The last two years have forced us to rethink “business as usual” in the charitable food system. COVID-19, natural disasters, racial equity, and now rising inflation have shaken up how we think and our approach to food security. We are excited to share with you four new strategic pillars that shape our mission to increase food security for our neighbors.

**FEED**
Provide our neighbors facing food insecurity with reliable access to enough food.
Families facing food insecurity frequently face difficult choices between eating and paying other bills—rent, medical care, childcare, and utility bills. We can help our neighbors have one less difficult choice by providing regular access to healthy food.

**NOURISH**
Support neighbors in making healthy choices and improving diet quality.
Addressing food insecurity is more complex than targeting hunger alone. We must also work to ensure every family has access to a balanced, nutritious diet. People with nourishing diets have better health outcomes, higher educational achievement, and overall well-being.

**EMPOWER**
Connect neighbors with community resources to address the root causes of food insecurity.
Poverty and food insecurity are intimately linked. Until we address the root causes of hunger, like poverty, we will not achieve food security for everyone. As a trusted community partner, we can refer people to additional resources, including mental health care, energy assistance, and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

**UNITE**
Inspire people and partners to take action to advance food security in Iowa.
Hunger exists in every community and can feel like an overwhelming problem. When we team up, we can make a lasting difference at the local, state, and national levels. We are amazed by the countless ways people continually come together to help their neighbors.
Inside the North English Community Center, a group of seniors gathers around two long tables chatting. You can hear laughter as they watch two young boys crawl under the tables pretending to be dogs. Among this group is Jim. Wearing a plaid shirt under a pair of denim overalls, all he needs is a feed store hat to look like he walked out of an old tractor sales ad. Further down the table, three women sit swapping stories about their grandchildren and comparing notes on their recent doctor’s visits.

After working his whole life, Jim has finally retired and now lives on a fixed income. With the rising cost of groceries and gas, he struggles to make ends meet each month. A rural community, North English has one small grocery store, and the closest major grocery retailer is 45 minutes away. Jim talks about how his kids aren’t able to help him much because they work long hours at the Whirlpool plant and still struggle with their own bills.

One of the women was recently diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, and her doctor wants her to eat more produce. She looks to her friends for help finding good sales on produce, and they are all facing the same challenge. Living alone on a fixed income makes it hard to buy fresh fruits and vegetables when you know you can’t finish the package before it goes bad.

Nationally, 6.8% of seniors don’t have reliable access to enough food. In Iowa, more than half a million seniors in our communities are food insecure. The increase in grocery prices and fuel hits seniors harder when they rely on a fixed income like Social Security. There is no wiggle room for milk to get more expensive.

HACAP teamed up with Heritage Agency on Aging to help seniors like Jim. At senior dining sites around East Central Iowa, HACAP is hosting pop-up produce pantries. Once a month, seniors can grab all the fresh produce they need from the pantry. Our program coordinator shops for the fruits and vegetables to select which items look best for each pantry. In North English, sweet potatoes, mini cucumbers, small oranges, and tomatoes are favorites. During set up for the second pantry at North English, Jim told the program coordinator, “I don’t have to worry about trying to get food anymore. It’s right here for me.”

Making fresh, nutritious food accessible to seniors means one less worry for them. They won’t have to choose between buying their medications and a healthy diet.

### Connecting Families to the Help They Need

Too many of our neighbors live paycheck to paycheck, leaving them vulnerable to financial shocks from catastrophic events — like the COVID-19 pandemic, a recession, natural disaster, or job loss — to smaller ones, such as unexpected car repairs or medical bills. Food is often the first item to be sacrificed when a household’s resources are strained. Emergency meals and support help provide the stability people need as they work to get back on their feet.

While providing food is important, we want to make sure our neighbors have access to crucial resources, so they can improve their long-term well-being.

Addressing social determinants of health is one way we can help empower our neighbors to succeed. Social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age that shape health. They include factors like socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, and social support networks, as well as access to health care. By looking holistically at family needs we can help connect them with appropriate resources to reduce stressors and remove obstacles to long-term food security.

Food Reservoir Connections helps families connect to local resources with a primary focus on mental health care. After meeting with a social worker, individuals and families are referred for additional services like mental health care, Medicaid, SNAP, food pantries, energy assistance, WIC, and other social service organizations. By connecting families with additional resources, we empower them to improve their food security and overall wellness.

