

The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Access in Rhode Island: Elevating Stakeholder Voices

April 2021

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We know the ZIP Codes that are going to be hard hit by this pandemic and its ripple effects. So, for me, **the crisis revealed the crisis.** And unfortunately, it's our communities of color, it's our lower-income communities, it's our homebound, it's the folks who were struggling before. And that's where my heart and my passion remains, to be honest with you.

~State Agency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 24 million U.S. adults reported that their households sometimes or often lacked sufficient food in the last seven days, with Black and Latinx adults approximately three times as likely as non-Latinx White adults to report food insecurity. To gain awareness of the impacts that COVID-19 has had on food access in Rhode Island (RI) and to identify promising solutions, virtual key informant interviews were conducted with 25 RI stakeholders including food pantries, nonprofit organizations, Health Equity Zone representatives, and state agencies from September-November 2020. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded using an inductive and deductive approach to identify themes. This report documents stakeholder successes, challenges, and recommendations. It underscores the need for a coordinated food access response through strategic leadership that emphasizes culturally relevant approaches during emergency situations.

Thank you to the stakeholders who participated in the interviews and shared their experiences, thoughts, and opinions that informed this report.
~The Study Team

“What we ultimately need is a coordinated care network so that it's much more formalized, structured, sophisticated than what we built during this pandemic, but it definitely was reinforced in this pandemic why we need such a thing because people are calling me after they've gone through three, four, five different doors and been told to go through yet another door...and it's two days later and they have no food, and that's a problem. ~State Agency”

STUDY TEAM

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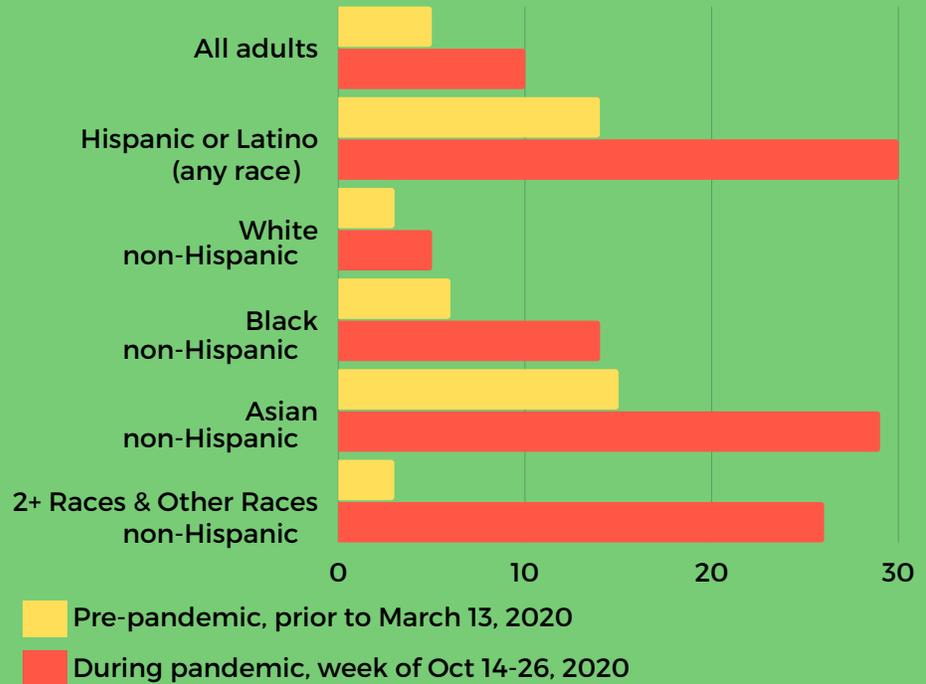
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3. Share Our Strength

THE LANDSCAPE

Beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rise in food insecurity due to job loss, disruption in food system and supply chains, and lack of access to regular in-school meals for youth. In addition, racial and ethnic disparities related to food insecurity were evident, as shown in the figure. Given this reality, it was important to understand how the pandemic impacted food access in the state of Rhode Island. In order to do this, local and state food access stakeholders were interviewed to document the successes and challenges of their efforts and ascertain practice and policy solutions to meet the increased food access needs of Rhode Islanders.

