

I am so honored to be able to share with the Commission a few observations and suggestions based on my 37 years as a food banker.

Defining the problem

Starting out in the seventies, our focus was on failure-to-thrive babies who lacked the calories needed for their brains and bodies to properly develop. We knew our job was to acquire and distribute every pound of food we could get our hands on, no matter what, to help ensure children had the calories they needed.

By 2000, Hunger in America as defined in the seventies and eighties had been virtually eliminated. American ingenuity had figured out how to manufacture cheap calories. The average amount of money that Americans spend to feed their families has gone down from 20% of their household income to 10%!

The only trouble with this “solution” to Hunger in America is that fast food, snack foods and soda are highly addictive... and unhealthy.

- In 1980, healthcare costs in America were \$250 billion dollars.
- By 1995, healthcare costs had quadrupled to \$1 trillion/year.
- Healthcare costs in America, mostly driven (60%) by rapidly escalating, nutrition-related chronic diseases, are projected to exceed \$3 trillion in 2015.

We see this reality manifest every day in our own community. Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County, located in Watsonville, in the heart of the Pajaro Valley. Over 25,000 farmworkers harvest over \$1 billion/year of berries and other fresh produce and over 75% of Watsonville residents live in homes where Spanish is the main language spoken.

Ironically, the biggest manifestations of hunger and malnutrition in our community are obesity and diabetes; 49% of our children are obese or overweight, most of whom are at serious risk of a lifetime struggle with diabetes. Too many families are forced to stretch their limited food budgets by purchasing cheap food which is high in calories and low in nutrients.

Too many young people are struggling to find pathways to enter the workforce to support families of their own. Thousands of families locally are trapped in downward spirals of chronic underemployment, chronic food insecurity and chronic health disease.

Creating a brighter future through good nutrition

We believe that the very definition of “hunger in America” has changed from too few calories to too few nutrients with too many calories. We believe that the new definition of “hunger in America” is the lack of access to healthy food. And Second Harvest is deeply committed to increasing both the access to, and consumption of, nutritious foods to kids and their families.

We believe that focusing on solving child hunger and malnutrition provides a lever and a fulcrum to fundamentally transform the communities we serve into healthy, strong and vibrant places where no one has their life opportunities curtailed by food insecurity and a lifetime struggle with diabetes and obesity.

Our Passion for Produce Program has trained and certified over 300 low-income parents and grandparents to be our volunteer Nutrition Ambassadors.

- Our Nutrition Ambassadors help teach over 600 nutrition classes a year at 34 schools, churches, low-income housing complexes, health clinics and community centers.
- Upon graduating from our six week train-the-trainer classes, we put on a graduation ceremony where our Nutrition Ambassadors receive certificates of completion and logo wear.
 - In their graduation speeches, our Embajadores often state that they “have never been asked to be a leader before”...and how very powerful that is.

Twice a month our Nutrition Ambassadors teach basic nutrition principles and healthy recipes featuring the produce that is being distributed farmers’ market-style after each class.

- We teach USDA My Plate’s basic nutrition principles:
 - Make sure half of all you eat is fresh fruits and vegetables.
 - Drink water and low-fat milk, not soda.
 - Make sure half your grains are whole.
 - Eat more healthy fats and lean proteins.
- We have found that healthy food and nutrition education, when combined with peer support is very effective in helping people change their eating habits and maintain healthy lifestyle changes.
- Specifically, our evaluation surveys report that
 - Over 90% of our participants are eating more produce and drinking less soda
 - Over 80% are eating smaller portions and exercising more
 - And 75% are losing weight.

Our Passion for Produce is a powerful program precisely because it engages our low income families as leaders and because it supports our families to take greater responsibility for their own health and wellness.

- In the past, many of us have often thought of food insecurity primarily as an **outcome** of poverty and lack of income and we had thought of our own programs primarily as safety nets.
- What is becoming increasingly clear is that food insecurity is also one of the biggest **drivers** of the cycle of poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS: I really enjoyed reading the detailed report from your March Commission Hearing and Meeting. I would like to focus on 2 recommendations:

1. In my opinion, of greatest import is the RTI recommendation for deeper investigation into the impacts of increased food security on long-term health care costs with special focus on impacts on both Medicare and Medicaid costs.

- We know that budgeting for healthcare costs is the biggest financial challenge being faced by Congress as well as businesses and families.
- We know that SNAP Education and Nutrition are our country’s greatest defense against rising healthcare costs.

- Our hypothesis is that an additional \$1 billion strategically invested in SNAP Education & Nutrition Programs would result in a reduction of direct federal outlays for healthcare costs by at least \$10 billion.
- It is my most profound hope that this Commission, together with your consultants RTI International, will commit to do whatever it takes to figure out how to prove this hypothesis beyond the shadow of a doubt. In my opinion, nothing is more important than doing this one thing.

2. We recommend that USDA invest more time and attention into identifying and scaling the next wave of effective solutions to increasing the consumption of nutritious foods by children and their families.

- We need to go beyond “proven practices” to assigning greater priority to supporting and holding up the kinds of “promising practices” you are searching for when you call for “innovative recommendations and community initiatives to reduce the need for government assistance programs.”
- Our classes are popular and effective with our largely farmworker population because they are short, highly-interactive, culturally appropriate and low-literacy.
- We find success is that we combining food and education and ongoing peer support . Instead of a series of 3-6 classes, we offer 24 classes all year long.
- Even though it is not a proven practice, our nutrition ambassadors program has been held up as a “promising practice” by the UC Berkeley School of Weight and Health, Feeding America and others.
- Fortunately we have received a \$120,000 grant from the Packard Foundation to conduct rigorous program evaluation over the next 30 months so we can achieve “proven practice” status.
- We recommend that you look at programs like ours as evidence that SNAP-Ed and SNAP Nutrition are working. We know that greater experimentation and flexibility is key to bringing forth the kinds of truly remarkable, replicable game changers needed.

We believe that implementing these two recommendations would change the calculus for healthcare costs in America, freeing up hundreds of billions of dollars a year for education, for infrastructure, for parks, for research, for defense, for workforce development programs.

We believe that your Commission has an historic opportunity to address food insecurity as an essential part of the broader vision to increase social mobility and reduce the need for assistance programs. Thank you for commitment to creating true opportunity for all, regardless of birth.