations for consideration in the event of a future disruption to the food system. These included input regarding the pre-disruption, response, recovery, and resilience phases. This information has been organized into a set of potential goals, strategies, and initiatives for the state to consider if there is a long-term disruption to the food system. This compendium can be found in the [Stakeholder Synthesis and Suggested Priorities and Actions](#), available in the Appendix of this report.

Priorities



Food security is a critical aspect of disaster/emergency/disruption recovery, demanding coordinated efforts to maintain the production, distribution, and access to food. To address this challenge, a structured understanding of food systems is essential. These systems encompass a range of elements, from production to communication and financial disbursement, all of which play pivotal roles in the effective management of food security after any disruptions. Below are the key food system elements, with priorities for each in pre- and post-disruption stages: Food Availability, Food Access, Communications, Financial Disbursement, and Training.

Food Availability System

The food availability system focuses on ensuring that sufficient quantities of food are consistently produced, processed, and distributed to meet the nutritional needs of the population.

Pre-Disruption Priorities:

- Establish a robust and sustainable pre-disruption food production and supply network that prioritizes local resilience, ensures equitable access to nutritious food, and fosters community preparedness.
- Establish a resilient and scalable food storage infrastructure that ensures safe, accessible, and sustainable food reserves for community preparedness and rapid response to disruptions.
- Establish a resilient and adaptive food transportation network that ensures reliable and equitable access to food resources during long-term disruptions to the food system.

Post-Disruption Priorities:

- Ensure rapid, equitable, and sustainable access to locally sourced, preserved, culturally appropriate, medically tailored, and fresh food for all affected communities during disruptions.
- Swiftly restore local food production, strengthen processing and distribution networks, and establish sustainable, community-centered distribution methods to meet the needs of recovering populations effectively. Foster local partnerships and enhance community engagement to ensure sustainable, adaptable, and equitable food access during recovery and future disruptions.

Food Access System

The food access system refers to the ability of individuals and households to obtain adequate food in terms of quality and quantity. This system is influenced by factors such as affordability, distance to food sources, and availability of delivery services. Several subsystems work together to support food access, particularly during and after a disaster.

Pre-Disruption Priorities:

- Create a resilient, accessible, and efficient retail food access system that ensures equitable food distribution and supports vulnerable populations, especially during long-term disruptions to the food system.

- Establish a resilient, inclusive, and community-driven charitable food system that ensures consistent access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food resources and promotes long-term food security.

Post-Disruption Priorities:

- Ensure sustainable and equitable access to food during disruptions and long-term recovery through the seamless integration of enhanced storage capacity, efficient distribution logistics, strong community partnerships, and robust preparedness strategies.
- Provide timely, accessible, and culturally appropriate food support for all community members, especially vulnerable populations, through robust infrastructure, real-time communication, and collaborative networks.
- Design and activate a flexible, resilient post-disaster food distribution network that rapidly adapts to transportation challenges and ensures safe, accessible, and efficient delivery of essential food resources to all affected communities.

Communications System

The communications system is integral to the coordination and dissemination of information during all phases of disaster response, recovery, and resilience-building. Effective communication ensures stakeholders and the public are well-informed about food security measures and available resources. The third policy brief, Enhancing Communication Before, During, and After Long-term Disruptions to the Food System, includes several recommendations regarding information sharing and coordination practices and systems.

Pre Disruption Priorities:

- Establish a comprehensive, accessible, and culturally inclusive communication system that ensures communities are well-informed about food access resources and local food security initiatives (e.g., Universal Communication or Broadcast in a Food Emergency/Disruption E-911).

- Build a coordinated, agile, and community-centered leadership structure that empowers effective food security and disruption response, strengthens local partnerships, and fosters inclusive decision-making across all levels of the food system.
- Establish a coordinated and inclusive food security network that leverages cross-sector partnerships, local leadership, and streamlined communication to ensure efficient and equitable food access, especially during disruptions.

Post Disruption Priorities:

- Implement a robust communication system that provides real-time updates, accessible information, and coordinated messaging through diverse platforms to ensure that all community members are informed and supported in accessing essential food resources during and after a disruption to the food system.

