

# ENDING HUNGER IN AMERICA

Food Insecurity Solutions Based on Lived Expertise

We are unapologetically people with lived experience. We are speaking on behalf of parents and families who know what it is like to be hungry. We have experienced food insecurity first-hand. We've personally skipped meals to make sure that our children were able to eat. We know what it's like to scrape the bottom of the pot just to make sure that there's something left. The fact of the matter is that you say you want to end hunger between now and 2030, but that is eight years away. We don't have that much time. Our children and our families need action now. Hunger and poverty have been an epidemic in our communities for decades. You should have figured it out years ago. But you have not been listening. As you develop a strategy to address hunger, we urge you to listen to our experience and the expertise of others with first-hand, lived experience of food insecurity and develop policies and programs for those who are truly being impacted - people and families like us.



## VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

Violence and discrimination are the daily reality for low-income families across the United States. You cannot begin to address hunger and poverty without addressing the violence that goes on in our neighborhoods and racism/discrimination embedded in systems. Violence exists where we live because people are scraping by in any way that they can. People are fed up with the systems that have been put in place specifically for us to fail.

Our families are not just managing the day-to-day challenge of putting food on the table for our families. We are also trying to keep our children safe in communities where the sound of gunfire is way too common, and police are not trusted to serve or protect. While we support the right to bear arms, our government must do more to keep guns out of our neighborhoods. Common sense gun control policies must be implemented to restrict the manufacturing and sale of high powered weapons. Fair punishments for offenders must be enacted to keep us safe and reduce the violence that is paralyzing so many of our communities.

Additionally, the racism and discrimination we face daily must be addressed. Even just the act of using a food stamps card results in unequal treatment and discrimination.

“ States have money allocated to build more prisons, but they can't make sure the library stays open? ”

Tianna Gaines-Turner, Philadelphia, PA

“ If we don't nourish our own bodies, there's no way that we can provide for our families, because we are diminishing from not eating. ”



Waltrina Blake, Philadelphia



## COMMUNITY RESOURCES

The lack of resources in communities is intrinsically tied to hunger and poverty. It is the most visible manifestation of poverty in our communities. In order for kids to be healthy, you must put back funding into libraries, after school programs, recreation centers, and community pools, and more. Because, without these resources, our kids do not have a chance.

Oftentimes low-income families must travel outside their own communities to access the resources they need, expending precious time and money to have access to the same resources as wealthier communities. Our families should not have to leave our neighborhoods so our kids can play in playgrounds that are not littered with broken glass and drug paraphernalia or have equipment that is not broken.



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

Center for

Hunger-Free Communities

Recommendations based on listening sessions held by the Center for Hunger-Free Communities on June 29, 2022 with people with lived experience, including members of the Building Wealth and Health Network, Witnesses to Hunger, and the SNAP Participants Collaborative: Waltrina Blake, Leona Brown, Tianna Gaines-Turner, Renorda Gaymon, Kimberly Hart, Luis Lugo, Lakeisha Metz, and Pennie Spain.



## AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

Food prices continue to rise, along with everything from gas to toilet paper. The only thing not increasing are people's paychecks, and the weekly food budget is not going as far as it used to. This cannot be solved by "shopping smarter" or "cutting coupons" as low-income families are often advised to do.

Many low-income neighborhoods do not have access to grocery stores with healthy, affordable food options. Families are forced to rely on subpar or overpriced corner stores filled with processed food where prices can be twice as high as traditional grocery stores. Being able to shop where you live should not be a privilege limited just to the wealthy. Every person should have access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables in their community.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are high cost and highly perishable, making them out of reach for many families on a limited budget. Even water is not free for some families who need it not just for drinking

“Please don't tell me, 'Maybe if we put a garden in your backyard.' Foolishness. I don't have time to do that. I don't have time to garden. I'm a full-time mom. I'm about to start going to school. I work full time. I don't have time to be out there hoeing nothing.”

Tianna Gaines-Turner, Philadelphia, PA



Renorda Gaymon, Harrisburg

“In our neighborhood, food choices [we are presented with] are very poor, having high sodium and different dyes. This is why we are seeing diseases in young kids that we used to just see in older generations.”

but also for cooking due to poor municipal water quality. The increasing cost of food is forcing us to put processed products back into our diets, to the detriment of the health of our families, and the food from pantries/food banks is often outdated or stale.

Food has a major impact on our mental and physical health. With many family members diagnosed with major illnesses, a nutritious diet becomes even more important. But when you walk into the corner stores, the first thing you see is processed foods that will not support their needs.

Additionally, while community gardens are a great resource, they cannot solve food insecurity. Most low-income families do not have the time outside of working and taking care of others in their family to tend to a garden. To make community gardens more impactful and effective in reducing food insecurity, tools and incentives are necessary to allow individuals the ability to prioritize time to spend gardening.

## POLICY AND PROGRAM SOLUTIONS



### Increase SNAP/ WIC Benefits and Expand Eligibility

With the ever increasing cost of food, the government must provide additional benefits, raise income limits, and remove asset limits to ensure more families can get food.



### Provide Equal Access to Public Assistance

Access to and impact of public assistance should not be dictated by where a person lives. It should be set at the federal level and all states must provide the same minimum support.



