

Together at the Table

Mobilizing for Food Security in Southern Ocean County

A High Level Report on the Convening to Create a Community Blueprint



This is an adapted, high-level recap, summarized from the full report, originally created by **The Br'Island Group** in July 2026.

Executive Summary

Southern Ocean County does not lack committed organizations.

It lacks the coordinated infrastructure necessary to ensure that every resident has reliable, dignified, and equitable access to healthy food.

That conclusion emerged consistently throughout *Together at the Table*, a July 15, 2026 convening hosted by the Grunin Foundation and Fulfill, and facilitated by The Br'Island Group, to mobilize collective action around food insecurity and persistent geographic disparities in food access. More than one hundred leaders from food providers, healthcare, government, philanthropy, business, faith communities, and civic organizations came together to explore a central question: **How might Southern Ocean County work together differently to ensure equitable access to healthy food?**

Although participants represented diverse organizations and perspectives, they repeatedly reached the same conclusion: the greatest opportunity lies not in creating additional programs, but in strengthening the relationships and systems connecting those already serving the community. That conclusion reflects the philosophy behind the partnership between Fulfill and the Grunin Foundation. Fulfill recognizes that ending hunger requires addressing the conditions that shape food security, while the Grunin Foundation has increasingly focused on strengthening community capacity, collaboration, and equity. Together, they created the convening to build a shared understanding of the challenge and a foundation for action.

Data presented at the convening underscored a geographic disparity. Monmouth County receives approximately 150 meals per food-insecure resident, compared with 107 in Ocean County. Southern Ocean County is the most underserved portion of Fulfill's service area: more than 13,000 residents across nine ZIP codes experience food insecurity, while six of those ZIP codes have only one food pantry or none at all. Closing the gap with Monmouth County would require approximately 1.3 million additional pounds of food annually. The disparity reflects historical patterns of network development, but it also establishes a clear imperative for action.

Participants began the day expecting to discuss ways to expand food pantries, meal programs, and food distribution. By day's end, they were envisioning something broader: a coordinated regional system capable of ensuring reliable access to healthy food with dignity. They recognized that food insecurity is not simply the absence of food. It is also shaped by disconnected systems, limited transportation, fragmented information, and services that do not always reflect people's daily lives. Improving food security therefore requires not only increasing the supply of food, but creating a system that is easier to navigate, more equitable in its reach, and centered on residents.

Across facilitated discussions, table conversations, participant note cards, and Mentimeter polling, hundreds of observations converged around four strategic findings that define the path forward:

- **Coordination is the missing ingredient.** Strong local organizations are not yet connected through the infrastructure needed to function as an integrated regional system.

- **Transportation shapes every aspect of food security.** Improving mobility and bringing food closer to where residents live, learn, work, and receive services emerged as the highest structural priority.
- **Residents must become the center of system design.** Accessibility, dignity, cultural responsiveness, and residents' lived realities should shape how services are organized.
- **The greatest opportunity is partnership.** Participants demonstrated a strong willingness to work across sectors, share responsibility, and build a long-term regional coalition.

The four findings point directly to four strategic priorities:

- **Stand up the coordination backbone** to provide the structure and shared accountability needed for sustained collective action.
- **Make food reachable** by reducing geographic and transportation barriers.
- **Design for dignity and choice** by organizing services around residents' lives rather than organizational convenience.
- **Widen the table beyond food providers** by building a broad Southern Ocean County Food Security Coalition capable of engaging and involving every sector that influences food security.

That readiness was tangible. Participants identified 70 commitments to action, and 56 individuals across multiple organizations* indicated that they wanted to remain engaged in what comes next. More fundamentally, participants shifted from asking, “How can we encourage organizations to do more?” to “How can we work together differently?” Converting that willingness and systems mindset into sustained relationships, leadership, and action is the opportunity now before the community.

The recommendations are organized as a phased roadmap that pairs early action with longer-term investment in coordination, access, technology, and regional capacity. Together, they provide a practical pathway from conversation to implementation.

Together at the Table was not the conclusion of a community conversation. It marked the beginning of a new way of working together. The convening demonstrated both a shared understanding of the challenge and a willingness to act collectively. This report translates that momentum into a practical framework for building a more connected, resilient, and equitable food security system.

