



To End U.S. Hunger, We Must Cut Poverty, Boost Economic Opportunity, Reduce Inflation, and Bolster the Middle Class

By Joel Berg, CEO, Hunger Free America

“Hunger today isn’t about scarcity — it’s about a massive failure in leadership.”

- President Joe Biden, May 24, 2020

Contents

- Introduction
- Why You Cannot End Hunger Just by Finding the Americans Who Are Hungry and Feeding Them
- Why the Nation Cannot Significantly Improve Nutrition and Health Without Ending U.S. Hunger and Food Insecurity
- Why Food Charities and Innovative Grassroots Anti-Hunger Projects Can Barely Dent the U.S. Hunger and Nutrition Insecurity Problems
- Why the Nutrition Assistance Safety Net Alone Cannot End Hunger
- So, How **Can** We End Hunger, Food Insecurity, and Nutrition Insecurity in the U.S?

Introduction

President Joseph Biden recently announced that he will be holding a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health (the first since 1969) this September. Getting Congress to fund, and the White House to agree to hold, the second-ever White House conference on food and nutrition, a step long championed by Hunger Free America, is a big victory for the anti-hunger movement. We are grateful that House Rules Committee Chair James McGovern, who fought incessantly for this for years, finally achieved this crucial milestone and that the Biden Administration is enthusiastically championing and advancing this effort. It is extremely encouraging that President Biden is committing to ending U.S. hunger by 2030, a truly historic pledge.

We cannot end U.S. hunger without significantly reducing poverty, and we cannot significantly reduce poverty without first raising wages, reducing inflation, boosting economic opportunity, and bolstering the American middle class.

Similarly, we cannot ensure good nutrition for all Americans without first ending domestic hunger.

The incontrovertible facts below will prove the truth of those statements.

If the White House is serious about using its upcoming September 2022 Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health to propose a plan to achieve its two historic goals set by President Joe Biden – ending hunger and increasing healthy eating for all Americans by 2030 (in only eight years) – the Conference must propose economic and social policies to raise wages and slash U.S. poverty, make the cost of living more affordable, dramatically increase economic opportunity, and make it easier for low-income Americans to enter, and stay in, the middle class.

Including a focus on aiding the middle class would also reinforce the reality that food insecurity is not just a problem for the very poor, and send a clear message that the President still cares deeply about the struggles of *all* working Americans.

It is concerning that, out of the five Conference pillars originally listed by the White House, increasing physical activity is included, but decreasing poverty and increasing economic opportunity are not. This gives the false impression that the White House believes that the leading cause of poor health in America is personal behavioral choices, when I know that President Biden and his staff are well aware that the top causes are structural and economic, not personal. Substantively, proposals that rely more on changing personal behavior than redressing structural inequities in the nation are destined to falter. From a messaging standpoint, any implication that the Administration wants to essentially lecture Americans that they need to exercise more and eat better but is unwilling – or unable – to improve their economic well-being so they have more money and time to do both – would be a political misstep.

Similarly, there would be significant substantive and political risk if the Administration set a public goal of ending hunger by 2030 while proposing a plan that would not come close to doing so.

I understand that, above all, the White House wants the Conference to be practical. It does not want the Conference to propose unachievable, pie-in-the-sky goals. I could not agree more. The Conference's goals should indeed be concrete, focused, and attainable.

However, as I will explain below, **ending hunger and improving nutrition by decreasing poverty and expanding upward economic mobility is a far more realistic strategy – from both substantive and political standpoints – than any other potential anti-hunger and nutrition improvement strategies.**

It is important to note that the Conference plan need not propose only steps that can be immediately enacted by the Biden Administration and *this* Congress. Rather, the plan should propose the steps that are objectively necessary to end U.S. hunger and boost nutrition, and

candidly explain to the American people that those goals can only be accomplished if both the executive and legislative branches carry out the steps proposed. In that vein, the Conference plan should be clear that we cannot end hunger without bringing down the costs of living for struggling families, and we cannot bring down the cost of living unless Congress enacts key provisions of the Build Back Better Plan.

Inflation in food prices and other costs of living will be the elephant in the room, especially since they are a reason for the nation's still sky-high levels of food insecurity. If the White House chooses not to address inflation in the Conference, it will surely get hammered by the media and political opponents. Thus, the best strategy would be for the Biden Administration to use the Conference to address food inflation on its *own terms*, thereby greatly influencing the framing of the public narrative on an issue that is top of mind for most Americans.

I have seen recent media interviews in which White House officials made a forceful and compelling case that enacting key parts of the Build Back Better Plan would reduce the costs of living for many struggling Americans. There is no reason that this Conference should not also make that case.

For all those reasons, the **plan proposed by the Conference must center on economic and safety net improvements**. As detailed below, significantly increasing the impact of innovative grassroots partnerships and food charities would barely scratch the surface of the U.S. food insecurity crisis, which, according to the [USDA Economic Research Service](#), systemically harmed 38.3 million Americans – including 11.7 million U.S. children – in 2020.

In theory, the nation *could* end U.S. hunger simply by dramatically expanding the U.S. domestic nutrition safety net, but that is not a realistic option politically. To do so, Congress might need to literally double the funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which is already set to spend about \$140 billion in federal tax funds this year. It would need to expand eligibility for SNAP to include undocumented immigrants, as well as tens of millions of families in the lower middle class, as well as provide funding to do both – *every year* – in perpetuity. That is simply politically and economically impossible.

In contrast, some of the steps needed to slash poverty (such as increasing the minimum wage in each state, making wage levels proportional to each state's median household income, and pegging future increase to costs of living) not only would be free to taxpayers, but they would actually *reduce* overall federal spending by decreasing the number of people who need, and qualify for, safety net programs.

Economic empowerment efforts would also be far more politically popular and sustainable than dramatically increasing federal spending on redistributive safety net programs like SNAP. For example, in 2020, 61 percent of Florida voters (13 points more than voted for President Biden) voted to increase the state's minimum wage to \$15 per hour. Low-income Americans themselves think that policies that reward work and boost upward mobility would help them the most. In a [nationwide poll conducted on behalf of Hunger Free America](#) of households earning \$50,000 or less annually, 72 to 75 percent of respondents said they would be personally aided by policies that: "increase Social Security benefits for working people", "eliminate benefits cliffs that harm

working people”, “enable consumers to better control credit ratings”, “guarantee any adult able to work a living wage job”, and “reward national service participants with mobility”.

