

Meeting Minutes

Inter-agency Food & Nutrition Policy Advisory Council

DATE: July 21, 2014

TIME: 2:30 PM

LOCATION: 401 Conference Room, Rhode Island Department of Health

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Janet Coit, Director, Department of Environmental Management (DEM); Michael Fine, MD, Director, Department of Health (HEALTH); Allison Rogers, Policy Director, Department of Administration (DOA); Corinne Calise Russo, Division of Elderly Affairs (DEA); John Rogers, Department of Corrections (DOC); Sandra Powell, Department of Human Services (DHS); Sandra Fabrizio, RI Department of Education (RIDE)

ATTENDEES: Aleatha Dickerson, Division of Elderly Affairs; Lissa DiMauro, Department of Human Services; Ken Ayars, DEM; Christopher Ausura, HEALTH; Ashley Biller, HEALTH; Kenneth Payne, RI Food Policy Council; Kimberly Clark, RI Food Policy Council/Farm Fresh RI; Kayla Ringelheim, RI Food Policy Council/Farm Fresh RI; Evan Hill, HEALTH; Ann Barone, HEALTH; Christine Ruggeri, DHS; Sophie Duncan, City of Providence

1. Approval of March 3, 2013 meeting minutes

- Dr. Fine, Council Chair, called the meeting to order at 2:33 PM.
- Dr. Fine called for a motion to approve the March 3rd, 2013 meeting minutes.
- Director Coit made a motion to approve.
- Alli Rogers, acting as Director Licht's designee, seconded the motion.
- Dr. Fine called for discussion and hearing no discussion approved the minutes.

2. Public comments received

- Dr. Fine called for public comments. No public comments were received.

3. Welcome of New Council Membership

- Dr. Fine, acting as the Chair of the Council, welcomed the new Council members, and designees.

- Dr. Fine called on Allison Rogers to provide a brief update of the actions of the IFNPAC to date.

- Allison Rogers spoke about the history of the formation of the Council, current findings and recommendations, the actions taken to include breastfeeding space in all State agencies to support State employees returning from maternity leave; the new provisions in the State's master price agreement for the prime food vendor to increase the amount of local food that the State purchases, the healthy eating at events policy, and the recent expansion of the IFNPAC's membership.
- Director Coit welcomed the new membership and asked to be allowed time to provide a brief update for the new membership due to her need to leave to make

another meeting. She updated the Council on the recent bond from DEM and gave a brief overview of the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act (LASA) grants which were recently awarded. She also thanked the RI Food policy Council for their help with implementing the LASA grants. To update the Council from last meeting she stated that DEM is working to develop new criteria to assist farmers in accessing viable land for farming, there will be more information available soon on those efforts.

- Dr. Fine reiterated Director Coit's comments and stated that there is an immense benefit that the food system and the agricultural sector could play in RI's economy; and that there has been some postulation that had RI had a stronger agriculture sector it would have recovered from the recession faster.

- Dr. Fine called for additional comments, and hearing none moved to the next agenda item.

4. Food Solutions New England

- Dr. Fine called on Ken Ayars, Chief of the Division of Agriculture, to present on the recent Food Solutions New England Summit held on June 12th and 13th.

- Ken Ayars provided a report titled *50/60 A New England Food Vision Report* from the group Food Solution New England; report will be posted to Secretary of State's Website, or be available upon request.

- Ken Ayars stated that he felt that it was important that we have a vision for a sustainable food system, and that this was a report for the region, and not a RI specific plan. DEM supports the plan and would like other agencies to read the plan and support it as well. The plan is structure to completely re-think the way we utilize food to ensure sustainability. It estimates that 10% of the food consumed regionally comes from a regional source, and in RI only about 1% of food consumed comes from RI. This means that 90% of the food consumed comes from sources outside of the region. This document sets the goal that by the year 2060 we will source 50% of the food consumed from the New England region; and states that there needs to be a fundamental shift in consumer trends to achieve reductions in the need for large agriculture lands allocated to meat production. He reiterated that DEM thinks this is a good plan, and would like the Council to consider adopting this plan moving forward.

- Dr. Fine stated that when a Rhode Islander consumes a Rhode Island grown food they are not consuming a toxic, industrially produced food. He then called on Ken Payne, from the RI Food Policy Council to present on the RIFPC thoughts on the 50/60 vision.

