Emergency Food Systems (EFS) Group

Facilitated by River Valley Charities in partnership with Foundation for Essential Needs

Q2 Meeting Minutes
Date: April 21, 2026
Location: Five Loaves Food Shelf (in-person with hybrid option)

Attendance

In-Person Attendees:
Jennifer Hanson, Five Loaves Food Shelf
Olivia Braaten, CW Solutions FSET Program
Helen Swanson, Polk County Public Health
Chrissy Cook, The Open Cupboard
Diane Viau, Lifeline Food Pantry
Katy Ellefson, HealthPartners
Amy Clay, Salvation Army (Polk, Burnett, Barron)
Shelly Smith, Our Neighbors Place
Sarah Fluegel, SCVFB
Mary Williams, Somerset Community Food Pantry
Jodi Murphy, Somerset Community Food Pantry
Bobbie Guyette, School District of New Richmond – School Nutrition
Karl Volk, SCVFB
Todd Stewart, SCVFB

Virtual Attendees:
Katie Bull, Foundation for Essential Needs
Brittany Mora, Peirce County Public Health/Peirce Co Hunger Prevention Council
Mindy Roth, St. Croix County WIC
Devan Greene, Dietetic intern with St. Croix County WIC

Featured Presentation

Foundation for Essential Needs (FFEN) – Data Insights

Presenter: Katie Bull

Overview:

- FFEN provides free data analysis services for food shelves using:
    - Food bank sourcing data
    - Service statistics (households served, pounds distributed)
- Goal: Help food shelves optimize purchasing and better meet client needs

Key Regional Insights (St. Croix Valley Data)

- **Participation:** 10 food shelves included in dataset
- **Distribution Model:**
    - 83% full shopper choice
    - 17% partial choice
- **Operations:**
    - Majority open multiple days per week
    - Most have food purchasing budgets
    - ~2/3 purchase food outside food bank network

Service & Food Distribution Metrics

- **Median pounds per person per visit:** ~22 lbs
  (Higher than overall dataset ~18 lbs)
- **Most important food categories:**
    - Fresh produce
    - Protein
    - Dairy
      (~48–49% of distributed food)

Cost Insights

- **Median cost per person served:** ~ $2
  → Key takeaway: Food shelves provide significant value per dollar
- Does **not include total operating costs** (staff, utilities, facilities)

Additional Observations

- Produce distribution higher than average
- Protein distribution slightly lower than broader dataset
- TEFAP sourcing relatively strong in region
- Local sourcing data not fully captured in all cases

Discussion Highlights

1. Full Cost of Operating Food Pantries

- Strong interest in capturing **true cost of operations**, including:
    - Staffing vs volunteer models
    - Facilities and utilities
    - Technology and infrastructure
- Recognized gap in current data systems
- Potential opportunity for EFS group to:
    - Collect regional data
    - Strengthen advocacy and funding narratives

2. Volunteer Shortages

- Consistent theme across organizations:
    - Aging volunteer base (many 70s–90s)
    - Declining availability
- Direct impact on:
    - Pantry hours
    - Program sustainability
- Driving operational changes (including program redesigns)

3. Backpack Program Shifts

- Some programs transitioning from food distribution to **voucher-based models** (e.g., Kwik Trip vouchers)
- Drivers:
    - Volunteer capacity limitations
    - Operational complexity
- Trade-offs discussed:
    - Increased flexibility for families
    - Concerns about donated funds flowing to corporations

4. Rising Costs & Resource Gaps

- Milk and protein identified as major cost pressures
- Continued reliance on:
    - Donations
    - Grants
    - Community partnerships

5. FoodShare (SNAP) Utilization

- Noted **underutilization in the region**
- Identified barriers:
    - Awareness
    - Application complexity
    - Perceived low benefit amounts
- Opportunity for:
    - Better outreach
    - On-site assistance
    - Cross-sector training

Upcoming Event

FoodShare Outreach & Education Meeting

- **Date:** May 11, 2026
- **Location:** St. Croix Valley Food Bank
- **Hosted by:** RVC EFS Group, PCHPC, SCVFB
- **Guest Speaker:** Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin

Focus Areas:

- Improving FoodShare access and utilization
- Addressing barriers for families
- Q&A based on submitted questions

Notes:

- RSVP required
- In-person only
- Strong encouragement to invite additional partners (schools, healthcare, etc.)