Percentage of RI Adults who Self-Reported Sometimes or Often Not Having Enough to Eat Pre-Pandemic and in the Last 7 Days



www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp17.html

THE PROCESS



Development
July-Aug '20

The research questions were guided by team brainstorming and gaps related to food access and COVID-19 in Rhode Island. Nine interview questions were developed to capture the following:

1. Scope of Work
2. Organizational Success and Challenges
3. Impact on Health Disparities



Recruitment & Data Collection
Sept- Nov '20

Involvement of key food access stakeholders included:

- Recruitment from a list of 35 stakeholders identified as involved with food access throughout the state.
- Interviewees provided with the questions prior to the interview and verbally consented.
- The interviews conducted and recorded on a web conferencing platform.



Qualitative Analysis
Dec '20-Mar '21

The codebook for content analysis was generated while professional transcription of the interviews occurred. The transcripts were then coded in NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program, by two of the researchers. Emerging codes were identified during the iterative data analysis process, discussed as a group, and this was used to develop themes.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Out of the 35 RI local and state food access stakeholders that were contacted, 25 responded and participated in interviews that lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. We identified several food access challenges and successes by state and local stakeholders in Rhode Island during COVID-19.

CHALLENGES

1 Increase in individuals facing food insecurity.

Stakeholders struggled to meet the increased numbers of those in need of food assistance. As a result of being furloughed or laid off, **Rhode Islanders' incomes were significantly reduced**, making it harder to buy food and maintain other expenses, such as housing.

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For many Rhode Island residents this was the **first time they experienced food insecurity** and this came with many challenges and confusion, but also a new population that needed assistance. Stakeholders noted the learning curve around the food distribution and food access programs.

"It was devastating honestly....think about people who lost their jobs, do not qualify for SNAP benefits, and do not qualify for unemployment benefits for a number of reasons. So their basic income during that time was probably nothing."
~State Agency



2 Amplified inequalities in marginalized communities.

COVID-19 amplified inequalities in these communities, especially for vulnerable audiences including undocumented families that struggled without assistance from federal food safety net programs.

"And then certainly for our families that are undocumented, it just gets worse and worse and worse, and so I think you've seen a lot of effort throughout the state to put resources to families, especially just dollars to families who are undocumented or just aren't able to access state level or federal level food resources." ~ City Agency



3 Lack of cultural and dietary diversity in food relief responses.

There is **not a one-size-fits-all approach to feeding our communities** and some of the food relief responses could have better met the cultural and dietary needs of several populations. Many felt that the "American" food that was being distributed as part of national emergency food relief programs needed to be more inclusive of all cultural dietary preferences.

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Despite a concerted effort to provide high quality food, the importance of cultural sensitivity was lacking as **stakeholders struggled to meet the community's preferences for increased food choice, culturally relevant foods, and healthier food items** with one stakeholder commenting: "So on one end we're saying that we want to really take care of these people and on the other end we're giving them food that's going to kill them".

"We found that culturally appropriate or diverse food was an issue. We think of food in terms of perhaps the standard, American definition of food, but many ethnic populations don't eat that way. And we have to be sensitive and understanding of [that]." ~State Agency

4 Cultural sensitivity of communication methods.

The importance of cultural sensitivity extended to organizations' communication of pertinent and timely information to the audiences that they serve. This called for **a need to restructure the way stakeholders deliver their services and information to the public.** It was expressed that information needs to be appropriate for low literacy audiences and rapidly translated into various languages across communication channels (i.e., social media/online platforms).

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This was exacerbated by the challenges that stakeholders faced as they received time sensitive information regarding federal programming and state updates, which they needed to ensure was accurately communicated in a timely manner.

"...at first a lot of the communication coming out of the state, related to food and not related to food, was only coming out in English. That does not work for our residents, and Spanish is like the tip of the iceberg...so at minimum trying to get stuff out in Spanish. So what we were doing is we were begging for information from the state." ~City Agency

5 Impact of social distancing and isolation on socioemotional health.

Social distancing and isolation during COVID-19 not only had a major impact on meeting the food access needs of high risk audiences, but **also impacted the socioemotional health of both stakeholder staff and clients** due to a lack of social engagement.

"I was just talking to a gentleman who gets our mobile pantry delivery and he was saying that's like a huge highlight for him when a person comes to deliver his food because that's really the only social interaction he gets." ~Food Pantry

6 Insufficient funding, time and organizational resources.

Insufficient resources greatly impacted organizations' ability to effectively address the drastic rise in food insecurity and provide nutritious foods.