- Ken Payne thanked the Council, and stated that he would like to address a point that was made earlier, that agriculture is economic development. He stated that historically this has not been the traditional thinking of the State; but that 13.1 square miles of agricultural land has been added in Rhode Island in the last decade, an area

the size of Middletown, Rhode Island; and that during the recession agricultural land increased, not decreased. He stated that the global population is growing, the estimated caloric consumption is growing, and the demand for increased food production will become more and more of an issue over the coming century. The need to localize food production will become a fundamental need for all communities due to changes in the earth's climate that will lead to rapid fluctuations in the availability of certain food products in our current food producing areas. He stated that with increasing demand and a potentially compromised supply it is simply prudent to source as much food as possible from local sources.

- Ken Payne stated that a fundamental question for any urban population is; how does it get food? The general rule of thumb has been to simply go to the market and buy whatever is cheapest from wherever it is produced, but the changes to the marketplace make this an increasingly risky consumer model.
- Ken Payne discussed the way that the report is specifically important to RI in the light of economic development. The economic approach laid out in the report is "shift/share". This means determining whether production is shifting to, or shifting away from your region; and what is your share of that marketplace. Rhode Island needs to ask if there is an increased shift to local food, and ask if the state as a whole will see an additional share of the market. He feels that the new report from Commerce RI highlighting agriculture and the food system as an area of economic development shows that it means that Rhode Island can and will see increased shares in the food marketplace in years to come, and investments into the food system should be made to support that growing market.
- Ken Payne stated that he would like to assure the Council that he will be assertive in his role to make this happen, and will be at the disposal of the Council.
- Dr. Fine thanked Ken Payne for his presentation and requested the RI Food Policy Council hold the IFNPAC accountable for their mission. He then called for comments from the Council on the proposed plan and Rhode Island's role in the plan.
- Director Coit stated that there is also an immense opportunity to increase the consumption and utilization of local Rhode Island fish and shellfish fisheries. She also stated that we should be working harder to increase the utilization of prevalent species which are currently not utilized.
- Ken Payne stated that there was a focus in the summit on fisheries as well, and agreed that increasing non-utilized species consumption in all areas of food consumption was a good idea.
- Director Coit stated that the conference seemed to focus heavily on equity related issues. She then asked, given the Council's scope, if there was a way to summarize

or give brief highlights about the issues of food access that this Council could help to address.

- Ken Payne stated that when convening this meeting the Food Solutions New England group wanted to begin tackling the disparities in access between different racial and socioeconomic groups.
- Director Powell stated that she was excited to see some of the changes which have already come out of this Council, and was interested to see how programs such as SNAP could potentially help support increased access for all residents. She said she was sure it was not an accident that the agenda was structured in the way it was to move the conversation from problem to possible solutions, and that a large portion of the population is currently using SNAP benefits to make ends meet; but unfortunately this makes access and affordability very difficult when food dollars are scarce. She mentioned that there are some potential policy changes such as increased assistance to help recipients buy seeds to start gardens, and the possibility of increasing subsidization of healthier food spending.
- Ken Payne stated that this was a very important topic for the RI FPC, and they were looking forward to working with the IFNPAC in the months and years to come. He stated that this was an issue where they would not be bashful, and in the view of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council this is not discretionary, but obligatory work.
- Dr. Fine stated that in the report there was a glaring lack of information regarding Rhode Island's immigrant population, and asked if there was any discussion at the Food Solutions New England Summit (FSNE) about immigrant populations.
- Ken Payne stated that the issue had not arisen until this point due to the lack of immigrant groups in the Northern New England states where the Food Solution New England Summit has been held for the previous three years. The Southern New England states asked to hold the most recent summit in a Southern New England state to address that issue. This is why the last summit was held in Pawtucket, Rhode Island to show first-hand the implications and impact which immigrant populations have on the regional food system.
- Director Coit stated that Ken Ayars suggested that the Council evaluate this as a suggested plan, and although the plan is not tailored to RI, one of the things this Council could do is to adopt the goal of a regional food system, then work with the Rhode Island Food Policy Council to establish Rhode Island specific goals and priorities.
- Dr. Fine asked for clarification on whether this was a specific ask of the Council to assign staff to the task of working to establish a baseline plan for a Rhode Island food system.
- Director Coit confirmed that this was a specific ask of the IFNPAC.

