

# Ending Hunger and Advancing Nutrition: Lived Experience Perspectives

Recommendations to Inform the 2022 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

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This brief serves as a supplemental document to the overarching Task Force on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health report,<sup>1</sup> which included listening session feedback alongside other inputs.



## Introduction

Today, soaring costs of living and spiraling inflation have made accessing and affording healthy food a challenge for many Americans. Matthew, June, and Molly<sup>2</sup> are three of them.

Matthew – a formerly homeless resident of Oakland, California – finds it difficult to eat healthily, even with government benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Without access to a kitchen or pots and pans, which cannot be purchased with SNAP funds, Matthew spends much of his time searching for ready-made and prepared foods. Accessing healthy meals is also an issue for June, a retired senior on a fixed income that renders her just barely ineligible for SNAP. June lives in a small town outside Selma, Alabama with only one grocery store where, she explains, “the prices are higher” and “the quality of food is not good.” In Chicago, Illinois, Molly, a mother who receives monthly assistance from the government’s Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), echoed June and Matthew’s struggles to get the food that she needs to keep her family healthy. Molly noted the financial and logistical challenge of finding safe and affordable formula to meet her daughter’s specific dietary needs.

Matthew, June, and Molly are not alone in struggling to obtain the nutritious food they know they need to stay healthy. In June 2022, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs partnered with World Central Kitchen and Auburn University’s Hunger Solutions Institute to conduct listening sessions<sup>3</sup> in three locations across the country to inform policy recommendations for the 2022 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. The sessions focused on learning directly from individuals with lived experiences of hunger and food insecurity to explicitly center and prioritize their voices and perspectives in policy conversations.

Matthew, June, and Molly – along with over 130 other individuals who participated in these sessions – made loud and clear that the current food system is not working for them. Their experiences underscored that inflation-induced price increases, extreme weather events

due to the climate crisis, and the continuing effects of the pandemic on supply chains have only made it harder to get the nutritious food they want and need, even with government assistance programs. They called for changes that are more responsive and flexible to their needs, critical shifts which can ensure that all Americans have access to a nutritious, food-secure future.

This brief presents key learnings from listening sessions and connects them with seven actionable policy recommendations. These recommendations include: 1) addressing root causes of hunger; 2) better coordinating federal resources; 3) reducing barriers to federal assistance; 4) adding federal benefits to address current challenges; 5) increasing affordability and availability of fresh fruits and vegetables; 6) improving food recovery; and 7) supporting communities with targeted food assistance. Underlying all of these recommendations is the understanding that hunger, nutrition, and health issues are deeply intertwined with several key environmental and social determinants – including but not limited to poverty, structural racism, housing, healthcare, economic security, education, and transportation – that help drive significant disparities in individuals', families', and communities' experiences of food insecurity, nutrition, and diet-related diseases.



**“We don’t have no dental coverage...what good would an EBT [Electronic Benefits Transfer] card do you if you don’t have no teeth?”**

*Oakland listening session participant*

## **1. Hunger Can Only Be Eliminated By Addressing Its Root Causes**

Poverty, lack of access to affordable housing and healthcare, as well as a history of systemic discrimination all fundamentally contribute to hunger and nutrition insecurity. Across listening sessions, participants explained how these root causes critically shape individuals', families', and communities' access to nutritious food, diet quality, and diet-related health. Individuals experiencing nutrition insecurity often simultaneously experience poverty and economic insecurity, forcing impossible decisions between basic needs. Participants consistently discussed having to make extremely difficult trade-offs between housing, transportation, and food. For instance, one native Oaklander mom, Brianne, discussed how lack of access to one need can affect access to another. She explained that “...we don’t have no

dental coverage...what good would an EBT [Electronic Benefits Transfer] card do you if you don't have no teeth?"

While feedback related to the root causes of hunger and nutrition insecurity was among the most frequent and urgent listening session findings, corresponding policy solutions surpass this brief's scope. Other organizations, including Hunger-Free America and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), have performed comprehensive research and examination of these root causes.<sup>4</sup> As noted in those reports, a true systems approach to tackling hunger, nutrition, and health issues demands the following actions for addressing equity and root causes more broadly:

- Increase access to affordable housing
- Increase wages
- Reevaluate poverty thresholds
- Examine and deconstruct sources of rural poverty
- Increase access to affordable transportation
- Increase access to comprehensive healthcare
- Increase investment in affordable, high-quality broadband, particularly in rural areas

## **2. Federal Assistance Needs Greater Cross-Sectoral Coordination to Fully Leverage Federal Resources**

A total of fifteen Federal Nutrition Assistance programs run by the USDA and a variety of state-level actors are eligible to people in need of food assistance, along with multiple other assistance programs that are not explicitly food-related (such as housing assistance). Yet while program eligibility often overlaps, applications do not. The difficulty, confusion, and bureaucracy involved in separately applying to multiple programs – paired with current restrictions limiting how federal assistance programs can be communicated or promoted to potential participants – create significant barriers to ensuring that all of these programs reach those who need them.