### Invest Heavily in Community Resources

Significant funding for important community resources, such as playgrounds, libraries, recreation centers, and pools, is necessary to keep kids active and healthy.



### Implement Universal School Meals

The best way to ensure all children receive proper nutrition during the school day is to provide free school breakfast and lunch to all kids at all schools. Increase funding to provide increased quality meals.



## INSUFFICIENT PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Pandemic and summer EBT programs have provided families a little bit of breathing room over the past two years. This support needs to continue and should be expanded. Families also need access to other assistance to allow them breathing room in their budgets to ensure their families are fed and healthy. These include healthcare, child care, and school meals.

In addition to just expanding the assistance offerings themselves, eligibility requirements must also be expanded so families are not left in precarious situations where a small pay increase makes them lose their benefits. In a time when costs for everything are so high, income base limits are entirely too low, leaving too many families ineligible for much needed services and assistance.

“ We’re one of the only countries that doesn’t have universal anything. We have to pay for everything. I am in danger of losing my Medicaid because my son is working. He puts us over [the income limits]. He is making \$15 an hour. ”

Kimberly Hart, New Haven, CT

Often public assistance programs fail to sufficiently support single fathers, veterans, and the elderly. Furthermore, levels of support can vary significantly from state to state.

Many benefits for children are currently limited to those under the age of 18. However, more of us are seeing our adult children stay at home well into their twenties as they are challenged to find jobs that allow them to afford to live on their own. Age limits on benefits should increase to support older children living at home.

Public assistance programs like TANF and SNAP must also be structured to support participants in transitioning off of assistance with greater flexibility. However, the way they are currently set up, they push people deeper into poverty by cutting off benefits as soon as a person begins to gain financial stability. These programs must allow participants to develop self-sufficiency through eliminating asset limits. Further, all public assistance programs should integrate trauma-informed financial literacy programming that supports families in developing and achieving financial goals and stability.

“ A lot of kids are home in the summertime. Not everyone can afford camp. Kids are not working, and some are not old enough to work, so their middle name becomes snack and what’s for dinner. ”



Tianna Gaines-Turner, Philadelphia



### Ensure Affordable Supermarket Access

All families should have access to grocery stores in their community that provide healthy and affordable food. The government must enact incentives to support stores specifically in low-income communities.



### Raise Age Limits of Child Benefits

The nutritional needs of children do not immediately disappear on their 5th or 18th birthdays. Allowing families to receive WIC/SNAP benefits for children beyond these ages will continue to support health.



### Implement Universal Healthcare

Everyone must have access to comprehensive and affordable healthcare. Additionally, insurance companies should be required to provide free gym memberships to all policy holders.



### Hold Businesses Accountable

The government must hold corporations accountable for their part in exacerbating hunger, poverty, and poor health through paying low-wages, violating labor laws, price gouging, and polluting the environment.



## ACCOUNTABILITY

Companies need to be held accountable for their role in creating and aggravating poverty and not following policies related to public assistance programs. Some businesses take advantage of families who utilize public assistance programs by charging higher prices on products when accepting SNAP/WIC in their stores or not following tax-exempt policies for purchases.

Many businesses intentionally hire employees in part-time roles so they are not required to offer them health insurance and other benefits. Then they require those workers to take on more than part-time hours without the benefits. It comes down to making money for the CEO and shareholders at the expense of workers' health, wellbeing, and financial stability.

Others employers pay the lowest wages possible, steal worker pay, or violate workers' rights. By paying minimum wage or below a living wage,

“ We are portioning out our food. My son says, if you cook this day, then we'll have to be able to stretch it. It's sad because that's not something that my children should be worried about. ”

Leona Brown, Philadelphia, PA

“ The most important thing is having a livable wage-paying job. If you pay me so I can do what needs to be done. I won't need any assistance at all. ”



Kimberly Hart, New Haven, CT

employers expecting the government, and in turn the American taxpayers, to cover their payroll. This has to stop. All employers must be required to pay a living wage so workers will not have to turn to public assistance to support their families.

Tax codes must be updated so businesses and the wealthy pay their fair share while low-income families are not overburdened or penalized for assistance received through programs like the Child Tax Credit.

The government itself must also be held accountable through more federal oversight on public assistance programs. Support for families is inconsistent from state to state because funding decisions are delegated to each individual state. Instead, the government must mandate how much of that money goes directly to supporting families.

As you develop a strategy to address hunger and gather this September for the White House's Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, we want you to remember that addressing poverty and hunger is not just a one-time thing. You cannot just release a strategy on paper, and it is solved. Hunger is real 365 days a year; we are living it. We have been waiting all these years for you to figure it out. For our sake, and more so for our kids, we need you to get it right this time.

### ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HUNGER-FREE COMMUNITIES

The Center for Hunger-Free Communities is a community-engaged research, service, advocacy, and policy center of Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health. The Center offers multi-faceted research and action with the goal of developing innovative, empirically-tested solutions to the challenges of hunger and economic insecurity. In partnership with families, researchers, policymakers, and community leaders the Center seeks to find solutions to hunger and poverty based on both science and the human experience.

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