- Dr. Fine felt there was no need for an official motion, but asked that staff work with the Rhode Island Food Policy Council to convene and come up with specific action items based on the changes necessary to make the report more Rhode Island specific. He asked if there were any objections to that approach, and hearing none thanked Ken Payne for his presentation.

- Ken Payne added that before moving on he would like to pledge to help this Council, and is looking forward to working together to develop the plan.

5. Federal Food Benefit Presentations

- Dr. Fine called on Ann Barone, Chief of the WIC program, to provide a brief overview of the WIC program; and discuss how it could help to grow a healthy Rhode Island food system.

- Ann Barone stated the official title of the program is the Special Supplemental Food and Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, and handed out a one page breakdown of WIC in Rhode Island; handout will be posted to Secretary of State's website, and/or will be available upon request. The main focus of the WIC program is brain development and healthy birth outcomes. WIC is 100% federally funded at \$14 million annually which goes directly to food dollars, those funds come through the State, but are only used to pay for food. An additional \$6 million in infant formula reimbursement is sent to Rhode Island, along with nutrition services and administrative funding (amount not stated), and farmers market nutrition funding at \$122,000 annually. WIC serves approximately 25,000 clients per month, with 41,000 clients per year providing referrals, coordination with physicians, nutrition counseling and education, and physical activity. WIC works with low income parents, and children ages 0-5; and focus on any and all environmental determinants of health. WIC Checks can be spent on a variety of staple foods, but there are specific guidelines on what types of food can be purchased.

- Ann stated that WIC is allowing the fruit and vegetable checks to be spent at farmers markets along with the farmer's market checks they issue to certain clients. Last year they had a 37% redemption rate of WIC farmer's market checks, they plan on a 50% redemption rate, but this is still short of that rate. WIC has partnered in the past with community groups as well as Johnson & Wales University; and last year piloted a pop-up market at one of the agencies with the lowest redemption and saw \$1000 in check redemption in one day, which was a substantial increase.

- Ann asked Evan Hill, WIC Farmers Market Intern, how many pop-up markets will be happening this year.

- Evan Hill stated that there will be six in Newport, two in Warwick, and one in Providence.

- Ann stated that they are working diligently to pursue strategies to increase the redemption rates for the local food dollars which are available to clients.
- John Rogers asked if Ann could better describe the pop-up market approach.
- Ann explained that Evan had contacted all of the WIC approved farmers to get a list of interested farmers, they asked the farmers to attend a specific market on a single day, and then worked with clinic staff to walk participants through the market to ensure clients understood what was available at the market.
- Evan added that there were multiple components contributing to the lack of redemption that the pop-up model addresses such as familiarity of the location of the market, convenience of getting a check and having an immediate place to spend it, and this increased the accessibility and knowledge of the client as it pertains to food items.
- Director Powell asked if at the pop-up market there was additional feedback from either the clients or the farmers. She also asked if the clients were spending more, or if there were more clients.
- Evan stated that the redemption increased by 10%, and that these were checks that would otherwise go unused; therefore the spending was likely more from increased redemption of checks, and not that there were more dollars spent. The farmers provided positive feedback that there was a financial reward, and were excited to return to this market.
- Ann stated that the redemption rate last year has begun to change from a decline of farmers market spending to an increased rate of redemption.
- Ken Ayars asked if there was any possibility to utilize the checks at the wintertime markets, and if there was an electronic benefit transfer machine necessary for accepting checks.
- Ann stated that the checks could be redeemed directly, and they allow participants to redeem fruit and vegetable checks at the wintertime market, but have not seen strong redemption rates.
- Dr. Fine asked if Ann knew the current percent of WIC dollars spent on local food.
- Ann responded that with the traditional check it is very low; mostly due to the need to purchase the lowest price item; and only approximately 1% of the fruit and vegetables purchased with fruit and vegetable checks is local; however, 100% of the farmer's market checks are spent on local food.
- Dr. Fine asked if there was any way to increase the \$122,000 in farmer's market funds.

