



Iowa Healthy Eating Active Living Partnership Strategic Plan 2023



Authors and Acknowledgements

The 2023 Iowa Healthy Eating Active Living (Iowa HEAL) Partnership Strategic Plan was developed by Iowa Department of Health and Human Services in collaboration with a network of statewide partners engaged in improving Iowa's food and nutrition environment.

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Purpose of the Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Plan

Poor nutrition is a leading cause of morbidity in the U.S. and is associated with increased risk of chronic disease, such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease.¹ These diet-related chronic diseases, as well as food and nutrition insecurity, disproportionately affect people with lower incomes, people living in rural communities, people from racial and ethnic minority groups and other underserved populations.² Addressing these issues requires coordinated and comprehensive approaches across all sectors to support healthy behaviors where people are born, live, learn, work, play and worship. [Policy, systems and environmental \(PSE\) change strategies](#) are broad public health approaches that support healthy behaviors and address influences that go beyond the individual.³

The Iowa Healthy Eating Active Living (Iowa HEAL) Partnership convenes partner organizations from across the state to work together on ensuring all Iowans are food and nutrition secure. The group fosters collaboration, sharing and open communication, and uses data-driven decision-making to advance effective solutions to improve food and nutrition policies, systems and environments throughout Iowa.

The purpose of this plan is to achieve improved food and nutrition security for all Iowans through actionable PSE change strategies for the Iowa HEAL Partnership to implement collaboratively.



Defining Food and Nutrition Security



FOOD SECURITY is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as having access to enough food for an active, healthy life at all times. At a minimum, food security includes 1) readily available nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and 2) the ability to acquire those foods in a socially acceptable way.¹



NUTRITION SECURITY is defined by the USDA as all Americans having consistent access to the safe, healthy and affordable foods essential to optimal health and well-being. Nutrition security builds on food security by focusing on how the quality of our diets can help reduce diet-related diseases. It also emphasizes equity in tackling long-standing health disparities.¹

What are Policy, Systems and Environmental Changes?

Policy, systems and environmental (PSE) change strategies are designed to promote healthy behaviors by making healthy choices readily available and easily accessible in the community.

Policy changes use laws, rules, ordinances and regulations to make an impact on health.

Systems changes modify the infrastructure within an organization or community to promote healthy behaviors.

Environmental changes involve changes to the economic, social or physical environment to promote healthy choices.

WHAT DO PSE CHANGES LOOK LIKE?

Policy

- Establish a policy to encourage healthy vending
- Establish a policy that employees can purchase healthy foods at a discounted price
- Implement the World Health Organization's 10 Steps to Successful Breastfeeding and become a baby-friendly hospital
- Establish an incentive program for employees for healthy behaviors

Systems

- Form a wellness committee to encourage partnership and collaboration between departments
- Promote a reporting system for health data with shared data points and develop targeted interventions
- Include food and nutrition insecurity questions during patient intake
- Implement a produce prescription program

Environment

- Water bottle filling stations
- Signage for walking routes
- Availability of healthy options in the cafeteria
- Onsite food pantry or donation-based garden



How Groups Can Use this Strategic Plan



Learn from others who are doing similar work.



Align efforts to address food and nutrition insecurity.



Share data and successes.



Cross-promote resources and ideas.



Contribute to a shared message.

Background and Introduction

The Iowa HEAL Partnership, previously known as Iowa Nutrition Network Partnership, is a collaborative network of Iowa local and state partners who develop, lead, implement and evaluate nutrition programming and projects. For the past 20 years, the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (Iowa HHS) has led the Iowa HEAL Partnership. Iowa HHS is one of two SNAP-Ed implementing agencies in Iowa. This group also serves as Iowa's State Nutrition Action Council (SNAC). The USDA Food and Nutrition Service requires each state to establish a SNAC or similar group to align nutrition education and obesity prevention activities across USDA Food and Nutrition Service programs, and in particular, SNACs focus on improving food and nutrition security.



Iowa HEAL Partnership members meet regularly to share ideas, strategies, information, accomplishments and challenges around food and nutrition security. In 2022, Iowa HHS was one of nine states to receive a grant from the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors as part of the newly established State Partnerships Improving Nutrition Equity (SPINE) program. The purpose of the SPINE program is to address food and nutrition security through sustainable and equitable actions that tackle economic and social conditions limiting food and nutrition security across the lifespan. This is achieved through building sustainable partnerships, programs and services, particularly in communities that may be at higher risk. As part of the SPINE program and to meet the USDA's aim for SNACs, Iowa HEAL members sought to develop a strategic plan that included food and nutrition security goals and objectives for the state of Iowa.