Stakeholders shared that state budgets and federal support were both insufficient and could have been more effectively coordinated.

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From a food distribution lens, organizations were also hard pressed to identify drivers to meet the need for mobile food deliveries that drastically increased due to social distancing and isolation. There was also **a general workforce reduction for many stakeholders due to social distancing guidelines**, including a limited number of volunteers, some of whom were in the at-risk population.

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This need for ensuring the safety of community members and staff permeated organizations' operational procedures as they modified existing protocols and infrastructure to align with COVID-19 safety regulations coupled with the increased demand for food. Organizations also needed more well-ventilated and spacious buildings to allow safe social distancing of staff and clientele. Refrigeration storage for perishable food was either limited or not available and unfortunately led to food waste or resulted in higher utility costs.

"I think the challenge is still the financial support that we want to achieve and are not yet able to achieve just because of constraints on the state budget and lack of sufficient stimulus funding to do the type of work that we want to do. We know through the work that we've done where the needs are and when they can't be supplied via a federal grant program, we are constrained in our ability to do so. And frankly that's frustrating." ~State Agency

SUCCESSES

Despite the variety and unique challenges experienced during COVID-19, state and local agencies persevered to ensure that Rhode Islanders had access to food.

1 Enhanced collaboration and communication.

Stakeholders reflected on the **value of working in a small state** where increased collaboration and communication, along with existing partnerships, facilitated food access and distribution. Many stakeholders reported having their staff watch the Governor’s press conference, participating in calls with other State Agencies, and reporting back to their teams to ensure that pertinent information was shared in a timely manner.

Solutions included creating a safe food distribution system at a centralized location in Providence to support a high volume of meals. This involved transforming city vehicles into a food delivery system, which required adherence to safety guidelines such as sterilizing the vehicles. This further entailed enhanced communication across stakeholders to coordinate distribution dates with other local organizations.

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Another successful example of collaboration included the work of Health Equity Zones (HEZ) which **used a “boots on the ground” approach** to reach vulnerable, socially-distanced populations.

This sentiment was shared by HEZs themselves who reported the strong connectedness that they have with their communities to address the social determinants of health, including food access.

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Lastly, stakeholders also reflected on the **importance of delivering timely, pertinent information** regarding food pick-up sites, federal programming changes/waivers, and COVID-19 safety regulations to community members as quickly and effectively as possible. Specifically, the use of technology for communication through social media, newsletters, emails, community texting programs, and word-of-mouth stories amplified relief efforts. One city agency described the importance of ensuring that materials were appropriate for all audiences and cited their tireless efforts to ensure rapid translation and development of materials that met the needs of a low literacy audience.

“We had a big group coming together, talking about what is everybody doing and how do we better coordinate all of these various services. Rhode Island is small...I talked about surging emergency foods, which we did, pursuing the federal waivers, which we did, creating the new programs.”
~State Agency

“Whether it was go food shopping or get groceries delivered to their homes or really just provide any other resources that they need whether it was any hygiene products. We really were grateful to have that infrastructure in place at the community level so that we could jump in and help assist [the HEZ] because we knew they were the boots on the ground. They knew their communities better than anyone else so they were there to step in and assist.” ~State Agency



2 Opportunities for federal, state, foundation funding and waivers.

Another success that contributed to increasing food access and security was the increase in federal, state, foundation funding, and waivers **that helped innovate and meet the food needs of RI**. Funds were directed to developing new programs to mitigate some of the COVID-19 barriers. The implementation of online food purchasing and delivery, made possible by federal waivers and programming, helped improve food access for many Rhode Islanders impacted by quarantine and stay-at-home orders. Another benefit was the increased flexibility for local agencies to utilize their funds/grants as long as it was in line with the original intended purpose.



Other stakeholders **curated programs to emphasize the importance of personal dietary preferences** if federal food assistance items were foreign or not part of their cultural or dietary lifestyle, thereby reducing food waste.



These innovative programs maximized food system efficiencies and helped clients access fresh, healthful foods. Other positive outcomes included the **increased use of the local food economy when national chains were having difficulty pivoting their regular operations** to accommodate for the pandemic. City agencies acknowledged the enhancement of the local food economy.

