



# Priorities for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

JULY 15, 2022

Nourish California is a nonprofit organization working to ensure equitable access to food. We focus our efforts on our fellow Californians who face the greatest needs and the starkest inequities. Our team leads statewide advocacy efforts to end hunger, disrupt poverty, and ensure that all Californians are well nourished and have the food they need to thrive.

We applaud President Biden's commitment to ending hunger for all Americans by 2030. We appreciate the opportunity to provide input on strategies and priorities that will help shape an achievable plan to fulfill this historical goal.

Federal, state, local, and Tribal policymakers should work with advocates and community members to ensure that community voices help shape solutions to end hunger in the United States by 2030. Acknowledging the critical importance of input from diverse stakeholders, especially community members who have lived experience with hunger and poverty, we have included an appendix of perspectives gathered through a recent public listening session that we hosted to solicit thoughts on hunger, nutrition, and health.

In addition, you can access Nourish California previous research, conducted in partnership with Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3), with direct input from over 1,000 community members about their experiences with hunger, economic hardship, and public programs: [Hardship and Hope for Change, What We Heard: The Lives & Experiences of Californians in 2021](#)

**To end hunger and foster well being, the White House's national strategy should address the inequitable root causes of hunger; strengthen the social safety net, including the improvements to the federal nutrition programs; and expand programs and services to be inclusive of all people living in the United States.**



## I. Address the root causes of hunger

Hunger in the United States is the result of systemic inequality and racist policies that keep individuals in a perpetual cycle of poverty. To end hunger and malnutrition, the White House must address the underlying root causes of poverty in their national strategy.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic fallout have further highlighted the disparities in access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare, particularly among Black, Latinx, rural, and immigrant households.<sup>1</sup> The nation's response to the unprecedented rises in food and economic hardship during the pandemic demonstrated the commitment across the public and private sectors to ensure that millions of individuals do not go hungry or fall deeper into poverty.

Yet, more needs to be done to support individuals and families with low income to be able to afford the food they need and want and to eliminate barriers to participation in public programs. The federal administration should prioritize these root causes in any efforts to ensure food security, nutrition, and well-being.

- **Align income and the cost of living.** Address the relentlessly high cost of living related to housing costs, child care expenses, health care costs, and inflation, including rising food prices, among other cost pressures on household budgets. Guarantee basic household resources to support the needs of all individuals and families, accounting for variations in costs of living across our nation.
- **Increase economic opportunity** through strategies such as effective, inclusive job training and accessible, affordable higher education.
- **Mitigate wealth inequality.** For instance, create federal programs that enable individuals and families with low income to establish and maintain savings. Fund down payment grants and low, fixed-interest loans to support first-time home buyers who have been historically shut out of the market.

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<sup>1</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021. Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>



- **Undo the harm of government-sanctioned racial discrimination and the many other forms of structural oppression.** Commit to dismantling racist, biased policies and systems.

## II. Expand and strengthen federal nutrition programs

A national strategy to end hunger should invest in federal nutrition programs to fully meet the need and better support education and health. With so many children,<sup>2</sup> older adults,<sup>3</sup> and immigrants<sup>4</sup> experiencing hunger, policymakers should leverage key advances made during COVID-19 in order to build a hunger-free future for the prosperity of our nation.

Nourish California urges the White House to increase the number of people who benefit from federal nutrition programs; significantly increase benefit amounts, and modernize the redemption of benefits. More specifically, any national strategy to end hunger should include:

- **Simplification of the application processes** to ensure easy access to basic resources. For instance, **require a single application for enrollment** in multiple programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, and WIC.
- **Reassess income criteria for program enrollment** to account for true levels of poverty and need. Update methodologies to determine the official federal poverty threshold – and related federal poverty guidelines – to accurately account for inputs and expenses that affect a household’s ability to meet basic needs.
- **Eliminating the “benefit cliff”** for households who increase their earned income. Households can experience modest increases in earnings which do not result in a living

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<sup>2</sup> No Kid Hungry, n.d. Facts About Child Hunger in America.

<https://www.nokidhungry.org/who-we-are/hunger-facts>

<sup>3</sup> National Council on Aging, 2021. Get the Facts on SNAP and Senior Hunger.

<https://www.ncoa.org/article/get-the-facts-on-snap-and-senior-hunger>

<sup>4</sup> Nourish California, 2022. New Brief: Food Insecurity & Poverty Among California’s Undocumented Immigrants.

