

Good works: Program is helping RI farmers, fishermen and the hungry

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Bad times bring out good ideas.

The Rhode Island Food Policy Council in its work with Hope's Harvest RI, Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Community Food Bank is bringing food to those who need it and supporting Rhode Island farmers and fishermen at the same time. This important work has just begun and there are many teams out there working to expand it and build on some work already done.



One problem is that farmers and fishermen have lost their valuable restaurant and institutional business, including colleges and corporate dining services, since the pandemic began in March.

The second problem is that food insecurity is soaring. Unemployment from the shutdown means more people in need of help. Food pantries across the state have reported they are working hard to keep up with the demand. Demand is up forty-five percent from a year ago this time, said Nessa Richman, Network Director of the Food Policy Council.

What if you could pay a fair price to farmers for their extra produce, and to fishermen for their catch, and then give it to those who are hungry?

That's the work that is being done by the Food Policy Council and its partners that will be expanded with a new \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Local Food Promotion Program.

“The goal is to build market links between local food producers and people in need of emergency and supplemental food. The project will support the state’s family farms and fishermen and feed tens of thousands of food-insecure Rhode Island residents,” said Richman.

"We have people in food lines that have never been in them before," she said. "They want fresh food and culturally appropriate foods." There are several examples of how this already working.



A partnership between Eating with the Ecosystem, the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island & the Food Policy Council pays fishermen for their catch

That food follows one of two paths. One is for whole fish. Representatives from different community groups meet at the Port of Galilee to pick up their fish from a variety of fishers and dealers. Then they bring it back to their communities to be distributed.

In Providence, scup, also called porgy, an underutilized fish, is prized by some communities. Families sign up for donations that may also include hake, whiting and clams. They can pick them up fresh, within hours of the catch, and they are distributed through many organizations including the African Alliance and the George Wiley Center as well as Sunrise Forever Inc., a Liberian humanitarian organization.

The organizations break them down into family-size packages for distribution.

Quotes shared by Richman show the meaning of the program: *"Having fresh fish made us feel like we were home in Africa,"* and the program is *"helping me save money to buy other food."* A second path is for prepared meals of local seafood that can be packaged, frozen and distributed through food pantries.

Adam Mir, owner of Bucktown, the fish and chicken spot on the West Side of Providence, did just that. Bucktown made a hearty fish stew and froze quart-size portions. They were then distributed to food banks at the Dr. Martin Luther King Community Center in Newport and the Jonnycake Center in Peace Dale.



When the pandemic began, demand for fish dropped off immediately, Mir said. He was glad to support the fishing industry by using monkfish and other small fish in the stew he called both nutritious and appealing.

Mir said the goal is to learn how to ramp up production and then develop an infrastructure to deliver the supplemental meals. "I don't know yet how to execute this," he said. But maybe there is a model to offer the stew on his menu, he said. Customers may pay full price to subsidize donations to those in need. And that could also help create demand for these fish, he said.

Richman said working out these kinds of issues is still ahead, and not just for fish. They are also working with Hope's Harvest RI, which mobilizes volunteers to collect unharvested produce and deliver it to needy populations. Eva Agudelo is the founder and executive director at Hope's Harvest, a partner to the Food Policy Council.



Richman said the state has engaged in several innovative pilot projects that link local farmers with the state's emergency feeding system.

For example, with the summer's drought, farmers who wholesale potatoes found them too small to go to market. But they could be used for home cooking and were distributed through the state's emergency feeding network, including the Community Food Bank.

The Food Bank doesn't only get local produce through Hope's Harvest, she noted. It has also made arrangements with community farms that grow produce just for the Food Bank.

This also helps preserve farms. "We and our partners will coordinate and invest in these market relationships until they reach a scale and effectiveness that is self-sustaining," she said. "All this requires public policy to make infrastructure and efficiency."

The pandemic has revealed the industrial complex of food is not resilient to shocks like COVID. Local sources have a better chance of success. There will be ways for the public to participate in these programs, Richman said. The Food Policy Council is looking for additional investment. For example, it would like to find funding to experiment with frozen filets that could go to food banks. But that is just one of many paths to explore.

Individuals or businesses interested in supporting the initiatives can contact the council at <https://rifofoodcouncil.org/>.