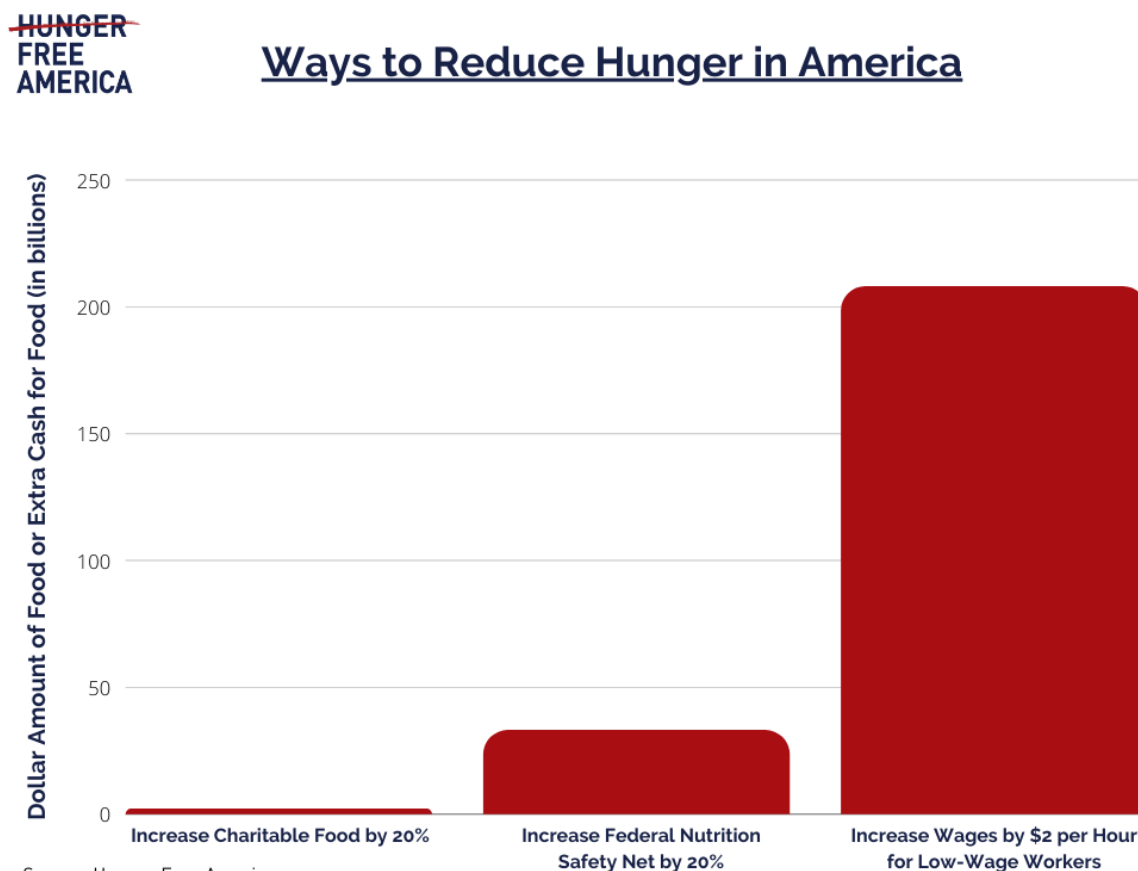
Beyond the political and messaging reasons for needing to include economic empowerment issues in the Conference, the substantive case is a slam dunk. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the hunger reduction impact of raising wages is far greater – by a huge order of magnitude – than the impact of increasing the federal nutrition assistance safety net, which in turn, is far greater – again by a huge order of magnitude – than increasing charitable food distributions.

If the nation increased wages for the fifty million lowest-income U.S. workers by merely \$2 per hour, that would provide their households an extra \$208 billion in cash to be able to better afford nutritious food and pay for other costs of living.

If the nation increased federal nutrition safety net funding by 20 percent, that would provide an extra \$33 billion in food for low-income Americans.

By contrast, if Feeding America (and its two hundred affiliated food banks nationwide) were to increase the food they distributed by 20 percent, that would provide an extra \$2 billion extra in food for low-income Americans.ⁱ

Figure 1



It is simply not accurate to claim that we can end U.S. hunger without increasing economic mobility, reducing inflation, boosting wages, and reducing poverty.

Claiming we can end hunger without reducing poverty would be like claiming we can end drought without more water.

The White House now faces two choices: either include poverty reduction and economic mobility as additional pillars of the Conference or scale back the pledge to end hunger by 2030.

Obviously, seriously planning to end hunger is the wiser choice – substantively, politically, and morally.

Why You Cannot End Hunger Just by Finding the Americans Who Are Hungry and Feeding Them

Many people assume that most low-income American families are impoverished and food insecure for long, continuous periods of time, often over multiple generations, but that is just not the case for most people who experience poverty and food insecurity in the U.S.

According to U.S. Census data, in the 48 months spanning the years 2009 through 2012, only 2.7 percent of U.S. households were below the federal poverty line for the entirety of those 48 months, but more than a third (34.5 percent) of all U.S. households experienced poverty in at least two of those months.ⁱⁱ In other words, while only one in 37 Americans lived under the poverty line the entire four years, more than one in three Americans lived in poverty some of the time. Most families who experience poverty do so sporadically, repeatedly climbing into, and then falling out of, the middle class. Likewise, many lower middle-class Americans fall into poverty multiple times over a lifetime, often for brief stints.

U.S. food insecurity is similarly fluid, episodic, and hard to pinpoint, while impacting a huge swath of the American population over time. [A study by Cornell University](#) in 2004 found that half of all U.S. adults will receive SNAP benefits at some point in their life, yet [USDA ERS reported](#) that fully 45 percent of food insecure households in 2020 failed to receive help from SNAP, WIC, or school lunches in the month prior to the national food insecurity survey.

While the safety net is effective at preventing mass starvation, its current design is neither nimble nor expansive enough to meet the rapidly changing economic and personal circumstances of many struggling Americans.

A [USDA ERS 2020 study on household food security](#) found:

“Households were classified as having low or very low food security based on their experience of the conditions indicated in the survey questions at any time during the previous 12 months. The prevalence of these conditions on any given day is far below the corresponding annual prevalence. For example, the prevalence of very low food security during the 30 days before the December 2020 survey is 2.3 percent (table S-4 in

Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). Most households that reported experiencing food-insecure conditions during the previous 30 days reported experiencing the conditions in 1 to 7 days during the month.”

USDA ERS also found that in 2020, 28.6 percent of families below 185 percent of the poverty line (\$40,182 in annual income for a family of three) experienced food insecurity, while 4.9 percent of those *above* 185 percent of the poverty line did. That means very significant portions of the lowest middle class face food insecurity.

Unfortunately, most of those families above 185 percent of the poverty line earn too much to be eligible for SNAP under current law but still experience food insecurity.

[Hunger Free America’s analysis of federal data](#) found that from 2018-2022, 9.7 percent of employed adults in the U.S. lived in food insecure households.