The convening also created something that is too often missing: a space for people from across Southern Ocean County to be seen, heard, and taken seriously. Participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives while connecting with others who care deeply about inequities in food access and are committed to building a stronger response together.

The vision underlying the comments from participants is clear:

A Southern Ocean County where every resident has reliable, equitable, and dignified access to healthy food through a coordinated community system built on partnership, innovation, and shared responsibility.

The opportunity now is to transform that shared vision into sustained collective action.

AT A GLANCE

TOGETHER AT THE TABLE

Mobilizing for Food Security in Southern Ocean County



THE CHALLENGE

**Southern Ocean County has the assets.
The opportunity is to connect them.**

Southern Ocean County does not lack committed organizations. It lacks the coordinated infrastructure necessary to ensure that every resident has reliable, dignified, and equitable access to healthy food.



SOUTHERN
OCEAN COUNTY
FOCUS AREA

THE NUMBERS

9
ZIP CODES
Southern Ocean
County focus area

13,000+
RESIDENTS
experiencing
food insecurity

6 OF 9
ZIP CODES
have only one
food pantry or
none at all

107 vs. 150
MEALS
per food-insecure resident
in Ocean County compared
with Monmouth County

1.3 MILLION
POUNDS
additional food needed
annually to close the
geographic distribution gap

WHAT THE COMMUNITY TOLD US: FOUR FINDINGS



COORDINATION IS THE MISSING INGREDIENT

Exceptional organizations are already doing important work. What is missing is the infrastructure that enables them to function as a coordinated regional system.



TRANSPORTATION SHAPES FOOD SECURITY

Food must become easier to reach. Transportation, location, operating hours, and proximity to places residents already use all influence meaningful access.



RESIDENTS MUST BE AT THE CENTER

Services should be designed around accessibility, dignity, choice, cultural responsiveness, and the realities of residents' daily lives.



THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY IS PARTNERSHIP

Food security cannot be addressed by food providers alone. Healthcare, schools, municipalities, businesses, faith communities, philanthropy, civic organizations, and residents all have roles to play.

FROM FINDINGS TO ACTION: FOUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



1 STAND UP THE COORDINATION BACKBONE

Create the structure, leadership, communications, and shared accountability needed to sustain collective action.



2 MAKE FOOD REACHABLE

Reduce transportation and geographic barriers by bringing food closer to where residents live, work, learn, worship, and receive services.



3 DESIGN FOR DIGNITY AND CHOICE

Build services around residents rather than organizations, increasing flexibility, accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and personal choice.



4 WIDEN THE TABLE BEYOND FOOD PROVIDERS

Build a broad Southern Ocean County Food Security Coalition that engages every sector capable of influencing food security.



THE SHARED VISION

A Southern Ocean County where every resident has reliable, equitable, and dignified access to healthy food through a coordinated community system built on partnership, innovation, and shared responsibility.



100+ leaders
convened



70 commitments
to act



56 participants
staying engaged

Five Moves to Start: A Practical Starting Agenda for the First 12 Months

Focus early action in one underserved cluster while establishing the coordination backbone countywide.
These moves build the foundation for lasting change.

	THE MOVE	WHAT WE'LL DO	EARLY SIGNS OF PROGRESS
1	 Stand up the coalition with a strong backbone	Launch the Southern Ocean County Food Security Coalition with cross-sector leadership, a funded coordinator, and an appropriate organizational home.	 Coalition launched, coordinator in place, and regular meetings underway with broad participation.
2	 Pilot food lockers or community refrigerators in one cluster	Install and test food lockers or community refrigerators in an underserved cluster, co-designed with residents and supported by a logistics partner.	 Lockers or refrigerators are stocked, maintained, and used regularly by residents.
3	 Expand evening and weekend hours at selected sites	Extend operating hours at priority pantry sites and communicate clearly so residents know when and where help is available.	 At least one site offers reliable evening or weekend access, with increased utilization.
4	 Launch a healthcare and food security working group	Convene healthcare partners to align on screening, referrals, and potential delivery models such as produce prescriptions and medically tailored meals.	 Healthcare partners engaged, shared plan in development, and pilot opportunities identified.
5	 Build the shared resource directory	Create and maintain a simple, accurate, regularly updated directory of services, hours, and eligibility—available online, by phone, and in print.	 Directory live, up to date, and accessible by website, phone, and printed formats.