[https://nourishca.org/fresh/blog-category/new-brief-food-insecurity-poverty-among-californias-undocumented-immigrants/.](https://nourishca.org/fresh/blog-category/new-brief-food-insecurity-poverty-among-californias-undocumented-immigrants/)



wage but nonetheless exceed income criteria for federal nutrition programs, causing an abrupt and complete loss of support from crucial safety net programs. Federal nutrition programs can mitigate the harm of the benefit cliff by operating on a sliding scale, allowing benefits to gradually taper off as households increase their income and assets to the point that they can meet basic needs.

- **Collect disaggregated data** on the reach of nutrition programs across race/ethnicity and other identities in order to identify gaps and inform equitable, intentional solutions.

**a. Additional Investments in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**

SNAP is the nation’s most important and effective federal nutrition program that reduces food insecurity and poverty.<sup>5</sup> The program serves as the first line of defense against hunger and supports participants in buying the foods that they want and need. Positive effects of SNAP participation are demonstrated in the short and long term. For instance, studies show children with access to SNAP had better health outcomes and were more likely to finish high school than those without access.<sup>6</sup> USDA’s recent Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) adjustment raised SNAP benefit allotments by \$1.20 per person per day. However, even with the TFP update, SNAP benefits are still inadequate to maintain a healthy diet, particularly for households with high non-food expenses and those that reside in areas with high costs of living.<sup>7</sup>

SNAP (or CalFresh as it is referred to in California) can be improved by:

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<sup>5</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2019. Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table>

<sup>6</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016. SNAP Works for America’s Children.

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-works-for-americas-children>

<sup>7</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022. Updated Thrifty Food Plan Helps Millions of Families Add More Healthy Foods to Their Diets.

<https://www.cbpp.org/blog/updated-thrifty-food-plan-helps-millions-of-families-add-more-healthy-foods-to-their-diet>



- Boosting benefits to **reflect the Low-Cost Meal Plan**, not the still inadequate Thrifty Food Plan currently used for calculating SNAP/CalFresh benefits.
- **Eliminate the cap on the SNAP/CalFresh shelter deduction** which is currently set at \$586 and doesn't reflect California's extraordinarily high housing costs.
- **Eliminate the punitive, counterproductive three-month SNAP/CalFresh time limit** for adults who do not have dependents and are seeking full-time work.
- **Allow recipients to purchase hot and prepared food with their benefits.** This will provide dignity and choice to participants that do not have adequate facilities for safe preparation or storage of food.
- Support **equitable access to higher education** by acknowledging that the pursuit of a college degree is work. **Eliminate the work time requirements** that keep college students from accessing SNAP/CalFresh.
- **Allow individuals who are incarcerated to apply for SNAP/CalFresh within 30 days prior to their release.** Formerly incarcerated individuals are likely to experience food insecurity and the associated poverty connected to unemployment following their release<sup>8</sup>. As justice-impacted persons return to the community, they must be nourished and have access to food, housing, employment and other supports to successfully transition and thrive.
- Increase access and participation among older adults by **allowing all states to implement Combined Application Projects** that streamline dual enrollment between SNAP and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Program.
- **Increase recertification periods to 5 years for older adults and one year for all other recipients.** Elderly and disabled individuals should not have to face the burden of yearly reporting requirements, especially when they have no earned income and there are no changes expected in their financial situation.
- **Make effective COVID provisions permanent** to increase program accessibility, reduce administrative costs, and churn. Eliminate in-person interview

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<sup>8</sup> Landon, Jenny. "Food Insecurity Is Rising, And Incarceration Puts Families At Risk". Prisonpolicy.Org, 2022, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/02/10/food-insecurity/>.



requirements, reduce paperwork, and limit bureaucracy burdens for applicants, participants, and program administrators. Increase effective, user-informed outreach and the ability to use benefits for online purchases.

## b. Bolster the WIC Program

WIC provides pregnant individuals and postpartum mothers with low income, infants, and young children, with nutritious foods and nutrition education. Yet in the state of California, the program fails to reach all young children in need. For example, about **500,000 children**<sup>9</sup> enrolled in Medicaid are presumptively eligible for WIC, but not enrolled. Federal policies are necessary to ensure equitable access and to remove the barriers standing between program participants and the food they need. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Woman, Infant and Children can be improved by creating a universal WIC program that provides critical nutrition benefits for all pregnant and postpartum individuals, infants, and children regardless of income.