Thus, if the government and/or nonprofit groups tried finding everyone in America who was food insecure or hungry *at any particular time* and providing them food at that particular time, that would be a nearly impossible task. Conversely, if you simply distributed free food through government programs and/or charities to anyone who *could become* food insecure at some point, that would be prohibitively costly and unsustainable over time. For all those reasons, it would be far easier and more cost-effective in the long run to significantly reduce economic hardship for Americans in or near poverty, thereby dramatically reducing the population of Americans who might need food assistance.

Why the Nation Cannot Significantly Improve Nutrition and Health Without Ending U.S. Hunger and Food Insecurity

There is a boatload of data proving that the prime causes of nutrition insecurity and poor health are systemic economic and structural problems afflicting our whole society. While personal behavior certainly matters, it is not the prime cause of these problems. All the nutrition education in the world will not significantly improve nutritional intake if the food itself is too expensive, too difficult to physically access, and too time-consuming to prepare for tens of millions of low-income and working families.

In 2020, [USDA ERS](#) found that 38.3 million Americans (including 11.7 million U.S. children) lived in food insecure homes, meaning they could not always afford enough food, or the healthy food they wanted, for themselves and their families. USDA further found that food secure households spent an average of \$10 per week per person more on food than did food insecure households. That means that for U.S. households of the average size of 2.5 people, over the course of 52 weeks, a food secure household will spend \$1,300 more on food than a food insecure household.

Of the 12.4 million Americans identified by USDA ERS as living in households with “very low food security” in 2020:

- Ninety-five percent reported that they could not afford to eat balanced meals.

- Ninety-four percent reported that they had eaten less than they felt they should because there was not enough money for food.
- Forty-six percent reported having lost weight because they did not have enough money for food.
- Thirty percent reported that an adult did not eat for an entire day because there was not enough money for food; 23 percent reported that this had occurred in 3 or more months.

Furthermore, we are seeing the paradox of food insecure people being at higher risk for obesity, since healthier food is generally more expensive to buy, harder to physically obtain, and more time consuming to prepare than less healthy food. Nutrition insecurity is a public health issue that must be addressed in tandem with food insecurity. There is simply no way to solve nutrition insecurity without solving food insecurity.

Why Food Charities and Innovative Grassroots Anti-Hunger Projects Can Barely Dent the U.S. Hunger and Nutrition Insecurity Problems

Policymakers often seek “silver bullets” – miraculously successful grassroots projects that, if scaled up greatly, could solve a major social problem.

Yet the hard reality is that, when it comes to fighting domestic food insecurity and improving nutrition, there are no grassroots silver bullets.

I have been working on domestic hunger issues professionally for nearly three decades, serving for eight years in senior executive positions at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and then working for 21 years for a local and national anti-hunger nonprofit organization. I also spent years researching my first book on domestic hunger published in 2008, *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?*

During all that time, I traveled the nation extensively and personally visited hundreds of anti-hunger charities and grassroots anti-hunger projects (including gleaning and food rescue projects, food banks, soup kitchens, food pantries, community support agriculture projects, food policy councils, nutrition education classes, urban farms and community gardens, food-related job training programs, farmers markets, community produce canning facilities, etc.), seeking to always learn about new best practices. I have visited such projects and agencies in nearly all fifty states, and usually met with their staff, volunteers, board members, and clients/customers to observe and learn about best practices on the ground.

All those travels and site visits taught me two things: 1) the people who create and staff these agencies and projects are among the finest human beings in the nation, pouring their sweat and blood into trying to feed their neighbors, usually for low salaries or no salaries at all; and 2) no matter how heroic their efforts, none of their projects can do more than slightly dent the hunger and nutrition insecurity problem in their community, even if their operations significantly ramped up.

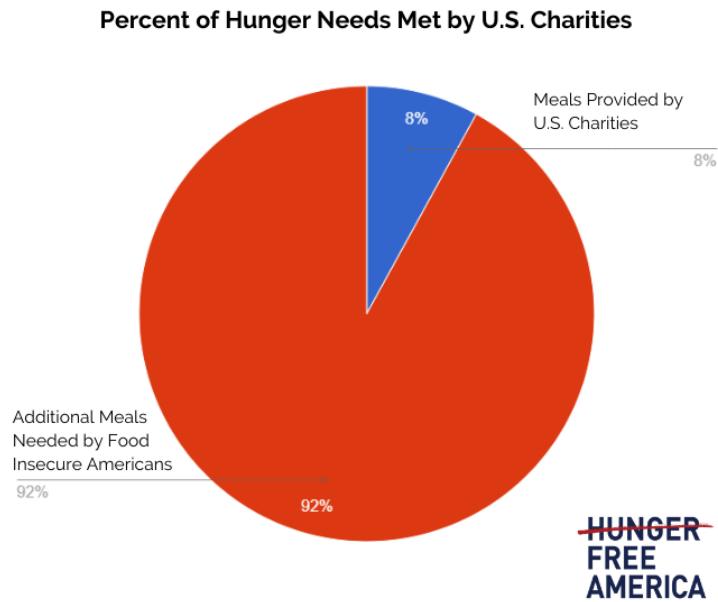
It is important to note that some of these projects are only successful *because* of their small size. For example, food rescue and gleaning organizations only have a finite amount of edible, safe excess food they can recover and distribute, and many such organizations would significantly decrease their cost-effectiveness if they built larger sorting facilities, purchased bigger truck fleets, and/or hired more staff, because the volume of food they distributed could not grow in proportion to their costs. Usable land for urban farming and gardening land is also finite, and rooftop and/or indoor agriculture is generally very expensive. Many other projects that are mostly based outdoors and/or are dependent on seasonal harvests (such as farm gleaning projects, local food processing, urban agriculture and community gardens, farmers markets, community supported agriculture projects, outdoor green/produce carts, etc.) are usually only in full operation a few months out of the year (with some exceptions in some locations in Florida, Texas, or California). Even after accounting for certain crops (like apples and some root vegetables) that can be stored year long, such seasonal efforts are hardly a serious response to the year-round, nationwide, food and nutrition insecurity suffered by tens of millions of Americans.

What about the nation's slightly more than two hundred food banks, and the tens of thousands of community-based food pantries and soup kitchens that they supply with food? They play an absolutely vital role in filling in gaps in the safety net, and they need and deserve more resources. However, there are numerous reasons why relying on food banks and other food charities to play a lead role in fighting hunger and reducing nutrition insecurity is insufficient and limited.

In her seminal 1999 book about the U.S. charitable food system, *Sweet Charity, Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, sociologist Janet Poppendieck lists what she calls the “Seven Deadly ‘Sins’” of the network: insufficiency (not enough food); inappropriateness (people do not get to choose what is best for their families); nutritional inadequacy (too much processed, high-sugar, high-sodium, high-fat junk food); instability (feeding agencies cannot always predict when they will be open and when they will run out of food); inaccessibility (they are particularly difficult to get to in rural areas or for seniors, people with disabilities, and people without cars; most are closed on nights and weekends when working people most need them); inefficiency (the agencies require a massive, three-tier system just to give out free food); and indignity (at even the best-run agencies, it is usually degrading to obtain emergency food).