IOWA HEAL PARTNERSHIP MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENT MULTIPLE SECTORS

Agricultural Organizations | Cooperative Extension | Food Banks | Government Programs and Agencies

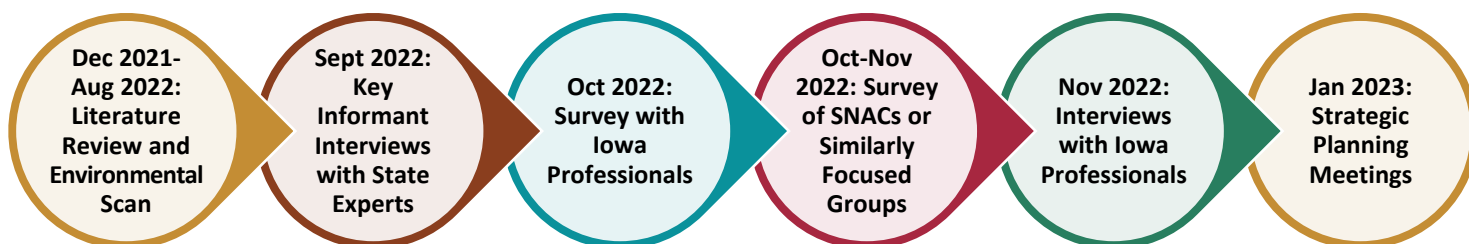
Nonprofit Organizations | Public Health Organizations | Universities

Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Planning Process

The Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Plan was developed through a multi-step, collaborative process. First, a robust environmental scan was conducted to identify best practices in addressing food and nutrition security and deepen Iowa HEAL members' understanding of current food security research and strategies, where there are gaps and opportunities, as well as identify approaches for consideration for the State of Iowa. The group obtained input for this plan from more than 100 contributors representing various sectors of the food system to aid in the development of priority goals and strategies. The four major activities conducted to inform the Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Plan are described below.

- **Grey literature search and environmental scan.**
Identified national best practices in addressing food and nutrition insecurity through PSE change projects, as well as collaborative approaches such as food policy councils, SNACs and guidance documents such as food charters and plans.
- **Key informant interviews with state-level experts.**
Provided a deeper understanding of current food security work prioritized by food policy councils, SNACs and food charter and plan contributors across the country, where there are gaps and opportunities, as well as strategies for consideration for Iowa HHS.
- **Survey of SNAP-Ed implementing and state agencies.**
Identified the type of organizations participating on SNACs or similarly focused groups and their priority goals, joint initiatives, resources and strategies to address food and nutrition insecurity.
- **Survey and interviews with Iowa public health and healthcare professionals.**
Revealed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to supporting equitable food and nutrition security throughout the Iowa food system.

In January 2023, Iowa HHS engaged a cohort of partners that comprise the Iowa HEAL Partnership to create the detailed and actionable statewide strategic plan utilizing the findings from the literature review and environmental scan, various surveys and key informant interviews. Over the course of two, full day facilitated planning sessions, Iowa HEAL Partnership strategic planning team members discussed and documented mission and vision statements, measurable goals and actionable strategies to achieve those goals.



Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Plan Evaluation

The Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Plan prioritizes a renewed focus on PSE changes to improve food and nutrition security in Iowa. The strategic plan details overarching goals and strategies for key partners to contribute to and achieve. The Iowa HEAL Partnership has committed to tracking the progress of strategic plan activities. Members will evaluate and report progress made on strategic plan goals and objectives on an annual basis. Additionally, every three years, Iowa HHS will lead a review to ensure goals and strategies are still relevant and will update the plan accordingly. A full strategic planning process will be conducted every five years to address Iowa's most pressing food and nutrition security needs. Furthermore, the next iteration of the Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Plan will incorporate physical activity.

How are organizations collaborating to influence the Iowa food system?

The USDA defines food systems as complex networks that include all the inputs and outputs associated with agricultural and food production and consumption. Food systems can vary by region and over time. In Iowa, key organizations are working collaboratively to maximize their efforts to influence the food system and achieve food and nutrition security for all Iowans.

In addition to reflecting current research and experiences of partners and experts, the Iowa HEAL Partnership Strategic Plan is designed to align closely with the goals and strategies of the Iowa Food Plan, which is being updated in 2023. Iowa HHS is working in close collaboration with the Iowa Food System Coalition, the group leading the effort to update the Iowa Food Plan, by contributing to the Food, Nutrition and Health section of the plan.



