

Introduction

This project was initiated in direct response to the *Resilient Food Systems* research conducted in the spring of 2025 by Courtney Long and Lisa Bates of the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Food Systems Team. That research identified key vulnerabilities and opportunities within Greenville County's food system and highlighted the need for stronger coordination, communication, and preparedness across sectors during times of crisis. Building on those findings, LiveWell Greenville and its Food Security Coalition partners launched a series of four convenings focused on developing an Emergency Food Response Action Circle, an Emergency Food Plan, and an accompanying Emergency Food Response Directory.

To inform this work, the team reviewed extensive qualitative data collected through three focus groups involving 59 participants and nine in-depth interviews with an additional 23 participants. These sessions engaged a broad cross-section of the community, including city and county government representatives, community advocates, farmers, food businesses, nonprofit organizations, schools and state agencies.

Through these collaborative discussions, participants revisited the research findings, identified shared goals, and outlined specific action steps to strengthen Greenville County's emergency food response capacity. The group also prioritized immediate "quick wins" to build momentum and allocated \$22,500 in project funding to support initial implementation efforts.

This report summarizes the outcomes of those convenings, including the structure of the Emergency Food Response Action Circle, the priorities identified for ongoing coordination, and the foundational steps taken to ensure a more resilient and equitable emergency food response during disasters.

Context

LiveWell Greenville's Food Security Coalition is a cross-sector coalition that convenes more than 50 partners in a collaborative model focused on aligning community efforts, leveraging shared resources and promoting equitable access to resources. Over the past decade, LiveWell has become a trusted convener and backbone organization for countywide initiatives addressing food access, health equity and systems change.

In recent years, the importance of this collaborative infrastructure has been underscored by increasing disruptions and their impact on Greenville's food system. In the fall of 2024, Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, power outages and infrastructure damage across Greenville County which disrupted local food access and distribution.

Extended power outages—some lasting up to two weeks—led to significant food spoilage in homes, grocery stores, restaurants and food pantries. Transportation barriers and downed communication systems left many rural and low-income neighborhoods temporarily isolated from resources. Nonprofit and faith-based organizations worked quickly to meet urgent food needs, but the response also revealed gaps in coordination and communication among agencies. While the Greenville community is resourceful and quick to mobilize in crisis, a more formalized and connected emergency food infrastructure is needed to ensure equitable, efficient response and recovery in future disasters.

Building on this momentum, LiveWell Greenville partnered with the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Food Systems Team to translate research insights into actionable strategies. The resulting series of convenings brought together diverse partners to co-design an Emergency Food

Response Action Circle and to begin formalizing a countywide Emergency Food Response Plan—laying the foundation for a stronger, more resilient food system for Greenville County.

Project Activities and Outcomes

Coalition partners prioritized one central action step: to build organizational commitments and protocols culminating in a comprehensive Emergency Food Plan that aligns with existing community food efforts and ensures a community-centered response and recovery process.

To achieve this, LiveWell Greenville’s Food Security Coalition convened a four-part series of facilitated work sessions designed to establish the structure and collaborative processes for a new Emergency Food Response Action Circle. This group will serve as the central coordinating body for Greenville County’s emergency food response.

Meeting 1—Project Launch and Emergency Food Response Directory Development

The first convening introduced the project’s goals and outlined the vision for a coordinated emergency food response system. Participants worked collaboratively to begin developing an Emergency Food Response Directory, capturing contact information, resources and service capacities for partners.

Meeting 2—Tabletop Exercise: Defining Roles in Crisis

The second session featured a tabletop exercise facilitated by Greenville County Emergency Management simulating a hypothetical disaster scenario. This activity allowed participants to test and clarify their organizational roles in preparedness, response and recovery. The exercise revealed both strengths and gaps in communication channels, coordination protocols and resource deployment, providing valuable insights for refining the emerging Emergency Food Response Plan.

Meeting 3—Defining the Action Circle Framework

The third convening focused on formalizing the structure and purpose of the Emergency Food Action Circle. Through a facilitated session, participants confirmed the group’s vision and values, agreed upon shared operating principles and delineated roles and responsibilities for each participating organization.

Meeting 4—Disaster Simulation and Next Steps

The final convening was a disaster simulation exercise designed to test organizational practices and communication protocols under realistic conditions. The exercise helped confirm operational processes, identify areas for improvement and clarify next steps for finalizing the Emergency Food Response Plan. The simulation happened just a few weeks before Tropical Storm Imelda, providing an unexpected opportunity to apply lessons learned in a real-world context (although fortunately, Tropical Storm Imelda ended up redirecting back out to sea). While the plan remains in development, participants noted that the community entered this event significantly more organized, connected and prepared than in previous disasters.

Wins

- Creation of an initial Emergency Food Response Directory connecting local food access organizations with emergency management and disaster response partners.

- Development of an early-stage draft of the Greenville County Emergency Food Response Plan with clear next steps for refinement and implementation.
- Strengthened cross-sector relationships and improved understanding of how emergency management systems function and how community food partners can effectively integrate within them.
- Successful participation in a mini real-life simulation during Tropical Storm Imelda, demonstrating improved organization, communication, and shared leadership.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

- Inclusive coalition-building and decision-making take time. The diversity of perspectives and priorities within the room—while essential for equity—also required careful facilitation to balance dialogue with action.
- Cross-sector communication requires “level setting.” Emergency management professionals and food system practitioners often use different terminology and operate within different frameworks, necessitating intentional translation and shared understanding.

Next Steps

- Convene an Emergency Food Action Circle on a regular basis with topic-specific work groups such as food distribution and emergency preparedness training.
- Invest in two-way radios to ensure coordination when cellular and online communication fails.
- Seek funding for food resiliency hubs with backup power sources that can serve as storage, staging and distribution centers during emergencies.
- Maintain and regularly update the Emergency Food Response Directory to ensure accuracy and readiness.
- Continue to build out and test the Emergency Food Response Plan, refining roles, protocols and communication flows through ongoing simulation exercises.