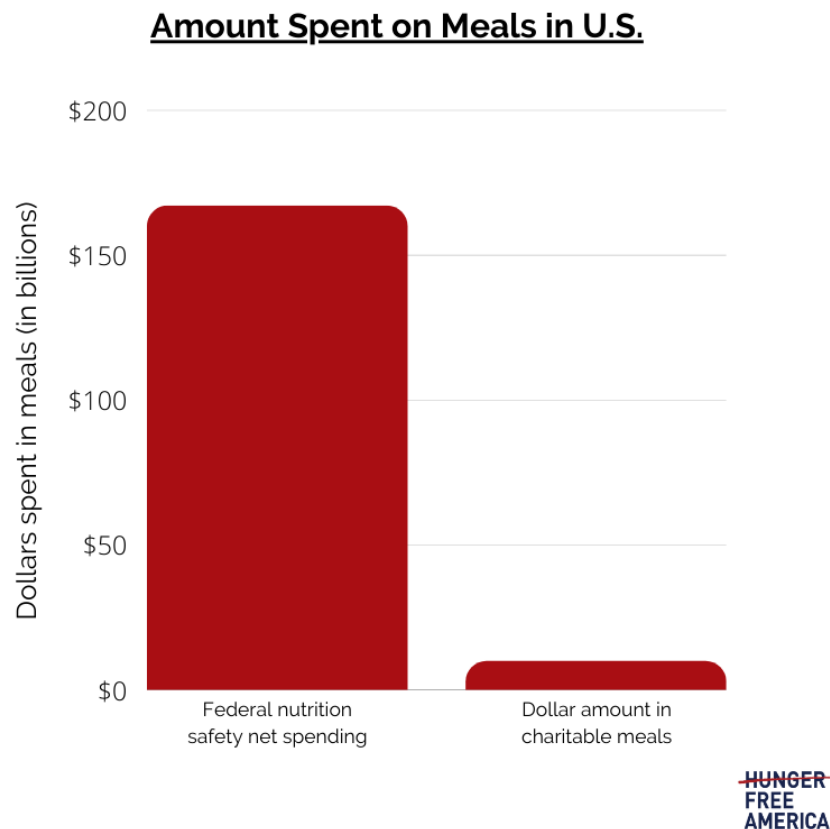
Of all those problems, the insufficiency in the dollar amount of charitable food is the most significant. In 2020, 38.3 million Americans lived in food insecure homes; if they were to eat three meals per day for 365 days, it would require 41.9 billion meals. In contrast, as explained in endnote ii and as **Figure 2** demonstrates, Feeding America reported that its network of two hundred regional food banks distributed 3.4 billion charitable meals, equaling just about eight percent of the meals that would be consumed by food insecure U.S. families if they ate three meals per day every day. ⁱⁱⁱ

Figure 2



As Figure 3 demonstrates, while food charities distributed an impressive \$10 billion worth of meals in 2020, the federal government spent \$167 billion on nutrition assistance programs in FY22, literally seventeen times the dollar value of food distributed by the charities.

Figure 3



The most iconic hunger-related image of the COVID-19 pandemic was that of thousands of cars lined up at a San Antonio, Texas food bank. But that overshadowed the reality that, in that same month in that same county, 294,512 local residents received \$33.6 million in SNAP benefits. If, let's say, that line of cars ultimately obtained food for 5,000 people, each person received \$25 worth of food, then that line provided food to only 1/59th of the number of the people in that county who received SNAP, and only 1/269th of the dollar amount of food provided by SNAP.

Why the Nutrition Assistance Safety Net Alone Cannot End Hunger

Bolstering the federal nutrition assistance safety net can significantly reduce hunger, food insecurity, and nutrition insecurity, but even those efforts on their own are not enough to end these problems.

The White House has helpfully announced this as one pillar for the Conference: “Improve food access and affordability: End hunger by making it easier for everyone – including urban, suburban, rural, and tribal communities – to access and afford food by, for example, expanding

eligibility for and increasing participation in food assistance programs and improving transportation options to places where food is available.”

First, I will note that, especially given the high costs of gasoline and public transportation in this nation, “improving transportation options” will only have limited impact on reducing hunger and improving food access. A better option would be increasing the home delivery of food (especially healthy food), but that too would have only limited impact unless people could not afford both the food and any delivery fees.

Moreover, there is [increasing evidence](#) that so-called “food deserts” are not the prime determinant of whether struggling Americans purchase healthier food. Affordability of such food is the prime factor.

As for “expanding eligibility for and increasing participation in food assistance programs,” that would have an enormous impact on reducing hunger but even that would not be nearly enough to have the impact necessary.

As previously stated, according to USDA ERS, nearly half of the Americans in food-insecure households do not receive SNAP, WIC, or school lunches. Part of the reason for this is that eligible people do not apply for and get enrolled in SNAP and WIC due to application hurdles and perceived low benefit amounts. However, a large part of the problem is that a substantial number of food-insecure Americans (especially undocumented immigrants and working people just above 130 percent of the poverty line) are legally ineligible for SNAP. Congress should increase aid to those populations, but it is unlikely it will do so in the amount needed to actually aid all those who are food insecure.

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, passed by Congress and signed by President Biden on March 11, 2021, extended increases in SNAP maximum allotments from July 1, 2021 through September 30, 2021. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, raised maximum allotments to 115 percent of the June 2020 value of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) from January 1, 2021, through June 30, 2021. USDA also took the visionary step of increasing the value of the food allotments in SNAP under the Thrifty Food Plan. Together, these steps more than doubled the average SNAP monthly benefit amount, from \$236 in February of 2020 to \$473 in October 2021. [according to USDA](#). This dramatically increased the purchasing power of SNAP by helping struggling Americans afford both more food and healthier food. While the increase in SNAP benefit size due to the revised Thrifty Food Plan allotments is permanent (unless a future Presidential Administration rescinds the increase), the increases in SNAP in maximum allotments are expiring, which, along with food inflation, will significantly erode the food purchasing power of SNAP.

Another key component of the federal nutrition safety net is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which, [according to USDA](#), “provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.” WIC is an absolutely vital program that literally saves lives for those who obtain it. According to [USDA FNS](#), WIC usage results in:

- fewer premature births;
- lower incidence of moderately low and very low birth weight infants;
- fewer infant deaths;
- a greater likelihood of receiving prenatal care; and
- very significant savings in health care costs

WIC is often difficult to both obtain and utilize, which is why, in 2019, a whopping 43 percent of Americans eligible for it failed to receive WIC benefits, [according to USDA](#). Furthermore, because it is limited to only pregnant people and households with children under five (a relatively small percentage of the food insecure population), and because its average benefit amount is only \$42.87 per month, its impact on the overall food and nutrition insecurity problems is relatively small.