Listening sessions highlighted the dearth of information about federal assistance programs and eligibility requirements. This was especially true for participants from minoritized and non-English speaking communities. Victor, who had emigrated to Oakland thirty years earlier and whose native language was Spanish, explained, “nowadays there is no information. It is difficult to have access to those resources,” but “if there is access, then [the community] are all going to know about it.”

Participants also reported difficulties in applying to the programs. The materials needed to complete applications – ranging from documents such as personal identification cards, proof of address, bank statements, or a social security card – in addition to the time spent following up with agencies or navigating arbitrary deadlines were critical obstacles. Many participants cited that support from previous applicants was often necessary to successfully apply.

Greater coordination between federal programs' eligibility criteria, application, and application materials is important to ensuring that those who are eligible can successfully apply for the support they need.

### **Recommendations**

**Enhance SNAP promotion:** Congress and USDA should reexamine current administrative policies that prohibit promotion of SNAP and other federal nutrition assistance to people who may be eligible but are not participating in the programs. Programs should

be promoted through multiple channels and mediums to ensure that communities and individuals are met where they are at.

**Coordinate program enrollment:** Congress should coordinate federal and state food assistance program enrollment with other federal social service programs to better serve eligible participants. One application could be used to determine adjunctive or categorical eligibility and automatically enroll persons in multiple income-based federal programs, including: SNAP, free/reduced price school meals, Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Special, Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, and Section 8 housing, when applicable. If an interview is required for program eligibility, one interview should be used to determine eligibility for multiple programs.



**“It’s not even access to the food that’s really the problem. It’s when you get there, you can’t afford it. You’re forced to pick whether or not you wanna eat healthy, or if you’re gonna fill your family up on junk.”**

*Chicago listening session participant*

### **3. Barriers and Restrictions to Accessing Federal Nutrition Programs Should Be Reduced**

Federal nutrition programs were widely praised as providing vital support to many individuals and families. However, federal nutrition programs were often said to be out of reach for participants who still needed support, and who otherwise sought out additional resources from community-based organizations, food pantries, and others. Restrictions to program eligibility affected many participants, including students who found themselves unable to meet work requirements, or those who could gain limited assets, such as a car. Many participants receiving SNAP also reported that the steep drop-off in benefits as their income rose caused stress and hesitancy to enroll in the program.

Participants across sessions expressed frustration that hot food and other cooking materials were ineligible using EBT/SNAP. Brianne from Oakland said, “we should be able to use the EBT card on any food item in the stores,” and another Oaklander, Ernie, added that cleaning items should be included as well for food safety. These restrictions on individual choice are even harder for those without access to kitchen tools or equipment. Federal nutrition programs should be made more inclusive and accessible to better meet the needs of the individuals who enroll and ensure they have access to safe and nutritious foods.

## Recommendations

**Include hot and prepared foods under SNAP:** Congress should ensure more equitable access to nutritious meals through authorizing SNAP for purchases of hot and prepared foods at grocery stores.

**Remove barriers to SNAP participation:** Congress and the USDA should remove unnecessary barriers to SNAP participation, making the program easily accessible to Americans, including, but not limited to: repealing exclusion from SNAP of individuals with drug convictions and other felonies; maintaining options for remote interviews and digital signatures even after the COVID-19 pandemic; and eliminating asset limits for SNAP households' eligibility determinations (see full Task Force report for further restrictions that should be removed).

**Decrease benefits cliffs:** USDA should phase out benefits more slowly across federal nutrition programs as household income increases.<sup>5</sup>

**Incentivize participation in Restaurant Meals Program:** The USDA should decrease administrative and regulatory burdens on states to engage in the Restaurant Meals Program (RMP) and ensure prompt review of new state applicants. USDA should also work to incentivize diverse restaurant participation in RMP to increase the number of nutritious options available to RMP-eligible individuals, including people who are elderly, disabled, and/or homeless.