“We were excited to be able to implement that and get some online purchasing and delivery going through that waiver. And then some were totally new programs, so we implemented the pandemic EBT program...So while it feels uncomfortable to talk about silver linings coming from a pandemic, we really made tremendous progress to meet the needs of folks in that time of urgency that will have ongoing, long term benefits for SNAP recipients for years and years to come.” ~State Agency

“We created a grocery certificate program. We started working with [nonprofit organization], and reached out to the Spanish-speaking community, which there’s a large, quite invisible sometimes Spanish-speaking community in [city]...We’ve been distributing \$50.00 worth of certificates that people can spend at the market. And then we have somebody [onsite], Spanish is her first language, who can guide those new shoppers through understanding how to use the certificates.” ~HEZ Representative



3 Implementation of culturally relevant practices.

There were some stakeholders who **implemented culturally relevant practices**, but there was also room for improvement as it related to ensuring equity and inclusion. For example, one non-profit organization demonstrated their commitment to understanding the families they were serving by directly reaching out via social media platforms to discuss their dietary and cultural preferences. Practices such as this one exemplify the importance of talking to key members in the community who understand the barriers to food access.



One Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) mentioned their efforts to accommodate patients who declined the food boxes lacking culturally familiar foods and connected them with another local food pantry that had familiar, fresh produce. The FQHC also offered to do grocery shopping for SNAP-eligible patients. In cases where patients were uninsured, undocumented or had no income, staff would utilize their own agency funds to purchase groceries as a last resort.

“Thank God for all the social media, because I can put something up on Facebook and get answers...I went live and said look, I really want to help you in [city]. I don’t know what you people want to eat. You’re very different. You’re not like the Cape Verdeans in [city]. It’s about having the willingness to ask that question, and I’m not trying to be offensive. I want to know what you like...treat you with empathy...and serve you where you live...” ~Nonprofit Organization

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STAKEHOLDERS & A CALL TO ACTION

Based on these challenges and successes, there were three main themes expressed by stakeholders surrounding how RI handled food access during the COVID-19 crisis and what must change to put our state in the best position to respond in future pandemics/emergencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Enhanced collaboration and communication among state-level and local “boots on the ground” leadership is urgently needed in order to incorporate new and successful initiatives that emerged during the pandemic to improve food access. This should be approached with a systemic perspective to ensure that changes account for the experience and perspectives of smaller agencies.
- 2 Strategies and efforts to promote food access during COVID-19 must be culturally sensitive, language appropriate, and reach all audiences in need. To achieve this, increased use of technology for communication (i.e., mobile apps and text message reminders) coupled with improvements in technology access for high-risk community members must be considered.
- 3 Federal leadership should better coordinate with states around food access and solicit ongoing feedback around the implementation challenges of federal food assistance programs and waivers. Stakeholders expressed the need for federally funded programs to be less restrictive, to include undocumented families, and to make it easier for families to understand their benefits.

A CALL TO ACTION

The following are action items that are informed by these stakeholder recommendations:

- 1 Increase efforts to promote inclusion and lift the voices of smaller agencies, especially those serving culturally diverse clients, and better represent the perspectives and needs of the community members served.
- 2 Continue to ensure that a state-level Director of Food Strategy is a permanent position in the state and that the Hunger Elimination Taskforce continues to bring together stakeholders across different sectors. The Director position was vacant during the majority of the pandemic and could have helped coordinate an appropriate emergency plan for food access during COVID-19 and ensure that there was streamlined communication across stakeholders.
- 3 Ensure that state lessons learned with federal food assistance programs are carried up to the national level to promote equitable access to foods, particularly around the need for flexibility as well as tools for communicating and distributing food assistance benefits.

*“When I’m with my Dominicans I know that they want the fried salami...I know ox feet is supposed to go to the Liberians. Very, very important, **because good intentions miss that all the time.** And just because I’m poor, or just because I’m in a hard [time], does that mean that I should get a [canned item] with radishes and an eggplant when I’m a Puerto Rican kid from the Bronx and I don’t know how to cook that...We talk about education. It’s educating us on this side that are doing the feeding **to understand an empathetic approach** to helping and serving you...And how can I help you in your space instead of trying to come into your space and convince you to eat with me...” ~Nonprofit Organization*