School meals are also vital in reducing child hunger and improving child nutrition, and they are often the [healthiest meals](#), and sometimes the only meals, children receive each day. But some imply that child hunger could be ended if only we achieved 100 percent participation in school breakfast and lunch programs, and that is just not accurate. Schools are generally open only 180 days a year. To feed children three meals a day for all 365 days of the year would require 1,095 meals per year per child. If a child were to receive both breakfast and lunches at school 180 days of the year, that would equal only 360 meals per year, only a third of their meal needs. Even if each of those children also received an after-school supper on each school day, that would equal only 540 meals per year, which would provide only about half the meals they would need for the year.

Approximately half of all children who receive school lunches receive school breakfasts, and about 85 percent of children who receive school lunches fail to receive federally funded summer meals. Even if Congress made the Pandemic EBT program permanent over every summer (which it should), there would still be many gaps in the child nutrition safety net.

The expansion of the federal nutrition safety net by President Biden and the majority in Congress during the pandemic played a historic role in preventing mass starvation during the nation's greatest economic collapse since the Great Depression, as [Hunger Free America has documented](#). The \$167 billion in nutrition assistance provided by the federal government in FY20 provided a food life preserver for tens of millions of imperiled Americans. If Congress increased federal nutrition safety net funding by twenty percent, providing an extra \$33 billion in additional food for low-income Americans, that would take a big bite out of hunger and nutrition insecurity. But such an increase may not be politically sustainable over time, and, even if it were sustainable, there would still be significant food insecurity in America.

In fact, there would be incredible pressure to *cut* SNAP. As *Agri-Pulse* recently reported, “Ballooning cost estimates [for SNAP] are likely to paint a bigger target on the Farm Bill’s

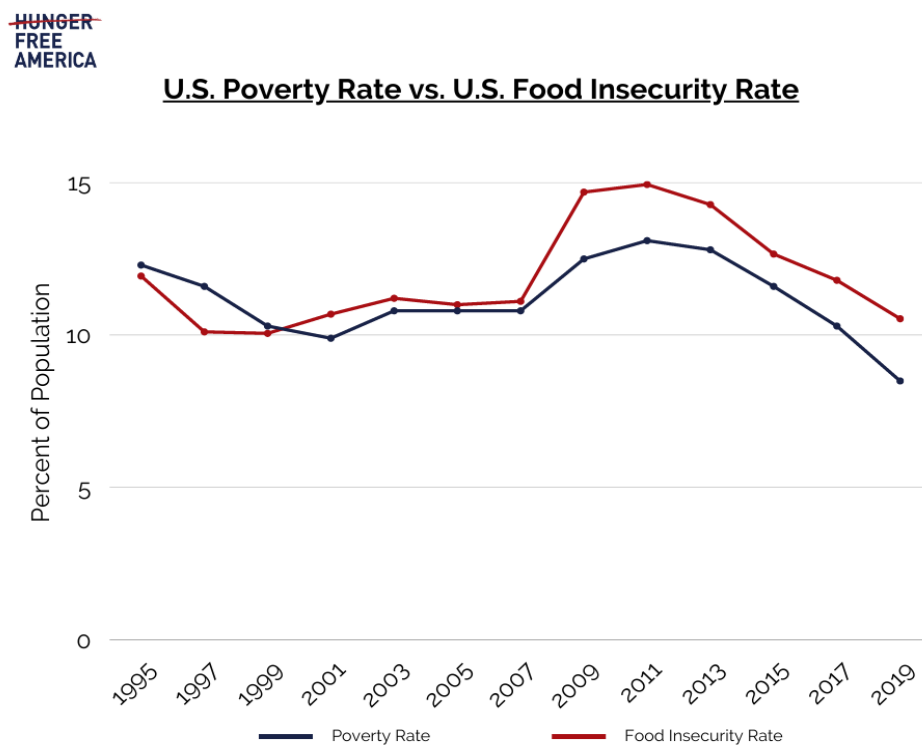
nutrition title when lawmakers start drafting the bill in the next Congress. The Congressional Budget Office’s new estimates for Farm Bill spending project that SNAP will cost about \$531 billion from FY24 through FY28, the five-year period expected to be covered by a new Farm Bill. By comparison, the entire nutrition title of the 2018 Farm Bill was projected to cost just \$326 billion over five years at the time it was enacted, according to the Congressional Research Service, and that estimate for FY19 through FY23 includes the cost of some smaller nutrition programs in addition to SNAP.”

Of course, Hunger Free America and other anti-hunger organizations will fight hard for increases and fervently oppose cuts, but depending on the composition of Congress, there is a strong chance that we will not prevail and that investments in the program will be reduced.

By contrast, if the nation increased wages for the fifty million lowest-income U.S. workers by merely \$2 per hour, that would provide their households an extra \$208 billion in cash to be able to better afford food and pay for other costs of living.

While the size of, and funding for, federal nutrition assistance programs is a significant variable in how much hunger and food insecurity there is in the U.S., the national poverty rate is by far, the more important variable, as Figure 4 demonstrates. It is obvious that food insecurity rates track almost exactly with poverty rates.

Figure 4



Hunger and food insecurity in the U.S. are *not* primarily food distribution problems — they are mostly affordability problems. The federal minimum wage – stuck at \$7.25 per hour for the last 13 years – equals only \$13,195 for full time work, leaving that worker significantly below the federal poverty threshold of \$23,030 for a family of three. Yet the average U.S. rent in April 2022 was \$1,827 per month (16.7 percent higher than the previous year), equaling \$21,924 for a year, far more than a minimum wage salary. Even if we were remarkably successful in increasing the amount of government-funded and charitable food by, let's say, 10 percent, if housing prices for low-income Americans increased by 16 percent, then food insecurity would likely be higher. That analysis does not even factor in soaring costs for childcare, health care, transportation, clothing, utilities, prescription drugs, phone and Internet costs, and, yes, food. People then cut spending for the only flexible budget item they can — food — by buying less or less healthy but cheaper options, in order to save money to pay for other costs of living, which are fixed costs.

Considering food access and affordability in a vacuum – detached from the broader economics of wages and prices – is a futile exercise.

So, How Can We End Hunger, Food Insecurity, and Nutrition Insecurity in the U.S?

The number one thing we need to do to end domestic hunger, food insecurity, and nutrition insecurity in America is to make healthier food more affordable. We also need to make it more physically accessible in every neighborhood across the country and make it more convenient to prepare and consume.

