



How the White House Can Most Impactfully Implement a 2022 Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health

Introduction

Convincing Congress to fund, and the White House to agree to hold, the second-ever White House conference on food and nutrition, a step long-championed by Hunger Free America, is a big victory for the anti-hunger movement. We are grateful that House Rules Committee Chair James McGovern, who fought tirelessly for this for years, finally achieved this crucial advance. Properly implemented, the conference will provide an historic opportunity to create and implement a comprehensive plan to, by 2030, end domestic hunger, food insecurity, and nutritional insecurity and ensure that nutritious food is affordable, convenient, and available for all Americans.

According to USDA, even before the pandemic, in 2019, 35.2 million Americans, including 10.7 million U.S. children – suffered from food insecurity, mostly because of deep, structural, economic inequality nationwide. In 2020, 38.2 million Americans, including 11.7 million children, lived in food insecure homes, unable to always afford enough food. While food insecurity varies a bit by region, every state suffers from serious hunger. In even the “least hungry” state in the union – New Hampshire – one in 18 residents lack sufficient food. In the hungriest state – Mississippi – one in six do.

The overwhelming majority of hungry and food insecure Americans are children, working people, seniors, people with disabilities, and veterans. According to Hunger Free America’s groundbreaking research on the “working hungry,” in 2018-2020 approximately 15 million American adults were food insecure but employed, comprising one in ten working adults.

While the largest numbers of food insecure Americans are white, Black people suffer from food insecurity rates at nearly double the national average and Latinx rates are nearly as high. Native Americans/American Indians also have very high rates of food insecurity, with one recent survey finding that 54 percent of respondents indicated that sometime or often during COVID-19 they could not afford to eat balanced meals. Households headed by single women have food insecurity rates nearly triple the national average.

At the same time, diet-related diseases are the top cause of early death in America and family farmers are struggling to stay on their land. People who are malnourished are far more likely to contract, transmit, and die from COVID-19.

While the conference (and the process leading up to it) provides a once-in-generation opportunity to bring together all key stakeholders (including people with lived experience with hunger, nutrition scientists, anti-hunger advocates, farmers, nonprofit leaders, federal, state, local, and tribal government officials, civil rights leaders, food industry leaders, etc.) it is clear that fundamental, systematic, nationwide changes in governmental and economic policies – not just increases in charitable food distribution and innovative grassroots partnerships – will be necessary to solve the twin problems of hunger and nutrition insecurity.

Any plan that is serious about ending hunger in America and significantly improving nutrition security would need to: create living wage jobs; raise wages and expand tax credits; slash poverty and bolster economic opportunity; help low-income Americans develop assets and avoid benefits cliffs; ensure free health care and prescription drugs for all; make quality affordable, housing, childcare, utilities, broadband access, and public transportation affordable for all; significantly increase government safety net programs like SNAP, WIC, school meals, P-EBT, and home-delivered meals for older Americans; and strengthen food systems.

How Congress Has Funded and Directed This Conference

The Fiscal Year 2022 Omnibus Appropriations Bill:

- Directs HHS to convene a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health in 2022, for the purpose of developing a roadmap to end hunger and improve nutrition by 2030.
- Appropriates \$2.5 million to support the conference.
- Directs the conference to be developed using a whole-of-government approach in partnership with the Executive Office of the President, the Department of Agriculture, and other Federal agencies and in consultation with state, territorial, local, and tribal officials, and a diverse group of interested parties from across the country, including anti-hunger, nutrition, and health experts; the private sector; and people with lived experience of hunger and nutrition insecurity.
- Directs the conference to examine why hunger and nutrition insecurity persist and how they affect health, including their role in the high prevalence of chronic disease, and also review existing and cross-departmental strategies and consider novel approaches to improve health by eliminating hunger, reducing the prevalence of chronic disease, and improving access to and consumption of nutritious foods in accordance with Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Requires HHS to consult with other Federal agencies and report initial findings to the Committees no later than 120 days after enactment of this Act (by July 11, 2022). The findings shall identify current programming that directly or indirectly impacts food and nutrition insecurity and diet related diseases; specific statutory, regulatory, and budgetary barriers to ending hunger and improving nutrition and health in the United States and the Territories; existing examples of coordination mechanisms

between federal agencies and state, local, and tribal governments, and all levels of government and program implementers; and additional authorities or resources needed to eliminate hunger and improve nutrition and health.

- Directs the conference to produce a final report detailing its findings and proposed solutions to end hunger and improve nutrition security in the United States by 2030.