Adapted from: Arizona Food Systems Network. <https://www.azfsn.org>.

Vision, Mission and Guiding Principles of the Iowa HEAL Partnership

Vision

Every Iowan has equitable access to affordable, nutritious and culturally relevant foods.

Mission

Iowa HEAL Partnership supports food and nutrition security for all Iowans by cultivating statewide networks of partners to leverage resources, support innovation and maximize impact. Iowa HEAL Partnership amplifies the voices of those experiencing food and nutrition insecurity, centers decision-making around those with lived experiences and works to reduce barriers and improve access to food and nutrition resources statewide.

Guiding Principles

- **Data-Driven:** Iowa HEAL Partnership makes informed, data-driven, research and evidence-based decisions to drive quality and improve results.
- **Accountability:** Iowa HEAL Partnership uses public resources responsibly to improve lives through the programs and services we provide.
- **Integrity:** Iowa HEAL Partnership generates trust through honest, respectful and reliable work that members can be proud of.
- **Equity:** Iowa HEAL Partnership actively identifies and removes barriers to access and inclusion so that all Iowans have an opportunity to succeed.
- **Communication:** Iowa HEAL Partnership communicates in a thoughtful and coordinated way to ensure Iowans are well-informed about the group's work.
- **Collaboration:** Iowa HEAL Partnership facilitates meaningful partnerships that focus on the voices of the individuals and communities served.
- **Evaluation:** Iowa HEAL Partnership is committed to continuing dialogue, analysis and modification of the group's mission and work plan as needs change and progress is made toward achieving goals.
- **Transparency and Openness:** Iowa HEAL Partnership believes in the importance of transparency and the public sharing of accurate, complete data and statistics, minutes and other materials in a manner that is clear and open to the public.
- **Inclusivity:** Iowa HEAL Partnership welcomes the views and contributions of all Iowans. Iowa HEAL Partnership seeks equitable member representation across the state and among diverse population groups.

Lived experience refers to an individual's human experiences, choices and options and how those factors influence one's knowledge based on one's own life.⁴ Engaging people with lived experience is a vital step in advancing equity.

Goals & Strategies

Goal #1:

Expand partnerships and maximize engagement with various sectors influencing the food system

Why is this important?

Researchers suggest applying a systems approach to address food insecurity since numerous policies and programs already exist but have not been fully coordinated to achieve maximum benefit. To design coordinated approaches with aligned goals, it is important to understand how whole systems work and how individual approaches function within the larger system.⁵ Engaging interested groups and establishing partnerships with organizations from across the food system (at the state, local and regional level) plays a key role in addressing food and nutrition security,



STRATEGIES

- Build relationships with local-level partners throughout the state.
- Engage partners in advocating for equitable legislation that would improve the access and affordability of food for all Iowans.
- Foster authentic engagement of partners and broaden engagement to include the voices of different cultural and demographic groups (including Tribal populations) and geographic locations (including rural communities) to identify solutions to food and nutrition insecurity that best meet the needs of all Iowans.
- Strengthen partnerships with the healthcare sector and assistance programs (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid, child care assistance, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance) and create linkages to nutrition professionals and resources to improve food and nutrition security and reduce risk of chronic conditions.
- Provide opportunities for education and professional development focused on how policy, systems and environmental changes impact the food system.
- Collaborate with partners across the Iowa Food System Coalition that implement strategies from the Iowa Food Plan that align with the Iowa HEAL Partnership priorities.

Goal #2:

Center the lived experience of populations who are impacted by food and nutrition insecurity in decision-making

Why is this important?

People with lived experience are those directly affected by a policy or public health issue and the strategies that aim to address those issues. They are critical partners in designing, implementing and evaluating research and programs.⁴ Iowa HEAL Partnership aims to learn from people with lived experience and the communities served before developing and implementing programs to reduce barriers and improve access to food and nutrition resources. Improving the understanding of food insecurity among these diverse populations will help to design effective interventions and approaches to address well-known health disparities.

STRATEGIES

- Identify and address barriers to food and nutrition security and access to services experienced by lowans statewide.
- Gather input about factors that influence food decision-making, access and preferences from priority audiences of all backgrounds (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, income, geographic location) to guide collective work.
- Establish or enhance nutrition and food services and programs in a variety of food system settings (e.g., hospitals, clinics, grocery stores, worksites, schools).

Goal #3:

Use data purposefully to guide decision-making and demonstrate outcomes

Why is this important?

