FoodShare Regional Discussion Meeting Minutes

Date: 5/11/2026
Location: St Croix Valley Food Bank (SVCFB)
Convened by: River Valley Charities (RVC), SCVFB, Hunger Prevention Council of Pierce County, Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin (FAEW)
Presenter: Brooklynn Gray, FAEW (Food Bank)
Facilitators: Andy Johnson (RVC), Brittany Mora (PCHPC), Sarah Fluegel (SCVFB)
Attendees: Listed at end of minutes

Meeting Purpose

The purpose of the meeting was to provide updates regarding significant FoodShare policy changes, discuss barriers community members experience when accessing FoodShare and related resources, and gather regional input on opportunities for collaboration and solutions.

FoodShare Outreach and Statewide Support Updates

Brooklynn Gray from Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin (FAEW) provided an update on statewide FoodShare outreach. She explained that after changes to statewide outreach contracts, FAEW stepped in to help ensure FoodShare education, support, and helpline services did not lapse.

Brooklynn shared that her team is currently supporting FoodShare outreach across Wisconsin, including all 72 counties and Indigenous communities. Services include helpline support, education, training, materials, and technical assistance for partners and community members.

Brooklynn also shared that FAEW is working toward establishing a new FoodShare outreach position based in the St. Croix Valley. The goal would be to have a trusted local person who understands the region, knows local resources, and can help build relationships directly within the community.

Major FoodShare Policy Changes

Brooklynn reviewed several significant FoodShare policy changes that have already begun taking effect or will be implemented soon. She emphasized that many of these changes are complex and may cause confusion for participants, applicants, and local service providers.

1. **Out-of-State Purchase Restrictions**

As of March 1, 2026, FoodShare participants must now call or register online if they plan to use their FoodShare card outside Wisconsin.

This may affect individuals and families who:

- Travel out of state
- Visit family
- Experience family emergencies
- Live near state borders
- Shop across state lines

Brooklynn noted that this change has already created confusion and barriers for some participants. Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin has been working with DHS to advocate for clearer communication and improved implementation.

2. **Expanded FoodShare Work Requirement**

Effective March 1, 2026, the FoodShare work requirement expanded significantly.

Key changes include:

- Age range for work requirement expanded
    - Previous: Ages 18–54
    - New: Ages 18–64
- Veteran exemption removed
    - Veterans are no longer automatically exempt from the work requirement.
- Former foster youth exemption removed
    - Individuals who were previously in foster care are no longer automatically exempt.
- Parent/caregiver exemption narrowed

- Previous: Exemption applied to households with minor children 17 and under.
- New: Exemption only applies to households with children age 13 or younger.

Brooklynn explained that this means many people who have never had to meet the FoodShare work requirement may now be screened for it during renewal. This includes retirees, people working part time, veterans, former foster youth, and families with children ages 14–17.

Participants discussed concern that some individuals may lose benefits simply because they do not understand the new rules, miss a renewal notice, or do not know what documentation or action is required.

Brooklynn also noted that loss of FoodShare can affect access to other connected programs, such as Summer EBT, because active FoodShare participation can automatically connect families to additional benefits. Without FoodShare, families may need to complete extra steps to access those supports.

3. **Refugee Eligibility Changes**

Brooklynn shared that additional FoodShare eligibility restrictions for certain refugee and immigrant populations are expected to take effect July 1, 2026.

Many individuals who currently qualify for FoodShare due to refugee-related eligibility categories may lose eligibility unless they:

- Are legal permanent residents who have met the five-year requirement, or
- Fall into limited remaining qualifying categories, such as Cuban or Haitian entrants or specific COFA-designated populations.

Brooklynn noted that Wisconsin is home to many individuals and families who came to the United States seeking safety due to conflict or crisis, including people from Afghanistan, Ukraine, and other countries. These changes may significantly affect families already receiving support.