What We can Learn from the Only Other WH Conference, in 1969

The Poor People’s Movement, originally launched by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – as well as high profile media attention on the domestic hunger crisis – forced President Nixon to take significant steps to address the problem, including holding a White House conference on it.

In May of 1969, Nixon sent a special message to Congress, which included this stirring passage: “We have long thought of America as the most bounteous of nations . . . that hunger and malnutrition could persist in a land such as ours is embarrassing and intolerable. More is at stake here than the health and well-being of [millions of] American children. ...Something like the very honor of American democracy is involved.” Shortly thereafter, he announced that he would host a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health and appointed Dr. Jean Mayer – an indefatigable force of nature – to plan, implement, and chair it. In advance of the conference, 800 academics and scientists, business and civic leaders, activists, and politicians developed more than 1,800 recommendations.

The conference was convened on December 2, 1969, and lasted three days. After an opening address, in which Nixon vowed “to put an end to hunger in America...for all time,” the 3,000 conference attendees considered and approved all 1,800 recommendations, and startling 1,600 of these were implemented within the next two years. This conference launched a series of bold and concrete policies which, by the late 1970s, almost entirely ended hunger in America. To date, the 1969 meeting remains the only White House Conference on hunger and nutrition. That first conference provides us a few key lessons that should be applied to a 2022 conference:

- 1) The process should be inclusive, fully involving a wide variety of stakeholders.
- 2) The proposed policy details should be in place well in advance in the date of the actual conference.
- 3) The proposed policies should be detailed, comprehensive, bold, and actionable.
- 4) The messaging must be clear that – while all key stakeholders have crucial roles in ending hunger and ensuring nutrition security in the U.S. – these efforts must be led by the federal government, the only entity with the scope, resources, scale, and legitimacy to enact massive changes on behalf of the entire nation.

Suggested Timing and Location for the Conference

We suggest the conference be held on or near November 22, 2022, which would both be close to Thanksgiving, but also after the mid-term elections, thus reducing any perception that the conference might be used by anyone to gain partisan advantage.

While it would certainly be easier to enable top federal principals to attend the conference if it were held in Washington, D.C., there are three strong arguments for holding it in a city in the middle of America that is an air travel hub (such as Chicago, Kansas City, Dallas, or Houston); doing so would a) make it easier and cheaper for a wide variety of Americans to attend, b) it would be more cost-effective for the federal government to sponsor and c) it would reinforce the message that hunger and nutrition insecurity are truly national challenges, not merely “Beltway concerns). In any case, HHS should use at least some of the \$2.5 million allocated to the conference to pay for transportation, hotel, and meal costs for low-income participants.

The White House could also help to sponsor a series of state and local hunger and nutrition conferences and/or listening sessions around the country leading up to the White House conference.

Suggested Process leading Up to the Conference

In order to meet the request from Congress to provide a report on “barriers to ending hunger and improving nutrition” by July 11, 2022, the White House needs to immediately ramp up a robust interagency planning and policy process related to the conference and to rapidly accelerate consultations with all key stakeholders.

We would suggest that Ambassador Rice, Secretary Vilsack, and Secretary Becerra co-chair the conference.

We would also suggest Congressional co-chairs for the conference such as House Rules Committee Chair Rep. Jim McGovern and Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow.

The conference could also engage bipartisan co-chairs outside of the federal government, such as:

- People with lived experience with hunger and poverty, some of whom are still low-income and some of whom are financially successful now (like actress Viola Davis)
- Former Presidents Obama, Bush, and Clinton
- Former First Ladies Obama and Bush
- Former USDA Secretaries Glickman, Veneman, and Espy
- Leaders in food like Chef José Andrés, Rachael Ray, and Tom Colicchio
- Former government food program administrators like Ambassadors Eric Bost and Ertharin Cousin.
- Governors, county executives, mayors, tribal leaders.
- Advocacy and direct service nonprofit groups working on hunger, poverty, nutrition, and food issues.
- Academic and nutrition science leaders such as Dr. Dariush Mozaffarian
- Food industry/agriculture workers, business leaders, unions, and trade associations
- Civil, women’s, disability, Native American, and LGBTQ rights organizations
- Religious leaders like the Rev. William Barber II and Sr. Donna Markham, PhD, the Director of Catholic Charities USA, as well as top Muslim, Jewish, Hindi, and Buddhist leaders
- Private and Corporate Foundations and Individual Philanthropists

In May and June, the federal government could sponsor grassroots listening and problem-solving sessions across the country involving all the sectors mentioned above. Top participants in such sessions would later be invited to the conference itself. Those grassroots sessions – as well as intensive meetings with representatives of such sectors in Washington, DC – would develop action recommendations in advance of the conference from each sector of society.