- Ann stated that they could request expansion funds if they saw an uptick in redemption.
- Dr. Fine asked if there were any ways to incentivize redemption similar to the “Bonus Bucks” model in SNAP.
- Ann stated that federal dollars allocated to the WIC program could not be spent on incentive funds projects.
- Dr. Fine asked if other states have created WIC farmers market incentive programs.
- Ann stated that yes other states have, but no federal money can be spent on incentives, and that other states have used private and state funds to incentivize redemption.
- Dr. Fine mentioned that this seems to be in the best interest of the State, as well as the producers to increase the redemption, and therefore increase the amount of money which the federal government would send to Rhode Island to be spent exclusively on Rhode Island products by WIC clients.
- Christine Ruggeri stated that there are pilot projects which are aimed at using SNAP dollars to incentive fruit and vegetable consumptions, but these projects were not specific to farmers markets; and USDA has some guidance forthcoming for funds allocated in the farm bill for incentive programs.
- Dr. Fine stated that as budgets are being written, it would behoove the Council membership to add \$10-15,000 to their unconstrained budget request for the 2016 budget. He was unclear which department those funds would live under, but this could increase the funding by 50%, and could increase the amount of money which could be accessible to Rhode Island. He stated that this is economic development, and could be a great opportunity to spur increased spending on local food, as well as increase the available dollars for Rhode Island residents receiving WIC.
- Ken Ayars asked Kayla Ringelheim to speak to what funding is available, and how it has worked thus far in Rhode Island.
- Kayla stated that the discussion on the table was correct, and that currently in Rhode Island there is no subsidization or incentive for WIC, only SNAP. The funds to incentivize SNAP come from fundraising, and an organization called Wholesome Wave. She affirmed the findings of others in the room, and stated that to increase redemption of these funds you need to increase the value of the dollars to make the trip to a different market worthwhile to the consumer.

- Dr. Fine re-stated his previous comments and asked that each director at the table think independently about potentially adding some funds to the unconstrained budget between now and the next meeting to support increased redemption.
- Dr. Fine called on Christine Ruggeri to provide an overview of the SNAP program, and the SNAP Ed. program.
- Christine thanked the Council, and stated that SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which was previously called food stamps currently has approximately 178,000 recipients, which equates to 18% of Rhode Island's population. 30% of those people are elderly or disabled and 60% are under the age of 18. There is dual eligibility with other state and federal poverty assistance programs which means that if you qualify for Medicaid or Medicare you qualify for SNAP. There are no restrictions on foods which are purchased except that they cannot be prepared foods, this means ready to eat. There are no restrictions based on the nutritional quality of the food available to clients.
- Christine stated that although there were no restrictions on the nutritional quality of the foods, SNAP has been working at both the state and federal level to increase the redemption of benefits at farmers markets by providing no cost EBT machines to the markets through a federal grant. The previous grant was approximately \$25,000, but only \$5,000 was used due to the difficulty in getting the machines set up for the farmers. USDA has allowed RI to put \$20,000 into this year's budget to buy machines, and to fund the MarketLink process which will provide technical assistance to farmers and farmers markets.
- Christine asked if there were questions prior to her moving on to SNAP Ed.
- Dr. Fine stated that to his knowledge there have been no successful attempts to limit consumption of unhealthy items, but that there were other states who had tried to create guidelines based on nutritional quality.
- Christine confirmed that other states have tried, but that none have been successful.
- Dr. Fine stated that on July 1st, Undersecretary of the USDA, Kevin Concannon had mentioned in a conversation with Dr. Fine that he felt that USDA would entertain a well thought out application from Rhode Island to pursue this type of limitation due to the proximity and size of the state.
- Director Powell stated that in addition to the restrictions conversation, the SNAP Restaurant Meals Pilot (RMP) was another topic she would like to discuss at a later date; and also wanted to clarify that the recipients of SNAP benefits have to recertify annually.
- Christine stated that Director Powell had brought up a good point regarding the SNAP RMP was a progressive pilot approved by Director Powell, and that the

program has been extremely successful helping elderly, disabled, homeless, or any combination of the three be able to get food that is more nutritious than processed, packaged junk food that they classically were forced to consume due to the lack of ability to prepare food. The program has seen modest returns, which is exactly what they were hoping to see; consumers who need the food are purchasing it, but still using their benefits in the intended way at grocery stores and farmers markets first, and supplementing their diets with prepared foods, when needed.

