



Virtual Listening Session - Community Priorities to End Hunger and Eliminate Disparities

Nourish California and the California Association of Food Banks held a listening session on July 11, 2022, from 1:00 pm to 2:30 pm. One hundred people registered and 60-70 attended the meeting. Many community members from California expressed their opinions and shared their stories. There were three breakout sessions – Addressing the Root Causes of Hunger, Strengthening Federal Food Assistance Programs, and Improving Immigrant Access to Food Assistance Programs.

Below are some examples of the common themes and expressed priorities **by community members:**

Addressing the Root Causes of Hunger

1. Structural racism, discrimination, and bias affect the way people access food.

Ineligibility due to immigration status, programs that don't recognize the unique and varied needs of communities, the stigma of poverty, and other outcomes of structural oppression underlie hunger and poor health.

What we heard from community members:

- *Poverty means people consider your voice less important, you are not treated well. Hunger and poverty as a whole bring a form of disrespect and disregard.*
- *We had a mixed immigration status household with 9 children. My parents and older siblings struggled to have enough food for all of us. We also had to focus on food that was affordable and led to poor diets. We had lots of refried beans and potatoes with tortillas as it was the most cost-effective.*

2. Barriers to access for certain communities have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated hunger for many – particularly for populations who are barred from SNAP due to their immigration status, those that struggle with their mental health, and those who are unhoused. These groups were unable to utilize the many benefits associated with SNAP participation.

What we heard from community members:



- *There are several challenges of enrolling into programs. It's especially hard for those who are unhoused -- access to the internet, the ability to navigate the system when you are dealing with mental illness, having access to a caseworker when you need it. Getting folks automatically enrolled or otherwise easing the burden and complexity of enrollment would be helpful.*
- *There are many policies that exclude undocumented families. Children from immigrant families may grow up without access to SNAP or state-funded food assistance programs even though they qualify for free or reduced lunch at school. Parents may be afraid to look for help from the government.*

3. There is a lack of access to the variety of foods that people WANT to consume.

Higher cost of foods that people consider healthy and desirable, having to travel to find stores that carry culturally appropriate food, and programs not offering food that is a cultural fit are some of the barriers that keep people from accessing the food they want for themselves and their families.

What we heard from community members:

- *Providing good storage facilities to store fresh food to improve the shelf life. This will increase its availability in the market, reduce waste and also reduce the cost of getting fresh food. This will also make it affordable to low-income earners.*
- *All food should be accessible and available to everyone, it is the humane thing to do and needed for everyone to survive. California is the agricultural capital of the country and oftentimes our own farm workers cannot eat it. Only a limited variety of foods are readily available. Fresh produce is often not one of them.*

4. Food insecurity is one part of the bigger picture. With the cost of living in California, even those with incomes far above the federal poverty threshold can struggle to get by. Due to nationwide income guidelines, these individuals and families do not qualify for public programs such as SNAP, WIC, and school meals.

What we heard from community members:

- *It's all connected. We cannot solve the food problem without solving the income gap/low wage issues, access to high-paying jobs, rent control, etc.*



- *It is really easy to research and provide education on 'eating healthy.' But if an individual is only able to buy beans and rice, then that is all they are feeding to their families. Income guidelines must be reasonable, and taxes must go down. Take a look at how much the cost of gas is impacting the cost of food.*

Strengthening Federal Food Assistance Programs

1. **There are multiple gaps within federal food assistance programs that make it difficult for communities to get the food they need.** With inflation, the cost of food is going up astronomically, yet SNAP benefits are not increasing to match the reality. High costs of child care, food, and shelter must be taken into account when determining program eligibility and benefit amounts. Applying for food assistance needs to be made easier – sometimes even eligibility workers don't know the rules and deny benefits when people are actually eligible. Finally, federal programs often are talked about in the context of children and families, but miss conversations around older adults.

What we heard from community members:

- *We need to bring EBT/SNAP onto college campuses so that students can use it. Need to make it easier to apply. Need to re-think FPL calculations, because it's so outdated. We need to use a local cost of living calculator so that it's much more realistic.*
 - *Many older adults with pensions don't qualify for federal assistance through programs like SNAP. But people's lives are more complicated than that. Income limits are designed to be black and white, but we need to be able to make exceptions for people who have fallen on hard times.*
2. **Foods that are offered by assistance programs should reflect what participants want or need, in a way that is most accessible to them.** School lunches generally fail to take into account the cultural tie of food and flavor, and leave out the wealth of culinary knowledge held by the community. Though SNAP farmers' markets incentives are a way to get fresh, local produce to individuals, people may not have access to transportation to a farmer's market, the time to process fresh items, and in some cases, storage units like full-size refrigerators to safely and properly store foods without spoilage.

What we heard from community members:



- *What is being offered on school campuses is largely disliked by students, and there is rarely local food offered, despite the fact that as a state California is rich in culinary resources. Current rules and guidelines about what can be served in schools seem great on paper, but produce food that many students dislike, while what my students make, from scratch in culinary class wouldn't be allowable even though it is filling and minimally processed.*
- *Some of the other barriers to food access (especially in terms of access to fresh, local food) are time and transportation. For a lot of families and individuals, they either don't have the means to take full advantage of programs like California's Farmers Market Match because it is so limiting (\$10-\$20 per market day) that it is not often worth securing transportation to the market or being sure that their work schedule accommodates market schedules.*

3. **SNAP must become inclusive of all individuals.** The rules for SNAP participation are not reflective of the needs of today's society. The program was intentionally designed to discriminate against members of our community who are deemed "less worthy" of benefits. Work rules for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) and college students, are harmful and prevent individuals from accessing food during times when they require assistance.