Partner Updates

St. Croix Valley Food Bank

- New Development Director hired
- Food Resource Directory in progress
- Recent Empty Bowls fundraiser successful
- New grants secured:
    - Local sourcing (50% local food requirement)
    - ~$80,000 for fresh produce (starting mid-June)
- New facility under construction (target completion: October)

Our Neighbors Place:

- Moved to Main St in Downtown River Falls during new building construction
- Building projects and fundraising efforts underway - completion goal of March

Polk/Barron/Burnett County Backpack Programs:

- Amy shared updates on backpack programs across Polk, Barron, and Burnett Counties, highlighting continued growth in need and increasing operational challenges.
- Rising food costs, especially milk and protein, continue creating significant budget pressures for backpack programs.
- Several programs are transitioning from traditional backpack food distribution to Kwik Trip vouchers due to aging volunteers, limited capacity, logistics, and food safety concerns.
- Amy noted the transition was emotional for many longtime volunteers, some of whom have supported programs for decades.
- Volunteer shortages and declining church capacity were identified as growing concerns for rural backpack programs.
- Barron County backpack programs currently serve approximately 875 students, with milk costs alone reaching $3,000–$4,000 per month.
- Amy emphasized that despite the challenges and operational changes, programs remain committed to ensuring children continue receiving support.

HealthPartners (Amery, Westfields, Hudson)

- Katie from HealthPartners shared updates on the Power of Produce (POP) Club and expanding farmers market partnerships across Polk and St. Croix Counties.
- POP Club provides children ages 2–17 with $4 in tokens to purchase fresh produce or produce-producing plants at participating farmers markets.
- New or expanding POP partnerships were discussed for:
    - Amery
    - Osceola
    - Balsam Lake
    - Frederic
    - New Richmond (45th Parallel market sponsored by Westfields Hospital)
- Discussion included efforts by St. Croix Valley Food Alliance to promote senior farmers market vouchers/checks and improve transportation access through partnerships with ADRC.
- Participants discussed barriers seniors face accessing voucher programs, particularly transportation challenges and requirements to travel to locations such as Balsam Lake or New Richmond to enroll.
- The group explored opportunities to better connect farmers markets, WIC, FoodShare/EBT, food pantries, backpack programs, and healthcare organizations to improve awareness and participation.
- Several attendees noted strong success distributing farmers market and POP information through backpack programs and schools before summer break.
- Katie also highlighted the monthly Community Health Action Team (CHAT) meetings facilitated by HealthPartners:
    - Third Thursday of each month

    - 8:30–10:00 AM
    - Next meeting planned as an in-person gathering in New Richmond (location TBD between police station or library)
- Katy.J.Ellefson@healthpartners.com

Lifeline Food Pantry

- No major updates from Diane. Some discussion on aging volunteer base with no one lining up to take their place.

The Open Cupboard

- Chrissy mentioned the freezer had gone out but it was working now, temporarily. Received a grant to install a new one soon.

Polk County Public Health

- Helen from Polk County Public Health shared additional WIC outreach materials and encouraged partners to help distribute brochures throughout the community.
- Discussion highlighted a potential disconnect between individuals seeking in-person assistance at food pantries and the FoodShare application/call center experience.
- Polk County Public Health plans to invite Economic Support staff to the May 11 FoodShare meeting to better understand barriers families may be facing and explore ways to streamline the process and improve access.
- The group discussed opportunities to strengthen coordination between food pantries, outreach workers, and Economic Support teams to improve FoodShare participation and community awareness.
- Additional conversation focused on senior farmers market voucher programs and barriers seniors face using them, including limited participating vendors and transportation/access challenges.
- The group discussed opportunities to better educate and recruit farmers market vendors to participate in senior voucher programs, noting that many vendors may not realize how simple the process is.