**Include food preparation items in pilot program:** Congress should fund a pilot program to create a refundable tax credit for low-income individuals for the purchase of home kitchen tools and equipment needed to prepare and store nutritious foods.

## 4. Heightened Challenges to Food and Nutrition Security Necessitate Additional and Targeted Benefits

Many listening session participants mentioned the need for further benefits to cover current gaps in federal assistance. Some pilot programs from the last decade, such as the USDA Summer EBT demonstration program, have shown great success in reducing food insecurity and improving dietary quality. That pilot in particular led to the Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer program (P-EBT) during the COVID-19 school closures, which along with other pandemic-era augmented benefits and flexibility, were lauded by many participants.<sup>6</sup> Participants indicated that even two years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, more robust food resources are still needed, particularly in light of inflation and supply chain issues that have increased the price of food. Brenda, a mother from Chicago, noted that the government was “keeping the amount that you get the same, but food is going up.”

For residents in rural areas, physical access to food is difficult amid few transportation and grocery store options. Selma resident June noted that “a lot of people that may not have transportation to get to, they only have that one place to go to and the prices are way higher on your meat and vegetables and, you know, stuff like that. So, you have to have better access to foods.” While rural communities often face a unique layer of food-related challenges, federal assistance rarely addresses them. Barriers to accessing food – such as increasing costs, lack of tools, distance to grocery stores, and more – require food assistance programs to adapt and add targeted benefits to ensure programs are actually effective in reducing hunger and nutrition insecurity.

## Recommendations

**Provide universal, free school meals:** Congress should provide free school meals (lunch, breakfast, summer, afterschool meals) for all children, removing the income test and ensuring all children receive free meals without stigma or burdensome paperwork.

**Extend Summer EBT:** Congress should make permanent a nationwide summer electronic benefits transfer (Summer EBT) program that would allow families eligible for free school meals to automatically receive \$100/month (adjusted for inflation) in EBT benefits per child when schools are closed for the summer (a similar benefit value to the Pandemic-EBT program).

**Expand online access for SNAP and WIC:** USDA and Congress should continue to expand online SNAP and WIC access, allowing participants to make purchases (including produce) through online retailers and farmers markets. Online SNAP is already available in nearly all states and should be made permanent. Online WIC should be expanded to additional states.

**“I love to be able to get fresh fruit and vegetables, and it’s costly. It is, and I don’t always...I do not always have the funds to go and buy it from the store, you know? I just don’t have it.”**

*Oakland listening session participant*



## 5. Fruits and Vegetables Must Be More Affordable and Available to Increase Public Consumption

Only one in ten Americans meet the federal guidelines for fruit and vegetable consumption,<sup>7</sup> with key socioeconomic disparities due in part to the cost of fresh foods. The federal government has instituted programs to address high produce costs, limited availability and access, level of freshness, and lack of information about taste and preparation, all of which are barriers to higher consumption of fruits and vegetables.

However, in the listening sessions, participants gave several examples in which federal programs have fallen short. Many individuals who want fruits and vegetables still could not afford them. Brianne from Oakland remarked that, “I love to be able to get fresh fruit and vegetables, and it’s costly. It is, and I don’t always...I do not always have the funds to

go and buy it from the store, you know? I just don't have it." Some participate in federal and state programs that subsidize costs but still experience stigma, unaffordable transportation costs, or lack of access to frequent local farmers markets. Christina, a coordinator for a local farmers market in Alabama, discussed "bigger challenges" outside transportation and frequency of market days. "One of the bigger things that [they]'re seeing is that it's cheaper for people to get their food from Aldi and Walmart than it is to buy fresh, local produce from the farmers." But not everyone has access to stores like Aldi and Walmart, and participants believed that the produce there is less fresh than farmers market alternatives.

## Recommendations

**Increase GusNIP funding:** Congress should increase funding for the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) Produce Prescription Grant Program as an accelerator for produce prescription programs by doubling the current \$500,000 limit per grant award to \$1 million or larger to sustain larger-scale projects and robust evaluations that include a comparison group, while also increasing the number of small-scale programs (\$100,000 to \$500,000) to allow for pilots in more diverse geographies and patient populations with a focus on equity.

**Match farmers' markets dollars:** This should include proportional increases to grants funding 'Double Up Food Bucks' programs at farmers markets that match limited dollars spent on fruits and vegetables, also providing critical support to local food systems and farmers.