- Chris Ausura stated that in addition to the success that has been seen at the SNAP level, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown a clear interest in the progress and success of the pilot, and is curious as to when and how it will expand.
- Christine clarified that the pilot was intended to be a slow approach to ensure that food offered was healthy thereby improving the diets and health of the target population, and that there would not be overutilization of the benefit undermining the intent of the SNAP program. She stated that she felt that the pilot has achieved both of those goals.
- Chris Ausura added that in addition to the existing framework of the program from SNAP, RI HEALTH has supported the pilot by providing the Healthy Eating at Events Nutrition Guidelines to SNAP to cross promote, and collaborate between the two agencies.
- Director Powell stated that the 60 by 60 will help as well since there will be increasing pressure from the USDA to comply with the nutrition guidelines.
- Aleather Dickerson stated that the senior congregate meal sites accept SNAP to cover the suggested donation, but there has been some difficulty getting EBT machines at congregate meal sites, and asked if there were any grant funds to support that, or was it just for farmers markets.
- Christine answered that she was not aware of any funds to support EBT machines at congregate meal sites, but they do encourage participants to use their benefits at the congregate meal sites first as it is a full balanced meal, not just a sandwich to go.
- Ken Ayars asked if seafood was eligible for SNAP and WIC.
- Christine and Ann Barone answered that SNAP does allow seafood, but WIC does not.
- Christine stated that SNAP has no oversight over the retailers like WIC does, and that the oversight comes from the federal level.
- Ann stated that WIC monitors all vendors who accept WIC benefits in RI and checks that minimum inventory and other requirements are being met.

- Christine moved on to the SNAP Education component of her presentation and stated that RI DHS partners with the University of Rhode Island to implement approximately \$1 million annually to support nutrition education statewide. They go to SNAP field offices to speak with clients, they go to schools and talk about nutrition.
- Dr. Fine asked if they use the video monitors at the DMV to advertise and educate about healthy choices.
- Christine said it is an idea they have on the table, but they are waiting on clarification from USDA to see if this would be allowed under the new rules regarding media campaigns.
- Christine stated that they had close to 500 responses to a recent request for focus groups to help SNAP better understand how to reach their clients. Clients are very interested in receiving nutrition education information from social media outlets to keep them in the loop in non-invasive ways.
- Christine stated that they have also partnered with the Feinstein Center to help notify target populations that are currently not utilizing the benefits.
- Aleatha asked if there was any outreach targeted to the senior population.
- Christine stated that they are absolutely one of the target populations who frequently qualify, but don't access the benefits. She stated that there are many reasons why this happens, but they are actively working to help get more seniors enrolled.
- Kayla Ringelheim stated that New York had used some of their SNAP Ed. funds to use for gifts and incentives such as measuring cups to reward participants who participate in nutrition education programs.
- Chris Ausura asked if there were other states that have used their SNAP and WIC programs to collaboratively support the increased utilization of local, healthy food.
- Ann and Christine responded that the criteria for eligibility is different so it is very complicated to overlap services; but WIC is currently cross promoting WIC and SNAP farmers markets, and giving SNAP Ed. materials at all WIC clinics.
- Dr. Fine asked if there was any database of contact information being collected, specifically email addresses.
- Christine and Ann responded that at this point there was no aggregate email list for recipients at this time.

- Dr. Fine stated that there are a multitude of e-health and m-health products that provide health information in the medical field, and that those models could potentially be used to inform these participants to encourage them to access more local food.
- Director Powell clarified that the new system they are moving to will have the capability to aggregate email addresses.
- Dr. Fine stated that there were multiple communication channels that HEALTH currently uses, and that by combining different lists of emails we could likely reach the majority of those who are eligible, or current participants.
- Director Powell stated that they are currently sending some information to the participants in the annual mailing they send; and that moving forward she is very interested in creating nutrition education materials that appeal to the different economic, social, and ethnic groups across the state.
- Dr. Fine stated that the Department of Education would likely be another critical partner in getting the information out to the residents. He added that Professor Prochaska at the University of Rhode Island is sending messages out using the five stages of change method to ensure recipients are getting messages which pertain to their current interest in behavioral change. Messages are sent to smokers who have enrolled in the program that are applicable to their current status in the stages of change to support their attempts to quit smoking.
- Dr. Fine called for additional comments or questions for Christine, and hearing none asked that the new IFNPAC members at the table come to the next meeting with some specific information about what they are doing around food and nutrition, and if there are specific opportunities for this Council to help to develop the RI food sector leveraging both public and private resources as we move to create a policy direction.

6. Adjournment

- Dr. Fine called for a motion to adjourn the meeting.
- Ken Ayars, acting as Director Coit's designee, motioned to adjourn.
- Director Powell seconded the motion.
- Dr. Fine adjourned the meeting at 3:58 PM.