Financial Disbursement System

The financial disbursement system is essential for the allocation and management of funds to support food security efforts during and after a disaster. It ensures adequate financial resources are available to sustain emergency food distribution, support local food systems, and build long-term resilience. The fourth policy brief, [Expediting Funding During a Long-Term Disruption to the Food System](#), includes several recommendations to revise state policies and practices related to contracting, funding, and payment of safety-net and other essential providers to ensure their continued viability in the event of a long term disruption to the food system.

Pre Disruption Priorities:

- Establish a transparent, responsive, and sustainable government funding framework that supports long-term food security, strengthens preparedness, and ensures equitable access to food resources during disruptions.
- Build a responsive, sustainable, and collaborative funding ecosystem within the philanthropic sector that supports long-term food security, strengthens local food

systems, and enables rapid, flexible response to food access needs during long-term disruptions.

Post Disruption Priorities:

- Establish a rapid-response financial support system prioritizing emergency grants and cash transfers to high-need food banks, meal sites, and households.
- Secure and deploy funds to rebuild local food supply chains.
- Strengthen partnerships with local businesses, donors, and charities, and promote federal and state assistance programs through community workshops and leader training to ensure sustained food access and support during disruptions.

Training System

The training system focuses on building the knowledge and skills of individuals and organizations involved in food security, ensuring an effective and coordinated response to disasters. Proper training is essential for enhancing the efficiency and reliability of food production, distribution, and emergency response.

Pre Disruption Priorities:

- Enhance food safety and crisis preparedness by strengthening partnerships, establishing clear food protection protocols, and ensuring workforce readiness.
- Establish a highly skilled, emergency-ready food security workforce through specialized training, structured preparedness programs, and robust community engagement that ensures rapid, effective response to food needs during disruptions.

Post Disruption Priorities: N/A

Visual Playbook: Roles and Decision Making

The Visual Playbook (available as an Appendix) is the first “go-to” at the onset of a food disruption, specifically outlining actions, roles, decision-making, response, solution backups, contingency planning, and best practices supporting State response. It covers the following:

- Roles and general food emergency responsibilities by government, business, and community-based entities
- Food Disruption Decision Matrix: key actions, purpose, and action steps by entity
- Disruption Response Plan: pre-disaster, immediate response, recovery, and resilience
- Disruption Solution Matrix: by theme/focus area
- Stakeholder Contingency Plans: by government, business, and community-based entities
- Stakeholder Best Practices: by government, business, and community-based entities

Detailed visuals of the above are available in the [Visual Playbook: Roles and Decision Making](#), also located in the Appendix of this report.

Strategic Implementation and Policy Recommendations

For this plan to be implemented successfully, we recommend the following:

Governance and Management:

A central recommendation that emerged from the *Setting the Table* planning process is that the governance and management of implementation of the recommendations, and the accompanying tools, are to be the collective responsibility of the state agencies represented in the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) and the RI Emergency Management Agency. This document and its appendices are to be included as an appendix to RIEMA's Comprehensive Emergency Response Plan.

For this Plan to be successful, the IFNPAC Agencies and RIEMA must:

1. Identify where this Plan and its corresponding Playbook and Asset Maps should be housed for easy, quick, public access.
2. Locate an office and/or designated official to lead the State's implementation of these recommendations within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS, as described in the first policy brief, State-Level Leadership for Long-Term Disruptions to the Food System.
3. Prioritize increasing local capacity and designate a local contact or entity in each community that plays a corresponding role in ensuring food security in times of crisis, as described in the second policy brief, Capacity Building for Municipal and Tribal Governments to Address Long-Term Disruptions to the Food System.
4. Perform annual tabletop scenario exercises to test, modify, and update the plan and regularly review and revise the accompanying Asset Maps and Catalog of Data and Visual Playbook, to ensure relevance and utility over time.

Appendices

1. [Asset Maps and Catalog of Data](#)
2. [Visual Playbook: Roles and Decision Making](#)
3. [Stakeholder Synthesis and Suggested Priorities and Actions](#)
4. Policy Briefs from the RI Food Disruption planning effort
 - Policy Brief 1: [State-Level Leadership for Long-Term Disruptions to the Food System](#)
 - Policy Brief 2: [Capacity Building for Municipal and Tribal Governments to Address Long-Term Disruptions to the Food System](#)
 - Policy Brief 3: [Enhancing Communication Before, During, and After Long-Term Disruptions to the Food System](#)
 - Policy Brief 4: [Expediting Funding During a Long-Term Disruption to the Food System](#)