Participants discussed the importance of clear communication, especially for mixed-status households. Brooklynn clarified that even if an adult loses eligibility, children or other household members with qualifying status may still be eligible.

Brooklynn also emphasized that current recipients should not renew early unnecessarily, as some may be able to maintain benefits until their next regular renewal.

4. **Proposed Restrictions on Soda, Candy, and Energy Drinks**

Brooklynn addressed recent state legislation related to potential FoodShare purchase restrictions.

The legislation allows Wisconsin to apply for a federal waiver that would restrict FoodShare purchases of:

- Soda
- Candy
- Energy drinks

Brooklynn clarified that this change is not currently in effect. Wisconsin must still submit the waiver to USDA, receive approval, and develop an implementation timeline. Retailers would also need time to update systems and processes.

Participants noted that some retailers and families are already confused, believing the restriction may already be active. Brooklynn emphasized that nothing has changed yet and that community partners will need to help communicate accurate information if and when implementation occurs.

Small Group Discussion

Participants broke into small groups to discuss two primary questions:

1. What are common myths, concerns, or reasons why individuals and families may not apply for FoodShare?
2. What supports or resources would help connect more people to FoodShare and other assistance programs?

Each group was asked to record notes so that responses could be compiled and shared after the meeting.

Common Barriers and Myths Identified

1. **Fear, Confusion, and Stigma**

Groups reported that many people believe the FoodShare application process is too difficult, too invasive, or not worth the effort. Others assume they will not qualify, especially if they have previously been denied.

Common concerns included:

- “Someone else needs it more than me.”

- “I probably won’t qualify.”
- “It is too hard to apply.”
- “I tried before and was denied.”
- “The benefit amount may not be worth the effort.”
- Fear of making a mistake
- Fear of government systems
- Embarrassment or stigma

Participants noted that stigma can be especially strong in rural communities, where people may worry about being recognized at the grocery store or being seen asking for help.

2. **Technology and Access Barriers**

Participants repeatedly identified technology as a major barrier. Many people who need assistance may not have reliable access to:

- A computer
- Internet
- A phone
- Email
- Transportation
- A private place to complete an application

This is especially difficult for people experiencing homelessness, older adults, people with low literacy, people with disabilities, and families already in crisis.

3. **Documentation and Verification Barriers**

Participants discussed how documentation requirements can quickly overwhelm applicants. Even when the requirements are reasonable from a program perspective, they can feel impossible to someone in crisis.

Barriers may include lack of access to:

- Identification
- Income verification

- Housing documentation
- Bank statements
- Prior addresses
- Transportation to obtain documents
- Technology to upload documents

Representatives from homeless services emphasized that people experiencing homelessness often lack the very documentation systems require.

Great Rivers Consortium later clarified that some misconceptions exist around documentation, including that homeless individuals with no income may not need as much documentation as people assume. Still, the perception and fear of documentation remain significant barriers.

4. **Homelessness-Specific Barriers**

Representatives from homeless service organizations shared that FoodShare access is especially difficult for shelter residents.

Common barriers included:

- Lack of phones/computers
- Lack of identification/documentation
- Limited transportation
- Low literacy or low comfort navigating systems
- Competing crisis needs
- Staff capacity limits

Shelter representatives also noted that some residents sell FoodShare benefits because they are receiving meals through the shelter and need immediate cash for other urgent needs. This raised concern about how benefit systems interact with real-life survival needs.

Participants emphasized that shelter staff are often expected to help clients navigate these systems, but capacity is limited.

5. **Rural Barriers**

Participants discussed how rural communities face unique challenges, including:

- Transportation gaps
- Limited broadband access
- Fewer in-person support locations
- Greater visibility and stigma
- Longer distances to county offices or required services
- Difficulty accessing drug testing, employment support, or documentation sites

Participants noted that even when resources technically exist, they may not be practically accessible.