In terms of making it easier for Americans to afford healthy food, there are four ways to do that: 1) increase their wages; 2) decrease their other costs of living; 3) decrease food prices through both market forces and more aggressive government crackdowns on illegal price gouging, monopolies, and price fixing; and 4) increase the government nutrition assistance safety net.

In order of importance, the nation needs to do the following if it is serious about ending domestic hunger, food insecurity, and nutrition insecurity:

- 1) Create jobs, raise wages; make it easier for low-income people to develop assets by moving from owing interest to owning income-producing resources; boost upward mobility; and strengthen the middle class.**

Congress and the President should work together to:

- Raise the national minimum wage, indexing future increases to inflation, and fully cover tipped workers, gig and contract workers, and agricultural workers. To make such an increase politically palatable to moderate legislators and to reduce the strain on small businesses, the wage could be pegged, by state, to local median family income and average housing costs.

- Authorize, fund, and implement a “Good Jobs, Food Jobs” initiative to provide more technical assistance and seed money to more food-related startup companies (especially those focused on food processing), and particularly those owned by women and BIPOC.
- Authorize, fund, and implement a government-wide “Assets Empowerment/Middle Class Wealth Generation Agenda” to dramatically increase economic opportunity and mobility by enabling more families to transition from owing non-productive debts and paying interest to owning assets such as first homes, small businesses, and savings accounts that can earn interest, increase in value, and/or provide profits. This work should be combined with initiatives to eliminate, or at least reduce, “benefits cliffs” in which workers who get raises or work more hours are punished and lose benefits.
- Renew the expansions of the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit.
- Ensure universal paid sick days and 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave.
- Overhaul TANF so that it better supports families and enables long-term economic advancement.
- Modernize America’s immigration system. Welcome immigrants in our communities. Reassert America’s commitment to asylum-seekers and refugees. Enable Dreamers and their families to have a path to citizenship. Expand protections for undocumented immigrants who report labor violations.
- End redlining and other discriminatory and unfair practices in the housing market.
- Enact and implement the HOPE Act of 2021 (H.R.2336/S.1181), an innovative and ground-breaking bill which would dramatically modernize the delivery of social services and reinvent poverty policy in America. The Act would: a) authorize three federal agencies—HUD, USDA, and HHS—to enable select state, county, city, and tribal governments to create pilot programs in economically distressed rural, urban, and suburban areas, as well as state-wide in select states; 2) leverage client-facing technology to coordinate access to multiple government agencies that work on anti-poverty, health care, nutrition, housing, work support programs, and nonprofit aid for low-income Americans and tie that to banking services; 3) provide extra resources and technical assistance to enable low-income people to voluntarily work with local nonprofit groups and government agencies to develop assets (by buying a first home, starting a small business, saving money to pay for college, or plan for retirement, etc.) to achieve long-term self-advancement benchmarks; and 4) establish a merit-based competition to award HOPE Technology Innovation Contracts that help ensure client-facing technology apps, widgets, and templates are created for pilot entities to use to create meaningful HOPE Accounts.
- Expand and improve the AmeriCorps national service program by increasing living allowances and educational awards to enable any American willing to serve to pay for their higher education by doing so.

2) Reduce prices for housing, childcare, health care, higher education, transportation, clothing, utilities, prescription drugs, phone and Internet costs, and food.

- Congress and the President should work together to enact and fund the entire Build Back Better agenda and other efforts to dramatically decrease the cost of living for working families.

Because entities other than Hunger Free America are more expert in these areas than we are, we will leave it up to them to propose the policy specifics in these areas, but we do know that, as long as Americans need to spend so much on other, non-negotiable, items, they will never have enough money left over to afford healthier food.

3) Significantly increase the number of people who benefit from, and the size of the benefits in, the federal nutrition safety net programs. Increase benefit amounts while making it easier for low-income people to be enrolled in such benefits, and to redeem those benefits, online, particularly for home delivery of healthy foods.

Congress and the President should work together to:

- Make the pandemic emergency allotment boosts in SNAP permanent.
- Make permanent the temporary provisions that removed restrictions on low-income college students obtaining SNAP.
- End restrictions on legal immigrants obtaining SNAP. Make undocumented immigrants in working families who have resided in the U.S. for more than a year eligible for SNAP.
- Increase the income cutoff for SNAP eligibility (currently at 130 percent of the federal poverty line in most instances) to 200 percent of the federal poverty line and slowly ramp down benefits for people earning above that, while eliminating assets/resources limits for SNAP.
- Increase the SNAP re-certification period for eligible Americans aged 60 and older and people with disabilities to once every five years. Increase the SNAP re-certification period for everyone else to one year.
- Reinvent how SNAP relates to unemployed Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDS) by replacing the status quo under which those who are unable to find work are also denied food with a new system that truly empowers them to obtain and maintain living wage employment.
- Eliminate the requirement that SNAP applicants and people re-certifying for SNAP need to provide an interview (*in addition to* signing legally binding written applications).

- Allow SNAP recipients in all states and counties to be able to use SNAP for hot meals, meals prepared to be eaten away from home, and restaurant meals.
- Make the Disaster SNAP program mandatory after disasters and include pandemics among the situations that qualify as disasters.
- Ensure sufficient federal reimbursements to provide all students of all family incomes in all elementary, middle, and high schools nationwide with tasty, nutritious breakfasts, lunches, after school suppers, and summer meals—locally and regionally sourced and sustainably produced whenever possible—free of charge, with no required paperwork.
- Expand summer meals programs for kids by opening them to parents, allowing meals to be eaten offsite, and making the Pandemic-EBT program permanent over the summer.
- Make WIC an entitlement program so it will always have sufficient funding to ensure that everyone who qualifies for the assistance can get it.
- Make permanent the pandemic-time waivers to states that remove barriers for remote issuance of WIC benefits, so that participants will not have to come into clinics to pick up WIC EBT cards and/or paper coupons.
- Provide start-up and operating subsidies for CSAs and fresh produce basket programs that serve low-income people and neighborhoods.
- Increase funding for the USDA National Hunger Clearinghouse, which has been funded at only \$250,000 per year for more than a decade, to reflect the reality that the use of the Clearinghouse and its hunger hotline has tripled over recent years, with an acute spike during the pandemic.
- Create a federal program to fund nonprofit organizations to conduct joint SNAP, WIC, and child nutrition outreach and access work.
- Increase food and funding for food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens.
- Increase funding for congregate meals and home delivered meals programs for older Americans funded by HHS.

USDA should also:

- Use all existing legal authorities under current law to increase participation, boost benefit sizes, and reduce paperwork and bureaucracy for beneficiaries and program administrators alike in all USDA nutrition assistance programs.
- Work with the White House on an “I Made It on SNAP” campaign, to highlight prominent, successful Americans (such as former President Obama) whose families received SNAP/food stamps at some point in their lives.