The White House could also encourage governors, mayors, county executives, and tribal leaders to hold state, local, and tribal conferences in September or October, in advance of the White House one.

Developing Proposed Federal Policies and Programs in Advance of the Conference

The federal government must take seriously the Congressional mandate for the conference to issue a plan to end hunger, food insecurity, and nutritional insecurity by 2030.

Toward that end, the conference should commit to concrete, measurable goals related to:

- Creating living wage jobs, particularly through a Food Jobs initiative;
- Raising wages and expanding tax credits;
- Slashing poverty and bolstering economic opportunity;
- Helping low-income Americans develop assets and avoid benefits cliffs;
- Ensuring free health care and prescription drugs for all;
- Making quality housing, childcare, utilities, broad-band access, and public transportation affordable for all;
- Significantly increasing government safety net programs like SNAP, WIC, school meals, P-EBT, and home-delivered meals for older Americans;
- Boosting aid to food charities that help fill in the gaps;
- Strengthening regional and local food systems;
- Bolstering small and medium-size farms;
- Increasing affordable choices of nutritious food for all Americans;
- Reducing obesity and diet-related diseases;
- Protecting and bolstering food workers;
- Making more culturally-sensitive, economically-realistic nutrition education more widely available; and
- Ramping-up nutrition education and research.

While the White House offices of Domestic Policy and Public Engagement – along with Secretary Vilsack and his team at USDA and Secretary Becerra and his team at HHS – will surely take the lead in organizing the conference, the following White House Offices and federal agencies could be tasked to provide concrete support and substantive income:

- WH Council of Economic Advisors
- WH Council on Environmental Quality
- WH National Economic Council

- WH Office of Cabinet Affairs
- WH Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- WH Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships
- WH Office of Communications
- WH Office of Scheduling and Advance
- Office of Management and Budget
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of Labor
- Small Business Administration
- Department of Treasury
- Department of Education
- Department of Transportation
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Department of Justice
- Corporation for National and Community Service
- Federal Emergency Management Administration
- General Services Administration
- Social Security Administration

All domestic federal agencies should be tasked with addressing barriers on these issues by July 1 and creating action plans on the issues by Labor Day.

Recommendations could be divided between steps that could be accomplished immediately, versus those that would need to be accomplished over time, as well as in-between steps that could be taken administratively by the Biden Administration under existing laws and funding levels versus those that would require new authorizations and/or appropriations from Congress.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service, the USDA Economic Research Service, and the U.S. Census Bureau could be tasked to work together to improve the way that government collects and reports on hunger and food insecurity data, and to recommend how such data could be used in benchmarking success after the conference.

Obviously, USDA should continue to lead domestic anti-hunger efforts, and we have great confidence that Secretary Vilsack will do so vigorously and effectively, but virtually every domestic agency could do more to fight hunger, reduce poverty, bolster food security, and promote racial equity in food access and systems.

For starters, the conference should announce specifics of a government-wide initiative to use modern technology to make it easier for low-income Americans to apply for a variety of benefits at the same time and access banking services digitally. This would greatly advance President Biden's December 13, 2021 executive order on "Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government."

The conference should also call for enacting, funding, and implementing a government-wide "Assets Empowerment/Middle Class Wealth Generation Agenda" to dramatically increase

economic opportunity and mobility by enabling more families to transition from owing non-productive debts interest to owning assets such as first homes and small businesses, and reducing “benefits cliffs” that reduce government aid as people increase their incomes and/or assets.

Both of those efforts could be started administratively by the Biden Administration – using existing funding and authorities – but would be greatly enhanced by the enactment by Congress of The HOPE Act of 2021 (H.R.2336/S.1181), an innovative and ground-breaking bill, which would dramatically modernize the delivery of social service and reinvent poverty policy in America. The HOPE Act would:

- Authorize three federal agencies—HUD, USDA, and HHS—to enable select state, county, city, and tribal governments to create pilot programs in economically distressed rural, urban, and suburban areas as well as state-wide.
- Leverage client-facing technology to coordinate access to multiple government programs to related to poverty, health care, nutrition, housing, work support programs, and nonprofit aid for low-income Americans.
- Provide extra resources and technical assistance to enable low-income people to voluntarily work with local nonprofit groups and government agencies to develop assets (by buying a first home, starting a small business, saving money to pay for college, etc.) to achieve long-term self-advancement benchmarks.
- Establish a merit-based competition to award HOPE Technology Innovation Contracts that help ensure client-facing technology apps, widgets, and templates are created for pilot entities to use to create meaningful HOPE Accounts.