Data helps to understand key issues and causes of a problem, provides evidence for recommendations and prioritizes actions to adapt and improve conditions. Decision makers, members of the community and partners can utilize data to identify communities with the greatest need, which groups are most affected, the organizations that are best positioned to address those needs, and how funding can be equitably distributed to support efforts.⁶ Data are also essential for demonstrating collective impact, where partners from different sectors commit to a shared agenda for solving a complex problem. Partners can use a shared measurement system to ensure efforts are aligned, to track progress in the same way, to hold one another accountable and to learn from one another's successes.⁷



STRATEGIES

- Coordinate and build upon existing food and nutrition needs assessment processes, including engaging new partners (e.g., healthcare, local public health, universities).
- Establish or improve systems to collect, coordinate, share and distribute data that can collectively inform collection processes and measure the need, progress and outcomes of food and nutrition activities.
- Work with partners, individuals and families with lived experience to interpret data and make informed decisions.

Goal #4:

Support innovation of new approaches and streamlined efforts to expand the reach and impact of statewide and local activities working in sectors that influence the food system

Why is this important?

Food and nutrition insecurity is a complex issue that will take a coordinated approach to solve. Researchers recommend implementing innovative local and state programs, taking new approaches and considering new research to better understand how food systems behave and their effects.⁵ While a variety of entities across the U.S. are working to address food and nutrition insecurity and associated health outcomes through innovative grassroots efforts to large-scale national-level initiatives and governmental programs, a shared approach to accomplish change is more effective than working independently.⁸ Therefore, developing strong partnerships that leverage resources and coordinate efforts is essential for achieving change.

STRATEGIES

- Collaborate with a variety of partners to share and cross-promote resources, projects, ideas and needs.
- Pilot, implement and evaluate projects and approaches to identify best practices.
- Leverage skills and funding to increase capacity and impact through the use of creative, best-practice approaches.
- Use a whole community approach to ensure that all programs and projects are inclusive and engage multiple sectors.

Goal #5:

Educate and inform various audiences in Iowa about the importance of food and nutrition

Why is this important?

One of the five pillars of the White House's *National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health*⁹ is to empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices. The strategy supports robust and tailored nutrition education and encourages investing in public health campaigns that are culturally appropriate and resonate with specific communities. According to the *National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health*, "education related to healthy eating is even more effective when it is grounded in cultural understanding." To implement successful strategies, it is important to build local capacity through community workshops, technical assistance and training.¹⁰



STRATEGIES

- Work with advocacy organizations to establish a shared message to be used to educate and inform lowans and decision-makers on nutrition and food security.
- Utilize existing resources to create new messaging that is tailored to specific audiences that can effectively inform and educate lowans related to food and nutrition projects and services.
- Provide relevant nutrition education that can realistically be implemented by lowans who are at increased risk for food and nutrition insecurity.

Call to Action

Addressing food and nutrition security throughout the state of Iowa will require the coordinated efforts of numerous organizations across the food system. Together, we can address food and nutrition security by working collaboratively, engaging a broader representation of partners and those with lived experience and aligning efforts with one another to maximize impact.



Determine Which Goals Your Organization Will Support

Identify the priority goals and strategies best suited for your organization to support. The Iowa HEAL Partnership can leverage your experience and expertise with goals or strategies that align with your organization's focus. Once engaged, join a workgroup to help complete the activities and advance the goals outlined in this plan.



Collaborate with Others Doing Similar Work

Connect with a variety of partners to share and cross-promote resources, projects, ideas and needs. Prioritize establishing and strengthening partnerships across the different sectors of the food system. Collaborate with USDA funded programs and other state, regional and local initiatives that address food and nutrition security such as WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, summer feeding sites, SNAP-Ed, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, 5-2-1-0 Healthy Choices Count!, senior meal program, Double Up Food Bucks and Produce Rx. Further develop a collaborative network of partners across the food system such as colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations and local food growers and distributors.



Share Data and Resources

Increase data accessibility among key partners, populations served and collaborators through informal updates at meetings and gatherings, developing and disseminating publications, creating a shared measurement system or entering into data sharing agreements. Share successes, challenges and creative or innovative solutions with your colleagues across the state. Findings and lessons learned can maximize data-driven decision making, advance equity and be used to improve programs and interventions.



Stay Connected

Plan to attend Iowa HEAL Partnership regular meetings to stay abreast of the work partners are doing in this area to advance the goals and strategies outlined in this plan. Share updates with your partners on a regular basis. Contact the Iowa HHS team with questions, ideas or updates, and visit the Iowa HHS website for annual updates on progress made on the goals outlined in this plan.

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