## 6. Improved Food Recovery Mechanisms Are Critical to Ensure That Surplus Food Reaches Those in Need

In the US, over 108 billion pounds of food were wasted in 2019 across farms, homes, businesses, and manufacturing sectors,<sup>8</sup> while 38 million people in the US were food insecure.<sup>9</sup> Food supply chain disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic visibly demonstrated on-farm food waste increases due to failures in storage, transport, and distribution.

Several participants across listening sessions noted that it can be particularly difficult as a food-insecure person to witness major businesses disposing of fresh and prepared foods daily that could be redirected to those who need them. Brianne, a mom from Oakland, remarked that, "It would just be nice to see if you guys [community-based organization, Homies Empowerment] could get some of those donations from [a grocery store] before they throw it out." And many businesses and farmers face barriers to donating as well: businesses face liability concerns if an individual becomes sick from their donation, and many farmers, particularly small or medium sized enterprises, do not have the proper storage or transportation mechanisms to deliver surplus crops to food charities. Currently, unregulated and unstandardized date labels often make it more difficult to donate food that would otherwise be considered safe for consumption, and it can confuse consumers who may have received date-labeled products on whether food has actually expired, leading some to toss out goods that are still safe.

On the other hand, many participants said that they had been given spoiled food at some point and were expected to be grateful for anything because of their need. Matthew, an Oaklander in transitional housing, explained with some food, "You don't know what the source is, whether it's expired before." A new approach balancing food safety and human dignity with improved distribution is essential to decreasing food waste and increasing US food security.

## Recommendations

**Create date label standards:** The White House should direct the FDA to create national date label standards for food safety and food quality.

**Remove barriers for private sector donation:** Congress should clarify and strengthen the liability protections in the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act that apply to businesses donating food, including grocery stores, restaurants, and other retailers, to remove barriers for private sector participation in food recovery.

**Ease farmer donations:** Congress should create a new tax incentive option that makes it easier for farmers to justify the costs of donating crops. This new incentive should also include transportation and cold storage.



**“There need to be mindset changes...it’s more than just money.”**

*Selma listening session participant*

## 7. Communities – Like Individuals – Need Targeted Food Assistance

While listening session feedback focused on individual challenges with hunger, nutrition, and health, a significant part of each discussion emphasized the need for greater support for communities. Each listening session location had different specific concerns based on their community – for instance, participants in Oakland, many of whom were experiencing homelessness, expressed the strongest concerns about transportation to and from food sources. Meanwhile participants in Selma, a more rural area, often had very few choices in where to access food. Kara, a Selma participant, lives in a small town where they “only have one grocery store” and “sometimes [they] don’t have...transportation to...travel to buy groceries.” And living in a rural area, many of her neighbors are “really inconvenienced” by rising gas prices. Nearly all participants, however, emphasized how critical community-based organizations are to filling the gap between federal programs and their need, and many participants discussed a desire for further community investments such as community gardens, community fridges, increased grocery stores, and better access to transportation for people to reach food outlets. This feedback overlaps greatly with the root causes of hunger, nutrition, and health challenges.

Many participants noted the importance of and their dependence on CBOs in meeting their needs; thus, CBOs were further consulted to assess their needs for continuing or scale up their work. CBOs consistently indicated the need for the government to better and more meaningfully engage constituents and CBOs in the policy-making process. CBOs serve as an important resource for the groups they serve and have successfully engaged their communities through trusted relationships. These local community-focused groups have the ability to engage individuals and more nimbly respond to meeting their community’s needs, yet are



often under-resourced partners in directly addressing food insecure communities. Through CBOs, the federal government should find connection points and opportunities to ensure robust food security efforts continue at the community level.

## Recommendations

**Expand community garden grants:** USDA and Congress should either expand the People's Garden program, or establish a new grant program for community gardens, to enable individuals and communities to purchase plots of land, as well as inputs such as seeds, soil, gardening tools, and more to grow nutritious foods for their communities. Grant funding should have minimal restrictions to ensure that diverse individuals and communities are able to access inputs needed.

**Utilize National Parks community gardens:** USDA should expand partnerships with the National Parks Service (NPS) to evaluate NPS land that could be used for community gardens. NPS has identified food gardens as part of their Healthy Parks, Healthy People promising practices. Additional resources should be made available for raising awareness of grant programs and resources.