We couldn’t think of anyone better to share how this program works than the neighbors who have been impacted-
Making Healthy Choices Easy and Accessible for Every Community

Clients visiting food pantries often receive the same foods week after week. It is easy to get stuck in a rut of knowing what to prepare for different meals and snacks without getting tired of the same foods. By working with Healthy Food Access Specialist Brianna Montross, Southeast Linn Community Center created a display of common foods at the food pantry and shared ideas on using them in new ways. Recently they shared ways to use raisins and dried figs by putting them in oatmeal, bran flakes, energy bites, salads, and more. Using the materials provided by Brianna and the food from HACAP, they provided healthy snack and meal options to their community.

Behind the scenes, Southeast Linn Community Center is also working on policies to ensure a healthy food environment that focuses on nutrition and food safety. They also want to create a more accessible picture menu so that more neighbors feel empowered to make healthy choices that they like.

Too often, the charitable food system treats neighbors visiting food pantries as less deserving of high-quality food. HACAP wants to make sure all our neighbors receive delicious, nutrient-rich, and diverse foods to eat. Our neighbors know how to get creative, and we want to tap into that wisdom.

Southeast Linn Community Center promotes sharing lived experiences through recipes. They encourage their neighbors to give feedback on what they made with the food pantry foods and highlight a new idea each week on the top of their food menu.

Working with partners like Southeast Linn Community Center and ISU Extension and Outreach gives HACAP more opportunities to make healthy food accessible to all our neighbors.

“I come because I need supplies for my daughter ... with COVID, we don’t have a lot of jobs ... we only have three or four days working,” Paola Peña said, about why she comes the mobile pantry.

“Food is special for my family,” she said, looking at her daughter, Victoria. “She’s happy, then I’m happy too,” Paola said.

When asked about what she likes about her mom, Victoria said, “She plays with me, she cooks with me, and she also writes with me, and she also paints with me because she doesn’t know how to draw. So, I always teach her how to draw because she doesn’t draw that much.” Paola laughed.

“I learn with you and you learn with me, yeah?” Paola said, smiling at Victoria. “Yeah!” Victoria said.

Tony was going through a difficult time when he heard about Food Reservoir Connections. He decided to visit Urban Dreams, the food pantry at LADD Library, where he met Connections social worker Monica.

He decided to talk to Monica about how he felt and everything going on in his life. He had been diagnosed with anxiety in the past, but after losing his job and health insurance, he couldn’t afford to continue treatment. Monica helped him apply for Medicaid and SNAP.

“She referred me to the Opportunity Center, where they helped me update my resume,” Tony exclaimed.

Tony remembers a day, “When I felt lost and desperate, and I didn’t know who to turn to; I remembered that Monica had given me information about Linn County Mental Health Access Center.” The Access Center helped him clear his head and find a therapist that he could see regularly.

Now, Tony is working again. He appreciates the support he got through connections, “and now, when I know that someone needs help, I always recommend them to call HACAP so that they can receive the support they need.”
When Denise Johnson volunteers at her neighborhood food pantry every week, she carries on a family tradition. Her mother, Phyllis, volunteered at the pantry every Wednesday for 20 years. Today, Phyllis lives in a memory care unit and struggles to recall moments in her life, including her decades at the pantry. As a volunteer, Denise honors her mother’s legacy. “They remember her here,” she said, “I feel like I’m following in her footsteps.” Her parents mentored her to become a volunteer once she retired. Her father, Don, volunteered too, helping annually with holiday fundraising and distributions. After working in respiratory therapy for 47 years, Denise retired in September 2021. Working through 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic was “the most rewarding and difficult time of my career,” she said.

As a volunteer, she assists her neighbors as they shop the client choice pantry. She loves to see the smiles on their faces as they do their own grocery shopping, “which is a fundamental thing that we all get to do,” she said, “I live in the community, and I knew I wanted to do something to support my neighbors” she said. “Hunger is here, and it’s in every community.”

When you volunteer with HACAP Food Reservoir, you’re supporting access to nutritious food today, and you’re building community power to eliminate hunger for good.

Be part of a committed group of people working to end hunger. There are opportunities to volunteer almost every day and in ways that fit with how you want to help — whether that’s packing food at our warehouse, distributing nutritious food in your community or making phone calls from the comfort of your home.

To sign up now, visit www.hacap.org/volunteer.

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