- Use county-level USDA Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rural Development, and Cooperative Extension offices to inform the public about SNAP and WIC.
- Accelerate efforts to make it easier for SNAP and WIC recipients to use their benefits online to order food (including food from corner stores and farmers markets) and get food delivered to their homes or neighborhood centers. Make sure to integrate all SNAP and WIC processes for both clients and retailers.
- More aggressively push states to use the latest technology, systems improvements, and outreach to increase participation in nutrition safety net programs.
- More aggressively provide encouragement and technical assistance to states and school districts to expand school breakfast participation by serving breakfasts in first period classrooms and providing “grab and go” meals in school hallways.
- Make it easier for people with smartphones to redeem SNAP, Pandemic-EBT, and WIC benefits and make it easier to use SNAP and WIC benefits at farmers markets, farm stands, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects.

4) Fully integrate food and nutrition into Medicaid, Medicare, and the ACA, including a focus on defining “food as medicine.”

- [According to HHS](#), the nation’s health care expenditures (NHE) grew 9.7% to \$4.1 trillion in 2020, or \$12,530 per person, and accounted for 19.7% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Medicare spending grew 3.5% to \$829.5 billion in 2020, or 20 percent of total NHE. Medicaid spending grew 9.2% to \$671.2 billion in 2020, or 16 percent of total NHE. Given that diet-related diseases are the top cause of early deaths in America, all these costs would be dramatically reduced over time by reducing food insecurity and improving nutrition.
- Build upon [state Medicaid waivers that fund food as medicine](#).

5) Fully engage virtually every domestic federal agency in concrete, meaningful, systematic efforts to fight hunger and boost nutrition.

While the White House, along with USDA and HHS, will take the lead in hunger, nutrition, food, and health policy, virtually every domestic federal agency should play positive roles on those issues. To provide a few examples:

- HUD could help people enroll in SNAP and WIC as they enter public housing and/or obtain Section 8 housing vouchers; promote urban farms and community gardens; create

sites at public housing to which food ordered online with SNAP can be delivered; and make it easier for homeless Americans to access food.

- DOJ could buy more healthy food for federal prisons from regional farmers and could make it easier for people leaving incarceration to obtain SNAP.
- SBA could provide targeted funding and technical assistance to entrepreneurs, especially women and BIPOC people, who are starting or scaling-up food-related businesses.
- DOL could help Americans who are unemployed or in low-income jobs connect with SNAP and WIC.
- Treasury could expand outreach to increase the usage of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) by low-income people and combine such outreach with SNAP and WIC outreach.
- Education could do more to promote school breakfasts, since only half of American children who get school lunches now get school breakfasts. Education could also make it easier for college students to obtain SNAP, including by combining SNAP and Pell Grant applications.

Hunger Free America recommends in further detail how federal agencies can concretely help in this document:

https://hfa-website.cdn.prismic.io/hfa-website/7397dbe2-8e23-45cb-942d-6bc9b2099298_WH+Conference+Full+Recommendations+final.pdf

- 6) Every other key player in our society – state, city, county, tribal, and territorial governments; businesses, including food growers, processors, manufacturers, and retailers; farmers and ranchers; nonprofit organizations and civic groups; foundations and philanthropists; higher education institutions and K-12 school boards; hospitals, HMOs, and insurers; organizations that serve older Americans; religious denominations and congregations; and private individuals – should all work together to fill in the gaps when steps one through five are not enough.**

Some examples are below.

State, city, county, tribal, and territorial governments should commit to:

- Developing comprehensive “Food Action Plans” to detail and implement all-encompassing policies on food, hunger, food insecurity, nutrition insecurity, and food systems – from “farm to fork” – with a special emphasis on increasing participation among eligible state residents in federal nutrition assistance programs.
- Raising their minimum wages, indexing future increases to inflation, and fully covering tipped workers, gig and contract workers, and agricultural workers.

- Launching multi-agency communications and outreach efforts to enroll more eligible residents in federally funded nutrition assistance programs, including SNAP, WIC, P-EBT, school breakfasts, and summer meals. This could also be combined with vaccine outreach and/or rental assistance outreach.
- Providing a dedicated funding stream for government agencies and nonprofit groups to conduct outreach for SNAP, WIC, summer meals, and other food programs.
- Better utilizing SNAP and Medicaid as passports to WIC enrollment without separate applications to WIC required.
- Promote the inclusion of healthy food as an eligible expense in Medicaid 1115 waivers. California and a number of other states are already doing so in some form.
- Increasing participation statewide in federally funded school breakfast programs by mandating and providing technical assistance and limited funding to support implementation of a policy mandating that breakfast be served in first period classrooms and/or provided as “grab and go meals” in school hallways.
- Launching a state “Good Jobs, Food Jobs” initiative to provide more technical assistance and seed money to more food-related start-up companies (especially those focused on food processing), and prioritizing those owned by women and BIPOC.

All businesses overall should commit to:

- Providing their employees (and employees of their top contractors and suppliers) living wage jobs, with regular cost of living increases tied to inflation – as well free health care, paid personal and family and medical leave, and other adequate benefits.
- Supporting and ensuring that their business trade associations effectively fight for the enactment of public policies at the federal, state, and local levels that slash hunger by: raising wages; making quality health care, housing, prescription drugs, and childcare more affordable; expanding the nutrition assistance safety net; and helping low-income Americans develop assets so they can enter, and stay in, the middle class.

Food Processors and Manufacturers should commit to:

- Donating more food – and healthier food – to food banks.
- More clearly labeling the nutritional content of their products.

Food retailers should commit to:

- Lobbying Congress to change federal law to allow SNAP recipients to use such benefits for hot and prepared foods.
- Accelerating efforts to accept SNAP and WIC online and to deliver food to people’s homes or neighborhood delivery centers.

Restaurants and fast-food chains should commit to:

- Encouraging states to apply to USDA to participate in the SNAP Restaurant Meals program, then working with nonprofit groups to conduct outreach to residents who are homeless, have disabilities, and/or are elderly to help enroll them in SNAP and use their benefits, if they choose to do so, at participating restaurants.
- Making healthier food more affordable and convenient in low-income neighborhoods.

Farmers and ranchers should commit to:

- Donating more fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and meats to food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens.
- Partnering with gleaning and food rescue groups to facilitate the donation of excess food.

Nonprofit organizations and civic groups should commit to:

- Lobbying the government to enact the economic policies needed to end hunger, slash poverty, increase economic opportunity, and enable all people to afford healthier foods.
- Creating formal structures to empower low-income people with lived experience with poverty and hunger to 1) advise them on their internal policies and programs; 2) advise them on a policy advocacy agenda; and 3) help lead their public policy advocacy work.
- Paying their own employees living wages, even if it means paying their own executives less.
- Developing new and/or bolstering existing efforts to help eligible Americans receive SNAP, WIC, government summer meals, etc.