**Grow local food systems:** USDA should create a loan program for regional food hubs and regional food processor businesses (including specialty crops, value added products, etc.) to support the growth of local food systems and help improve resiliency in the food supply chain.

**Create a mechanism for direct community involvement:** The White House should consider a new mechanism to allow for sustained, substantive engagement with and feedback from community-based organizations who most directly interface with food and nutritionally insecure individuals.

## Conclusion

The 2022 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health has the opportunity to shift the policymaking process to focus on, listen to, and partner with individuals and communities facing these challenges, and to create inclusive and equitable policies. This means continuing to engage in meaningful conversations with those with lived experiences following the Conference, and prioritizing their experiences and insights in the policy process.

Hunger, nutrition, and health are driven by a host of root causes, including poverty, structural racism, and inequities in access to affordable housing and healthcare. Thus, the solutions proposed here to address hunger, nutrition, and health should be viewed as part of a greater system affected by those factors and require broader solutions to appropriately address many of those root causes. These include examining historic and current discrimination, marginalization, and inequity. As participants across geographic locations repeatedly pointed out, an EBT card can only get a person so far if they do not have transportation to access food, tools to prepare it, or teeth to consume it. Farmers in Selma provided an even broader lens, discussing the logistical processing and production elements needed to grow food and move it to market. As the food system faces challenges such as higher food prices, increasingly adverse climate events, continued pandemic disruptions, and more, the White House and other US policymakers must act quickly and holistically to achieve the shared goal of ending hunger by 2030.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Task Force was convened by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Food Systems for the Future, The Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, and World Central Kitchen.
- 2 All names are pseudonyms to protect individuals' anonymity.
- 3 The Chicago Council on Global Affairs and World Central Kitchen partnered with community-based organizations (CBOs) to host lived experience listening sessions in Oakland, CA, Chicago, IL, and Selma, AL. CBO partners were chosen based on existing relationships with and knowledge of the communities in which listening sessions were conducted. All listening sessions involved multiple small focus groups of 6 to 14 participants who were recruited by CBO partners. CBO partners were compensated \$5000. Participants were compensated with a \$50 gift card to a local grocery store. After each listening session, Council staff analyzed focus group transcripts and notes to identify core themes, challenge areas, and proposed solutions relating to experiences of hunger and nutrition. These themes were then synthesized into summaries that were sent to CBO partners for review and participant feedback. These summaries were invaluable in informing the Task Force report recommendations and this policy brief.
- 4 "How the Upcoming White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health Can Catalyze the Government and Every Other Sector of Society to End U.S. Hunger and Ensure Nutrition Security for All Americans." Hunger Free America. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclcfndmkaj/https://hfa-website.cdn.prismic.io/hfa-website/7397dbe2-8e23-45cb-942d-6bc9b2099298\_WH+Conference+Full+Recommendations+final.pdf.  
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- 7 Hee Lee, Seung, Latetia V. Moore, Sohyun Park, Diane M. Harris, and Heidi M. Blanck. "Adults Meeting Fruit and Vegetable Intake Recommendations - United States, 2019." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 6, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7101a1.htm#:~:text=The%202020%E2%80%932025%20Dietary%20Guidelines,cup%2Dequivalents%20of%20vegetables%20daily>.
- 8 "How We Fight Food Waste in the US." Feeding America. Accessed September 15, 2022. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work/our-approach/reduce-food-waste>.
- 9 "What Is Food Insecurity in America?" Hunger and Health, May 5, 2022. <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/>.

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*\*An asterisk denotes affiliation with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. All other participants are affiliated with World Central Kitchen. Names are listed alphabetically.*

## About World Central Kitchen

Founded in 2010 by Chef José Andrés, World Central Kitchen (WCK) is a nonprofit organization that is first to the frontlines providing fresh meals in response to crises, while working to build resilient food systems with locally led solutions. Applying our model of quick action, leveraging local resources, and adapting in real time, WCK has served more than 200 million nourishing meals around the world.

When disaster strikes, WCK's Relief Team mobilizes with the urgency of now to start cooking and serving meals to people in need. By partnering with organizations on the ground and activating a network of local restaurants, food trucks, or emergency kitchens, WCK serves comforting meals to survivors of disasters quickly and effectively. To support regional economies, WCK prioritizes purchasing local ingredients to cook with or distribute directly to families in need.

We know that good food provides not only nourishment, but also comfort and hope, especially in times of crisis. Learn more at [wck.org](http://wck.org).

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