FSET Program – CW Solutions

- Olivia from CW Solutions shared information about the FoodShare Employment and Training (FSET) Program, which helps FoodShare participants with employment support, education assistance, and transportation/gas cards for interviews and work.

- Offered assistance helping individuals navigate FoodShare issues, including completing renewals, understanding case notes, and resolving simple verification problems that may interrupt benefits.
- Also offered to provide on-site support or informational tables at food pantries to help community members navigate FoodShare questions and connect with available resources.
- Coverage areas discussed included St. Croix, Pierce, Polk, Barron, Dunn, Chippewa, and Eau Claire Counties.
- The group discussed how intimidating the FoodShare process can feel for families, particularly long wait times and confusion surrounding renewals or missing paperwork.
- Additional informational packets and digital resources related to FoodShare and FSET will be shared at the upcoming May 11 FoodShare meeting.
- Olivia.Braaten@changewithin.net

Five Loaves Food Shelf

- Jennifer with Five Loaves Food Shelf shared an update on progress toward its new facility, with approvals completed, permits underway, and contractors beginning to bid portions of the project.
- Rising construction costs continue creating challenges, with total project estimates increasing significantly since initial planning began. The freezer/cooler system alone was estimated at approximately $100,000.

New Richmond School District - School Nutrition

- Bobbie from the School District of New Richmond shared updates on the district's summer meals program, which will provide weekly meal box pickups for children ages 0–18 over 12 weeks this summer at New Richmond High School.
- Free/reduced qualifying families receive meal boxes at no cost, while paid-status families can purchase boxes for $40.
- Current program serves approximately 200 participants weekly, with Thursday lunch and dinner pickup options available at New Richmond High School.
- Bobbie shared plans to expand summer meal access into Somerset, Hammond, and potentially additional communities within St. Croix County that qualify under USDA summer meal site eligibility maps.
- Major current need identified was securing a refrigerated ("reefer") truck to support expanded summer meal distribution.

- Group discussion explored possible community partnerships, parking lot locations, and collaborative opportunities to support expansion efforts.
- Bobbie noted the district has staffing capacity and flexibility to support additional summer meal partnerships if community sites are identified.
- A free "Farm to School" community event hosted in partnership with St. Croix Valley Food Alliance was announced:
    - May 6
    - 4:00–6:00 PM
    - New Richmond High School
    - Event includes local food, educational activities, farmer booths, and family-friendly programming.

- Bobbie also shared that New Richmond school construction/remodeling projects will result in surplus kitchen and food service equipment becoming available, including shelving, carts, speed racks, ovens, and cooler/freezer equipment.
- EFS partners will be given early access to available equipment before items are auctioned or scrapped later this spring.
- bguyette@newrichmond.k12.wi.us

Somerset Food Pantry

- Somerset Community Food Pantry shared updates on expanding backpack program efforts and developing a new summer backpack food program for local students.
- The pantry is working closely with the school district to better understand unmet student need, including families eligible for free/reduced meals who may not currently be utilizing available services.
- Organizers are exploring surveys and additional outreach efforts to better understand family size, participation barriers, and how food is being distributed and utilized.
- Somerset Community Food Pantry recently joined the school district wellness committee to strengthen collaboration between schools, community organizations, and food access initiatives.
- Additional efforts discussed included expanding school and pantry garden initiatives, increasing access to healthy snacks, and strengthening nutrition-focused programming.

Key Takeaways

- The region continues to show strong collaboration, but systems are under strain
- Volunteer capacity is a critical vulnerability
- Participants discussed the growing need to better communicate and fund the true operational costs of running food access programs, beyond food alone.
- Data is a powerful tool but currently incomplete for full system costs
- Significant opportunity to:
    - Improve FoodShare access
    - Strengthen cross-sector coordination
    - Tell a more complete funding story