Additional priorities should include:

- Make WIC an **entitlement program** to ensure sufficient funding for all applicants.
- **Address gaps in program reach and streamline eligibility.** Extend certification periods to **two years for infants** in order to avoid the substantial drop in WIC participation that is tied to burdensome recertification requirements for one-year-old children. Extend eligibility for children **until their sixth birthday** to ensure that children over the age of five who are not yet attending school (and therefore do not have access to school meals) have adequate nutrition assistance.
- Extend **postpartum women’s eligibility to two years**, to improve maternal nutrition outcomes and combat maternal mortality.<sup>10</sup> The United States has the

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<sup>9</sup> The State of WIC: Investing in the Next Generation. S3.Amazonaws.Com, 2022, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/state-of-wic\\_2022.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/state-of-wic_2022.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> National WIC Association, 2022. “The Role of WIC in Reducing Maternal Mortality.” [https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/fy20\\_nwa\\_factsheet\\_reducing-maternal-mortality-full-report.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/fy20_nwa_factsheet_reducing-maternal-mortality-full-report.pdf)



highest rate of maternal mortality among comparable nations<sup>11</sup> and the mortality rate is still increasing. Considerable racial disparities have been observed with Black and American Indian women experiencing the highest rate.

- Permanently improve access to WIC services to reach more children. COVID-19 waivers increased WIC enrollment by **allowing remote certifications** and **dropping the requirement for enrolling in person**. Making these flexibilities permanent would eliminate barriers to WIC participation, such as limited access to transportation, conflicting work schedules and lack of paid time off. In addition, pandemic waivers allowed for **food package substitutions** when specific items were not in stores. Keeping those flexibilities will ensure better access to food for rural participants, families with transportation challenges, and others with limited access to well-stocked stores.
- **Remotely load benefits onto a participants' WIC EBT cards**. The use of an EBT card and automatically loading benefits remotely will remove challenges to participation such as reliable transportation, lack of childcare, lack of paid time off, etc. Participants will not be required to unnecessarily visit the WIC clinic.
- Promote **healthcare integration**. Nutritional assessments for infants can be conducted at WIC centers. Registered Dietitians are trained to provide medical nutrition therapy and services could be billed to Medicaid. Blood work that is required for disbursement of benefits is often completed at a WIC participant's local doctor's office or hospital. Data sharing systems could send information between healthcare services and WIC, creating fewer barriers for families and reducing healthcare/WIC visits and costs.
- **Modernize benefit redemption** by developing online ordering, online shopping, and allowing home delivery to ensure equitable shopping options. State agencies,

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<sup>11</sup> Tikkanen R, Gunja MZ, FitzGerald M, Zephyrin L., 2020. Maternal Mortality and Maternity Care in the United States Compared to 10 Other Developed Countries. Commonwealth Fund Issue Briefs.

<https://doi.org/10.26099/411v-9255>.



EBT processors, and retailers will need additional resources to build new systems and integrate technologies so participants can purchase items online.

- **Make the enhanced fruit and vegetable benefits permanent.** The Cash Value Benefit (CVB), previously \$9-11/month increased to \$24/month for children, \$43/month for pregnant and postpartum women, and \$47/month for breastfeeding women in response to the pandemic. Maintaining these benefits levels in the long term will allow WIC participants to purchase more fresh, nutritious produce.
- **Increase investments in WIC for breastfeeding support.** Strengthen collaboration with healthcare professionals. Help close the disparities<sup>12</sup> in initiation and support mothers in sustaining their breastfeeding choices. Provide necessary supplies to help mothers succeed in their breastfeeding goals.

### c. **Expand School Meals to All Children**

School breakfast and lunch are a lifeline, sometimes the only meals available to children with low income.<sup>13</sup> During the pandemic, school districts were able to offer universal school meals free of charge to all students, including summer meals, due to USDA's authority, granted by Congress. The discontinuation of these provisions can cause severe impacts and hunger for millions of children. Nourish California urges the White House to make these expansions permanent.

- **Establish a universal school meals program for all children,** from kindergarten through high school, with no application required and with sufficient federal funding to provide nutritious meals at no charge to students. This will improve access to meals, reduce stigma associated with program participation, and eliminate unpaid school meal debt. Universal meals will also reduce the administrative burden on already under-funded school nutrition departments and their workforce.

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<sup>12</sup> National WIC Association, 2022. The State of WIC: Investing in the Next Generation.

