

The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health focuses on equal access to healthy diets

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Last month, the White House held its much-anticipated White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health – the first such conference in more than 50 years. The last White House Conference on Nutrition resulted in the expansion of critical nutrition assistance and hunger safety net programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs (NSLP/SBP).

Hunger, nutrition, and health are inextricably linked. An unhealthy diet, often characterized by a high consumption of added sugars, saturated fat, sodium, and a low intake of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, is one of the leading risk factors for the development of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), stroke, and diabetes.¹ Hunger, poor nutrition, and diet-related chronic diseases disproportionately impact those living with lower income and people of color. Non-Hispanic black women and men have a higher prevalence of CVD than any other racial and ethnic group, at 58.8 percent and 60.1 percent respectively,² with the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbating these disparities.

Addressing structural barriers to health

The Conference presented an opportunity to further advance the efforts of all levels of government and the private sector to address food and nutrition insecurity and unhealthy diets as well as insufficient physical activity – all main drivers of chronic diseases. Typically, the burden of addressing nutrition and health has been pushed onto the individual. However, structural factors (i.e., access, affordability, availability, and utilization of healthy food) impact people's ability to access and consume healthy diets. Efforts to reduce hunger, improve nutrition, increase physical activity, and reduce the burden of chronic diseases should focus on the structural factors beyond an individual's control. The Conference highlighted several opportunities for the federal government to address some of the structural barriers that prevent people from accessing and consuming healthy diets through coordinated actions across all levels of government and with the private sector. Prioritizing actions to address structural barriers will help to reduce racial

and ethnic disparities in access and consumption of healthy diets.

American Heart Association recommendations highlighted

In advance of the Conference, the White House released a [national strategy](#) [1] to end hunger by 2030. This strategy is a call to action to change the trajectory of health nationwide by making nutritious food more accessible and affordable for all Americans while promoting physical activity. To help advance the goals of the national strategy, the White House secured \$8 billion in commitments from more than 100 private sector and nonprofit organizations. During President Biden's opening remarks, he highlighted a [commitment](#) [2] from the American Heart Association (the AHA) and the Rockefeller Foundation, in partnership with Kroger, to mobilize \$250 million to build a national Food is Medicine Research Initiative. The initiative will launch in Spring 2023 to generate evidence and tools to help the health sector design and scale programs that increase access to nutritious food, improve both health and health equity, and reduce overall health care costs.

The AHA has long championed several of the recommendations outlined in the national strategy as necessary to ensuring that all people have an equitable opportunity to live a long, healthy life. The recommendations outlined in the national strategy are ones the world is watching, given the widening of health disparities and growing food insecurity in a post-COVID world. By focusing on food quality in addition to food quantity in our national food programs, ensuring that all students have access to school meals at no cost, advancing 'food is medicine' programs that increase access to healthy food among chronic disease patients and expanding multi-sector efforts to encourage physical activity, we will see more equitable access to a critical safety net that will improve the diet quality and health for all Americans. While we are happy to see so many crucial recommendations outlined in the national strategy, we recognize that the implementation of the strategy will not happen overnight but will serve as a roadmap for improving the overall hunger and nutrition landscape.

About the author:

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