6. **Immigrant, Refugee, and Non-English-Speaking Households**

Participants discussed additional barriers for immigrant and refugee families, including:

- Fear of government systems
- Concerns about confidentiality
- Language barriers
- Confusion around eligibility
- Mixed-status household concerns

Groups emphasized the importance of trusted messengers and culturally appropriate communication.

Suggested Solutions and Supports

Participants identified several opportunities to improve access.

1. **Local FoodShare Navigator or Trusted Point Person**

A consistent theme was the need for a local, trusted FoodShare navigator who could help people understand eligibility, apply, submit documentation, and renew benefits.

Participants felt this would be especially helpful if the person could be physically present in the community and available through trusted sites such as:

- Food pantries
- Shelters

- Schools
- Healthcare settings
- Public health offices
- Community events

The potential St. Croix Valley-based outreach position through Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin was seen as a promising opportunity.

2. **Scheduled Assistance at Food Pantries**

Participants suggested having someone available at food pantries on a regular schedule, such as once or twice per month, to help with FoodShare questions and applications.

This could include:

- Private application support
- Case review
- Document scanning
- Help calling Great Rivers Consortium
- Help understanding renewal letters
- Troubleshooting denied or reduced benefits

Food pantry representatives emphasized the importance of meeting people where they already are.

3. **Better Resource Materials and Outreach**

Participants discussed the need for clear, simple materials that can be shared across organizations.

Suggested outreach locations included:

- Schools
- Medical clinics
- Food pantries
- Churches
- Libraries

- Shelters
- Public health offices
- Community centers

Ideas included:

- Posters
- QR codes
- One-page eligibility guides
- “Where to start” handouts
- FoodShare myth-busting materials
- Multilingual resources
- Simple explanations of renewal dates and documentation requirements

4. **Better Use of 211 and FindHelp.org**

Several groups discussed 211 as a helpful but underutilized resource. Some participants were not familiar with it, which highlighted the need for continued education.

Brooklynn also noted that FindHelp.org may include some resources not listed in 211, especially smaller programs that may not meet 211 listing requirements.

Participants discussed the importance of making sure churches, schools, and small community organizations know where to direct people for help.

5. **Schools as Information Hubs**

Participants noted that schools are one of the best places to distribute information because they reach many families in one place.

Suggested school-based opportunities included:

- Sharing FoodShare updates with social workers
- Providing materials to school nurses
- Including FoodShare information in family communications
- Connecting FoodShare outreach to school nutrition and Summer EBT efforts

This was seen as especially important because families with children ages 14–17 may now be newly affected by the narrowed parent exemption.

6. **Healthcare and Public Health Settings**

Participants suggested that healthcare settings could help identify food insecurity and connect people to resources.

Ideas included:

- Posters in clinics
- QR codes for food assistance
- Resource referral sheets
- Screening questions
- Partnerships with nurse navigators or care coordinators

FSET Resource Sharing

Representatives from FSET shared that while they cannot directly enroll individuals in FoodShare, they can help reduce barriers.

Support may include:

- Looking at a case and helping identify why someone is not receiving FoodShare
- Helping scan and submit documents
- Helping complete change reports
- Assisting with calls to Great Rivers Consortium
- Sitting at food pantries periodically to answer questions
- Helping people connect to FoodShare Employment and Training once enrolled

FSET support may include:

- Gas cards
- Job search support
- Interview support
- Employment-related assistance

- Case management

Participants noted that FSET can be valuable but is only available to people with an active FoodShare case, which creates challenges for individuals who lose benefits.

Great Rivers Consortium Update

A representative from Great Rivers Consortium provided additional clarification about FoodShare administration in the region.

Great Rivers Consortium serves 10 counties and includes:

- 12 managers
- 15 lead workers
- 103 economic support workers

The representative shared that Great Rivers answered approximately 150,000 calls in 2025.