Here are just a few examples of how specific federal agencies can better help and be incorporated into the conference report:

- HUD could help people enroll in SNAP and WIC as they enter public housing and/or obtain Section 8 housing vouchers; promote urban farms and community gardens; create sites at public housing to which food ordered online with SNAP can be delivered; and make it easier for homeless Americans to access food.
- DOJ could buy more healthy food for federal prisons from local farmers and could make it easier for people leaving incarceration to obtain SNAP.
- SBA could provide targeted funding and technical assistance to entrepreneurs, especially women and BIPOC people, who are starting food-related businesses.
- DOL could help Americans who are unemployed or in low-income jobs connect with SNAP and WIC.
- Treasury could expand outreach to increase the usage of Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC) and Child Tax Credits (CTC) by low-income people, and combine such outreach with SNAP and WIC outreach.
- Education could do more to promote school breakfasts, since only half of American children who get school lunches now get school breakfasts. Education could also make it

easier for college students to obtain SNAP, including by combining SNAP and Pell Grant applications.

- The Corporation for National Service could target more AmeriCorps slots to projects that jointly advance, economic, and food justice.
- DOT could aid the delivery of donated and recovered foods and support agriculture projects on highway rights-of-ways.
- EPA could do more to ensure that excess food is rescued for distribution to hungry Americans rather than sent to landfills.
- FEMA could increase the coordination between its Emergency Food and Shelter Program and USDA.
- HHS could do more to help older Americans who already get meals at senior centers and through meals-on-wheels to access SNAP, as well as to better integrate food and nutrition security measures into Medicaid and Medicare. Also, HHS, NIH, and HHS could coordinate better on nutrition research and education.
- The VA could connect low-income veterans with food resources.
- The Social Security Administration could inform older Americans how they might be eligible for SNAP and other forms of food assistance.

Those examples exemplify why these vital issues need to be tackled administration-wide, not just at the USDA.

Here are some other innovative plans the conference process could also help to develop and announce:

- The federal government should launch a “moonshot on nutrition research” to intensify and improve coordination of nutrition in order to reduce the breadth, severity, and cost of diet-related diseases. As explained in this paper in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition: “More Americans are sick than are healthy, largely from rising diet-related illnesses. These conditions create tremendous strains on productivity, health care costs, health disparities, government budgets, US economic competitiveness, and military readiness. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak has further laid bare these strains, including food insecurity, major diet-related co-morbidities for poor outcomes from COVID-19 such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, and insufficient surveillance on and coordination of our food system. More than ten federal departments and agencies currently invest in critical nutrition research, yet with relatively flat investments over several decades. Coordination also remains suboptimal, documented by multiple governmental reports over 50 years. Greater harmonization and expansion of federal investment in nutrition science, not a siloing or rearrangement of existing investments, has tremendous potential to generate new discoveries to improve and sustain the health of all Americans. Two identified key strategies to achieve this were as follows: 1) a new authority for robust cross-governmental coordination of nutrition research and other nutrition-related policy and 2) strengthened authority, investment, and coordination for nutrition research within the NIH.” This effort could increase life expectancies for Americans, while significantly decreasing spending on health care. This would require a mix of administrative and regulatory actions by USDA, HHS, and NIH, as well as legislation and appropriations.

- USDA and FDA should overhaul food labeling to ensure that all labels are large, clear, and accurate and base their serving sizes on what real people actually eat. Much food labeling is confusing, especially related to portion size. This could aid every American by improving the ability of everyone to make informed eating choices.
- HHS and USDA should work together to adopt a national food point system—tied to an easy-to-use smartphone app—to simplify and personalize daily nutritional choices for consumers. While food companies also have similar systems, they often ignore sound nutritional science, make self-serving suggestions, and are usually too expensive for much of the public to use. Creating one system free to the public and based solely on sound science could aid every American by improving the ability of everyone to make informed eating choices.
- The federal government should provide funds and encouragement to build nutrition science fully into the curricula of medical schools, where it is woefully under-taught. U.S. medical schools, on average, only offer 19.6 hours of nutrition education across four years of medical education. It is important to reorient the medical profession—which too often has a default preference for drugs and surgery—to focus more on wellness, including good nutrition. Improved nutrition education for doctors could increase life expectancies for Americans, while significantly decreasing spending on health care.

Conclusion

Properly implemented, a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health will make history by leading America towards finally ending domestic hunger and ensuring that nutritious food is affordable, convenient, and available for all America.

Hunger Free America will do everything within its power to work with the federal government and other stakeholders to ensure the success of these vital efforts.