VOICES FROM THE CONVENING

Participants described food insecurity as widespread but often unseen, and as a problem shaped by much more than the availability of food. Their responses repeatedly pointed to transportation, limited pantry hours, affordability, dignity and stigma, healthy food choices, and the need to listen to residents themselves. Several emphasized that food insecurity can affect anyone and that solving it requires addressing interconnected barriers rather than relying on a single program or intervention.

“ Transportation is a real barrier.” ”

“ Adding more hours. The food is available but the timing is a problem.” ”

“ *“It’s about more than meals. It’s dignity, wellness & health, safety and embracing community.”* ”

“ *“I’m a working mom & my husband also works— food is \$\$..... how would I ever get to a food pantry?”* ”

“ More people need help than you would think.” ”

“ Food insecurity comes with so much shame, these families need compassion and kindness and no judgement.” ”

“ What solutions do neighbors actually want ”

“ It’s not one solution because food insecurity is linked to many other factors.” ”

Representative verbatim responses to Mentimeter Poll 5: “In one sentence, what is the most important thing you want others to understand about food insecurity in your part of Southern Ocean County?”

COMMITMENTS TO ACTION

Poll 9: In one sentence: What is one specific action you or your organization will take as a result of today’s convening?

Participants made approximately 70 commitments to action during the convening. The statements below are selected representative responses that reflect the range and spirit of what participants pledged to do next.

“ I will reach out to three organizations I haven’t worked with before to explore how we can support each other.”

“ I will listen to neighbors more intentionally so our services reflect what people actually need.”

“ I will advocate for expanded evening and weekend hours at our pantry and help recruit volunteers to make it happen.”

“ I will help distribute information about available food resources through our networks and channels.”

“ I will share the data and resources from today with our board and team to build greater awareness and support.”

“ I will explore hosting a mobile pantry or pop-up distribution in an area with limited access.”

“ I will connect clients with transportation resources and work to create more options for getting to pantries.”

“ I will bring at least one new voice—especially a resident—to the next table.”

“ I will commit to the Ocean County Food Security Coalition and help shape our next steps.”

“ I will examine our policies and look for ways to reduce barriers and make access easier.”

“ I will look for funding opportunities to strengthen our programs and invest in infrastructure.”

“ I will stay engaged, keep the momentum going, and help turn today’s ideas into action.”



These commitments demonstrate the energy, readiness, and shared responsibility that emerged from *Together at the Table*. Together, we can build a stronger, more coordinated food security system for Southern Ocean County.

Participating Organizations from the July 15, 2026 Together at the Table Event

A Need We Feed	Girl Scouts of the Jersey Shore	New Jersey State Legislature	Southern Ocean Chamber Association
Amazon	Greater Tuckerton Food Pantry	NJ Food Fund	Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce
Anchor Family Success Center - Children's Home Society of NJ	Grunin Foundation	NJ Food Policy Council	Southern Ocean Medical Center
Barnegat Pride	Hackensack Meridian Health	O.C.E.A.N., Inc.	Springpoint
Bright Harbor Healthcare	Hearts of Mercy	Ocean Community Church	St. Francis Community Center
Causeway Cares	Hope Sheds Light	Ocean County BSS	St. Pius Food Pantry
Community Options	Horizon Foundation of New Jersey	Ocean County College	Starve Poverty International
CONTACT of Ocean & Monmouth Counties	Housing for All	Ocean County College Foundation	The Br'Island Group
Family Promise of the Jersey Shore	Just Believe	Ocean's Harbor House, Inc.	The Citta Foundation
Food Connect	Meals on Wheels Ocean County	RWJBH	United Way of Monmouth & Ocean Counties
Fulfill	Natural Resource Education Foundation of NJ	Shalom	YMCA of the Jersey Shore