<https://thewichub.org/the-state-of-wic-investing-in-the-next-generation/>

<sup>13</sup> No Kid Hungry, n.d. School Meals. <https://www.nokidhungry.org/what-we-do/school-meals>





- **Expand summer meal programs** to include young adults, such as recently graduated high school students, and parents, guardians, and caregivers accompanying young children to summer meal sites. **Implement a permanent, nationwide Summer EBT** program to help children maintain access to nutritious food when they lose access to school meal programs during summer breaks. More than 3.8 million children in California would qualify for a Summer EBT program like the one proposed in the House-passed Build Back Better Act.<sup>14</sup>
- Build on the success of **Pandemic EBT** to ensure children have food during planned school breaks and unanticipated school closures.

#### d. **Strengthen the Child and Adult Care Food Program**

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) plays a vital role in stabilizing childcare infrastructure and supporting parents' ability to return to work,<sup>15</sup> yet meals and snacks remain out of reach for too many as only 38% of child care programs in California participate in CACFP.<sup>16</sup> As California's older adult population grows – and elders with low income are disproportionately Black and Latinx<sup>17</sup> – the nation needs equitable investments in nutrition programs to support healthy aging.

- **Provide universal access to free meals** for all children in childcare.
- Allow an **additional meal or snack for children in a full day of care**. Centers and daycare homes are only allowed reimbursements for up to two meals and one snack, or two snacks and one meal. Preschoolers often spend 9 to 10 hours a day

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<sup>14</sup> Food Research and Action Center & Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021. The Build Back Better Act Would Transform Child Nutrition In California.

[https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/BBB-Fact-Sheets\\_CA.pdf](https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/BBB-Fact-Sheets_CA.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2013. Why CACFP Is Important.

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/why-cacfp-important>

<sup>16</sup> California Child Care Resources & Referral Network, 2019. California Child Care Portfolio.

<https://rrnetwork.org/assets/general-files/California-06-20.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Public Policy Institute of California, 2015. Planning for California's Growing Senior Population.

<https://www.ppic.org/publication/planning-for-californias-growing-senior-population/>



in care and need sufficient access to nutritious meals and snacks throughout that time to support optimal health, well being, and development.

- **Improve reimbursement rate adjustments for child care home providers**, making sure reimbursements keep up with the cost of providing a healthy CACFP meal.
- **Streamline participation for parents and providers** by moving to annual eligibility for proprietary child care centers.
- **Improve the technology** to eliminate overly burdensome and outdated paperwork. Child and adult care providers have to navigate complex unnecessary paperwork to receive reimbursements. Electronic data collection systems could be used to reduce administrative burdens.

### III. Inclusive federal nutrition programs and eligibility regardless of immigration status

The United States should be the land of opportunity for the individuals and families who call it home. Yet millions are barred from receiving access to essential programs and services solely due to their immigration status. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, passed in 1996, greatly restricted access to federal benefits for immigrants and continues to deter participation in programs that are critical to ensuring immigrants can meet their basic needs.

A national strategy to end hunger should guarantee equitable access to SNAP and other nutrition programs with no exceptions or exclusions based on immigration status.

- **Remove the five-year bar** and other barriers that deny lawfully present immigrants access to federally funded services, including SNAP.
- Support state and federal efforts to **remove eligibility restrictions based on xenophobic and racist policies** that discriminate against immigrants.
- **Provide clear, consistent, and field-tested messaging** to address fears, confusion, and misinformation among immigrants about public programs, including SNAP, impacting immigration status (e.g. the public charge rule).



In summary, to achieve the White House’s goals of eradicating food insecurity by 2030, national strategies should address the root causes of hunger and poverty; advance bold policies that expand and strengthen federal nutrition programs; and establish an inclusive, equitable safety net open to all who call the United States home. Everyone in the United States should have the food they need and want to thrive. Our nation’s long history of exclusionary, inequitable policies and government-sanctioned oppression requires a re-visioning and rebuilding of our public systems if we are to truly eliminate hunger and ensure the well being of all. We applaud President Biden and his administration for undertaking this effort.

## **Additional Resources**

Nourish California partnered with Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) to conduct focus groups and a statewide survey of 1,000 individuals with low and middle incomes in an effort to better understand Californians’ experiences with accessing food and other critical resources.

You can access the research results here: [Hardship and Hope for Change, What We Heard: The Lives & Experiences of Californians in 2021](#)

You can access the recording of the virtual presentation given on Dec 9, 2021. The presentation includes key findings about the assets and challenges affecting households across our state.

### [Event Recording](#)

Please contact Angeles Nelson for any questions at [angeles@nourishca.org](mailto:angeles@nourishca.org)