What we heard from community members:

- *The ABAWD rules need to be really re-evaluated. We need to separate work requirements from SNAP benefits. We're going to see a lot of harm done if ABAWD rules come back to California.*
- *College student hunger is a big struggle. Being away from family as a first-generation college student means not having access to adequate resources and balancing housing, food, and other costs. We need to make the temporary COVID-era college SNAP waivers permanent so that we can expand access and support students in their college education journey. Isn't being in college employment training in and of itself? Aren't people going to school to get living wage jobs? Why is there a requirement on top of that?*

4. **Child nutrition programs should expand to match participants' needs.** Hunger is a huge issue in the WIC community since WIC benefits are supplemental. Program benefits are



not enough for families to meet their food needs. Parents and guardians should not have to sacrifice their own nutrition to support their children's health. WIC doesn't have online shopping like SNAP does, so families have had to risk their health to go shopping in person during the COVID-19 pandemic. The inequities have been deepened with the formula shortage too, as people who can shop online have been depleting supplies, leaving WIC parents to have to risk going in person and finding nothing or driving long distances to look for available infant formula.

What we heard from community members:

- *My family used WIC, and my husband grew up in a poor household with a chronically ill single mother. School meals were often the only meals they had access to growing up. We need to be thinking about the impact of long-COVID and how that will impact families' food security as parents might not be recovering to their full health.*
- *As a child, I qualified for school meal programs. It was hard to not be able to qualify for programs when I myself had my first child. The cost of living is so high in California. Even with two parents working, we don't have enough to make ends meet, yet we also can't qualify for programs.*

5. **Innovative responses are needed to address growing food needs.** Current programs that provide access to fresh, locally produced foods are still inaccessible for various community members. Many small and/or local producers also fall below the poverty line and face challenges in optimizing the use of programs like Market Match. The same government dollar could help more than one group of individuals in need, as well as increase the amount of liquid income in local economies.

What we heard from community members:

- *Being able to afford fresher, local, in-season items is out of the reach for many families and individuals who fall into the low income, but small farmers/producers make far more selling directly (on average \$0.74 v \$0.12 on the dollar) than selling wholesale. Additionally, the average age of small producers is now over 55 and without new blood going into the industry, we're going to see a greater loss of small producers. Something to mitigate this would be to make it a livable career/industry again.*



- *Increased access to Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) would help support more than one group of individuals, especially if food boxes could be dropped off or picked up at a single, public-transit-friendly location. These boxes could allow local agencies to offer information on low-cost clinics, job training opportunities, government offerings, etc., without that social stigma barrier that stops many families from taking full advantage of offerings or asking questions.*

Improving Immigrant Access to Food Assistance Programs

1. **Immigrant populations face multiple barriers in accessing the food they need.** The types of foods offered in food pantries and food banks are not often culturally appropriate to the communities they serve. Due to fears of the previous public charge rule under the Trump administration and the current chilling effect, parents whose children are eligible for food assistance benefits do not apply to the programs.

What we heard from community members:

- *There is a lack of access to healthy food due to lack of money to buy and fear of receiving benefits due to public charge.*
- *Being full was always important to me because it would allow me to pursue the opportunities around me. Ethnic cuisine was also always a way to express my culture. To me, food is a fundamental part of who I am and what I can do. For many people, getting access to food is the first step of many to achieving the promises of the American Dream.*

2. **Public assistance programs are not adequately serving immigrant populations.** Many immigrant parents rely on their English-speaking children to help them with applications for public assistance programs. There are questions on the SNAP application that pose unique challenges to immigrants, such as the question about sponsor information. Immigrant farm workers have experienced calling their local SNAP office for assistance with the application and have been told that there were no translators or Spanish materials available.

What we heard from community members:

- *According to the LA Times, half of all immigrants in California without legal status struggle with food insecurity. Due to legal, cultural, and linguistic differences,*



they lack support from both government programs like food stamps and community networks in this country.

- *There is a lot of stigma about using public assistance within our community. Fear of being singled out, or being a burden to the country, causes immigrants to not apply for benefits.*

- 3. The government must work to make food assistance programs inclusive of all immigrants.** There needs to be better integration between frontline health and healthcare organizations and where immigrants are currently accessing food assistance to streamline accessibility. The process of applying for food assistance should be demystified so that people are less wary of applying because it is difficult to understand. We need to meet the community where they are at (such as first ensuring access to technology) because currently immigrant communities need many resources to navigate the complex food assistance application systems.

What we heard from community members:

- *One way that the federal government could help the well-being of the community is to send clear messages that SNAP benefits are not a public charge, and if it is necessary for families, they should apply without fear of being affected in a legal situation.*
- *More clear information for the community would help. There is a barrier in this community that affects their emotional well-being, they feel lonely and isolated.*

- 4. There needs to be more engagement with organizations and community members to address hunger.** The federal government must recognize the role that community-based organizations have in their communities. They should ensure equitable and appropriate compensation to community members for their time sharing their experiences and expertise, as well as empower community leaders by keeping them regularly updated about changes that would impact their communities.

What we heard from community members:

- *Legislative efforts that are being implemented around food assistance programs need to be taking into account immigrants' lived experiences.*



- *There must be more capacity building and financial support for CBOs that are invested in the well-being of communities.*

5. **The White House must go beyond improving access to food assistance for immigrant populations.** To best serve the community, the government must continue listening and responding to their needs even beyond the White House conference. Congressional leaders must move the LIFT the BAR Act forward to remove barriers for immigrants to access different social program support. As climate change is expected to worsen food insecurity globally, the federal government must also address climate change immediately and aggressively.