Key points included:

- Great Rivers is the regional call center for FoodShare-related support.
- Applicants are encouraged to apply as soon as possible to protect their filing date.
- Once an application is submitted, participants generally have 30 days to provide verification.
- Documentation can be submitted in multiple ways, including mail, fax, online upload, or drop-off at local agencies.
- If documentation is incomplete or insufficient, staff attempt to follow up and clarify what is still needed.

The representative also emphasized that there is misinformation about the call center and eligibility process. While wait times can exist, the average answer time may be shorter than many people assume.

Data and Regional Trends

Participants referenced the importance of using data to better understand regional FoodShare trends, including participation levels before, during, and after the COVID-era benefit changes.

Handouts and data were shared related to:

- County-level FoodShare participation
- COVID-era emergency allotments
- The unwinding process
- Return to regular renewal procedures
- Participation changes from 2018 through 2025

Participants noted that reliable data may help the group better understand where benefit loss is occurring and where outreach may be most needed.

Community Needs Questions

Participants were also asked to complete community needs questions on the back of the agenda. Brooklynn shared that these responses would be compiled to help Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin and regional partners better understand local needs, resource gaps, and concerns across the service area.

These responses will be shared back with the group after they are compiled.

Key Themes from the Meeting

Several themes emerged throughout the meeting:

1. FoodShare rules are changing quickly, and community partners need clear, accurate information.
2. Many people may lose benefits due to confusion, documentation barriers, or lack of awareness rather than true ineligibility.
3. Rural communities face unique access challenges, especially around transportation, technology, and stigma.
4. People experiencing homelessness face some of the most significant barriers to FoodShare access.
5. Trusted local navigators could make a major difference.
6. Schools, pantries, shelters, clinics, churches, and public health agencies are critical communication points.

7. Regional collaboration through EFS can help reduce duplication, share resources, and strengthen access across counties.

Next Steps

The following next steps were identified:

1. Compile small group notes
    - Brooklynn will compile notes from table discussions and community needs responses.
2. Share compiled responses
    - Notes and themes will be shared with meeting participants.
3. Continue the regional conversation
    - Participants expressed interest in reconvening to review findings and discuss next steps.
4. Explore a smaller leadership group
    - A core group may meet to discuss the future structure, role, and direction of the EFS collaboration.
5. Continue building EFS as a regional convening space
    - RVC, Pierce County Public Health, St. Croix Valley Food Bank, Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin, and other partners will continue exploring how EFS can support cross-county coordination.
6. Support local outreach efforts
    - Partners will continue looking for opportunities to distribute FoodShare information, connect people to support, and reduce application barriers.

Attendees

Sue Galoff	HPC Board and Elmwood Pantry
Miranda Lutz	Polk County Public Health
Helen Swanson	Polk County Public Health
Kay Briles	Baldwin Community Food Pantry

Russ Hammer	Grantsburg Area Food Shelf
Bob & Gwen Huebel	Elmwood Food Pantry
Amy Richter	Pierce Pepin WIC
Mary Weller	River Valley Charities
Olivia Braaten	FSET- CW Solutions
Kathy Wochomurka	FSET- CW Solutions
Anamarie Schell	Fresh Harvest / Operation HELP
Tricia Trowbridge	UW Valleys
Shelly Smith	Our Neighbors'' Place
Chrissy Cook	The Open Cupboard
Dave Doskey	Grantsburg Area Food Shelf
Rebecca Tomasek	Peirce County Public Health
Jennifer Salaba	Grace Place
Grechen Westphal	Grace Place
Marie Magnan	Prescott Backpack Program
Melissa McCarthy	West Cap
Candice Anderson	River Falls Food Pantry
Amy Clay	Grace Place
Mary Williams	Somerset Food Pantry
Jodi Murphy	Somerset Food Pantry
Brittany Mora	Pierce County Public Health
Heather Prigge	SCC Public Health
Jaime DeSmit	St Croix Valley Food Alliance
Daric Snyder	Hunger Prevention Council Peirce County
Katy Ellefson	HealthPartners
Heidi Albarado	Pierce County Food Pantry