Guidance for Using ARPA Funds to Support Rhode Island’s Farm, Fish, and Food Businesses and Ensure Food Security for All Rhode Islanders

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) will deliver $350 billion for eligible state, local, territorial, and Tribal governments to respond to the COVID-19 emergency and bring back jobs. Over $1 billion will come to Rhode Island. The program’s funding objectives are to control spread of the virus, replace lost revenue for governments to strengthen public support for public services and retain jobs, to support immediate economic stabilization, and to address systemic public health and economic challenges that have contributed to inequities in the impact of COVID-19. This includes “assistance to households, small businesses, and nonprofits, or aid to impacted industries such as tourism, travel, and hospitality.”

The State of Rhode Island and its 39 cities and towns have an opportunity to invest in a robust food system -- supporting vital food sector businesses and ensuring food security for all residents.

In Rhode Island, farmers, fishers, food business owners, and local nonprofits provided essential services when COVID-19 hit. They responded to rapidly changing circumstances, stepping up to ensure people were fed when national and global food supply chains faltered. The long-term strength of our local food system is critical to Rhode Island’s recovery and ongoing food security needs. All aspects of the food supply chain were affected by the crisis: farms, fisheries, food processors; food aggregators and distributors; grocery stores and institutional dining services; hospitality and restaurants; consumers and community-based organizations. Food insecurity remains high despite the beginnings of an economic recovery.

We can increase food security by investing a portion of ARP funds in local food production, processing, distribution, retail, access, and waste management. The Interim Final Rule published by the U.S. Department of the Treasury mentions food 18 times. The rule calls for funds to be expended to increase food security and food assistance and to address negative impacts on workers at farms, food production facilities, grocery stores, and restaurants. Further, the rule identifies food production and services among a list of industries recognized as critical infrastructure sectors and recognizes food production, food delivery, and
restaurant workers as eligible essential workers. Finally, the rule clearly prioritizes uses that aim to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in pandemic-related impacts.

The Council supports investment in four priority areas, all of which are aligned with the state food strategy:

- **Small Food Business Recovery and Resilience Grants.** Using ARP funds to Increase funding to the RI Local Agriculture and Seafood Act Grant Program can grow the impact of this program on small farm and fishery businesses. Extending the program with additional funding directed to small food processors and shared-use commercial kitchens in hard-hit communities will build critical infrastructure for our food entrepreneurs, including those who are low resource.

- **Food Access and Security Grants.** Fund local community organizations engaged in serving hard-to-reach populations, overcoming logistical challenges, and providing culturally appropriate foods. Fund school kitchens, congregate meal sites, transitional housing, and food pantries that have no/insufficient kitchen and refrigeration/freezer capacity to establish this capacity so they can distribute fresh produce, fish, and other perishables to residents in need. When pantries have cold storage they can provide more nutritious food to residents and concurrently support local farmers and fishers who have excess/underutilized products available.

- **Seafood Processing Projects.** Addressing a long-standing constraint in processing seafood wastewater would allow for increased seafood processing by both large and small businesses statewide. Investing in appropriate wastewater processing and seafood processing infrastructure will create jobs and economic opportunity. Investing in community shared-use commercial kitchen facilities designed for seafood products would enable food entrepreneurs from within commercial fisher, refugee, and other communities to enter the market for value-added seafood products.

- **Land Access Investments.** Land in Rhode Island is very expensive, which makes farming a difficult proposition economically, especially for new and beginning farmers. In urban areas, residents have few opportunities to grow their own food. ARP funds can be used to increase land access in both urban and rural areas. Using ARP funds to purchase parcels of land and build necessary infrastructure (e.g., raised beds, water access) will support food access and the food economy. As an added bonus, it will also preserve and promote green spaces where carbon is sequestered.

Given the pandemic's disproportionate impact on BIPOC communities and frontline workers, all decisions on investing ARPA funds should prioritize support for these hard-hit communities across our state.

**Please note that official guidance on ARPA investments is still being finalized. Any proposed expenditures should be carefully checked against the best available information about eligible uses.**
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The graphic below lists potential investments by food system segment. The most critical priorities will vary by town and city.

The Rhode Island Food Policy Council can provide additional resources to the state and municipalities considering how to make the strongest impact on our local food system, including developing specific dollar recommendations for recommended priorities.