Foundations and philanthropists should commit to:

- Funding only the types of nonprofit groups that carry out the best practices detailed above.
- Funding effective public policy, community organizing, and benefits access work.

Higher education institutions should commit to:

- Paying their own workers (including graduate students) enough so they are not food insecure and/or do not need governmental or charitable food assistance.
- Fully building free meals at campus cafeterias and/or food vouchers for local food stores into financial aid packages for all low-income students and many moderate-income students.

K-12 school districts should commit to:

- Lobbying Congress for universal, free, healthy school meals and summer-EBT for all,

and full funding for nutritious after-school snacks and suppers.

- Ensuring all students can get breakfast in first period classrooms or “grab and go” breakfasts in school hallways.

Hospitals, HMOs, and insurers should commit to:

- Screening all inpatients for food insecurity.
- Helping food insecure and low-income patients receive SNAP and WIC.

Organizations that serve older Americans should commit to:

- Playing leading roles in dispelling the stigmas/myths that deter older Americans from getting the help they need.
- Working with government offices/departments for the aging to develop and implement a comprehensive plan to help more older Americans access SNAP, senior center meals, and home delivered meals.

Religious organizations and congregations should commit to:

- Lobbying for the governmental and economic policies needed to end hunger, slash poverty, expand economic opportunity, and enable all people to afford healthier foods.
- Ensuring that any of the nonprofit groups they support follow the nonprofit best practices detailed above.

Private individuals should commit to:

- Calling on elected officials to support and pay for governmental and economic policies needed to end hunger, slash poverty, expand economic opportunity, and enable all people to afford healthier foods.
- Voting against any candidates who fail to support such policies.
- Donating to the most effective nonprofit organizations.

Hunger Free America recommends in further detail how all those segments of society can do so in this document:

https://hfa-website.cdn.prismic.io/hfa-website/7397dbe2-8e23-45cb-942d-6bc9b2099298_WH+Conference+Full+Recommendations+final.pdf

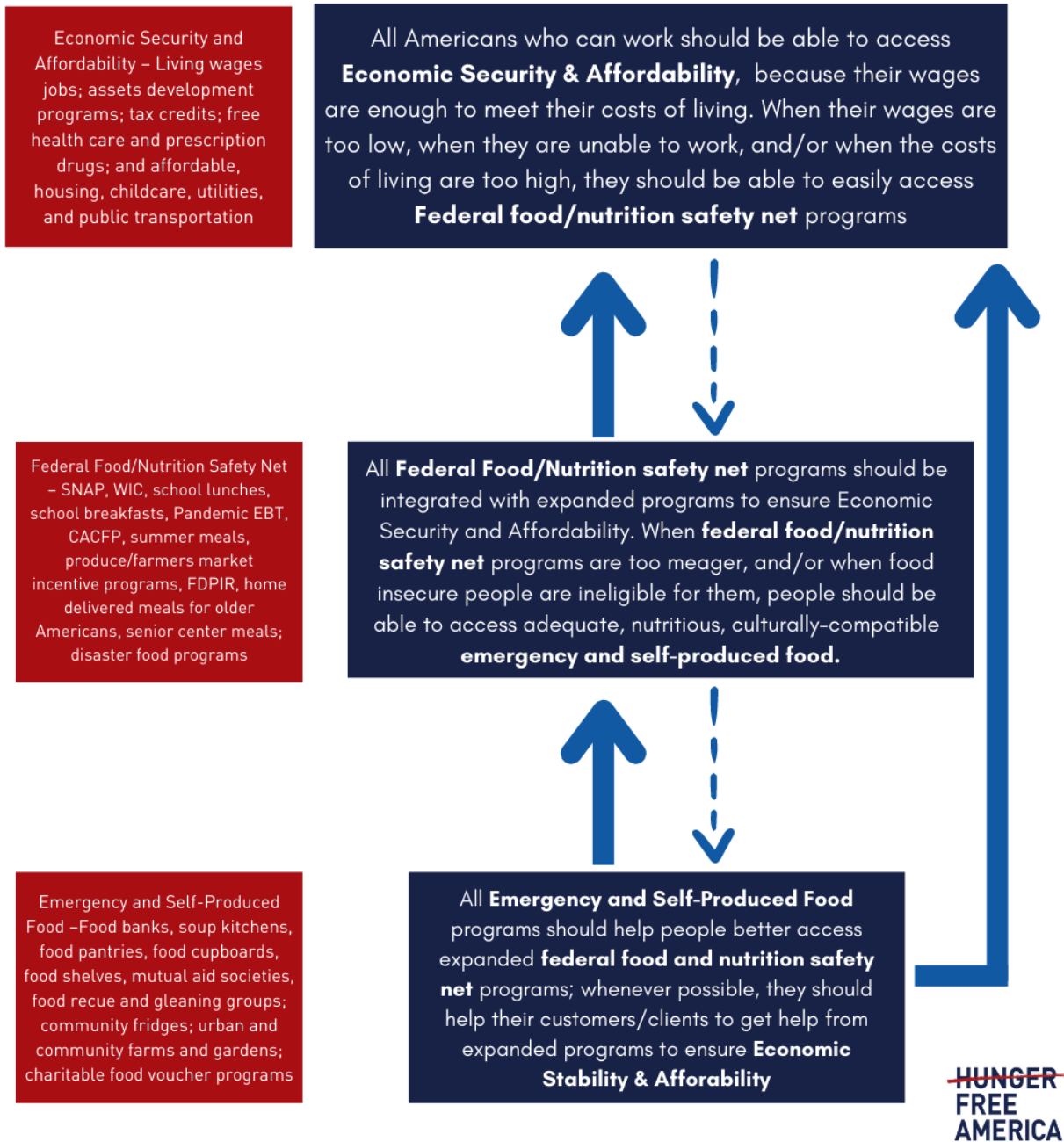
The other three conference pillars – empowering all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices; supporting physical activity for all; and enhancing nutrition and food security

research – can further advance the conference goals but will be much more successful in doing so if the other six steps we propose are taken successfully.

As chart below proposes, all sectors of society should work in tandem with each other to increase community and household food security. There should be an active – positively reinforcing – continuum – between policies that boost economic advancement, the nutrition assistance safety net, and charitable food programs and local food security projects.

The good news is that ***we can end U.S. hunger and ensure good nutrition for all Americans.*** We just need to be candid with the American people, and ourselves, about what it will take to accomplish those vitals goals.

A Dynamic Continuum of Action



ⁱ If \$50 million low-income workers earned two dollars more per hour and were paid for 40 hours of work per week for 52 weeks in a year, that would equal \$208 billion. In FY 2022, combining the USDA FNS programs and the HHS older Americans nutrition assistance programs, along with the minimal funding for FEMA Emergency Food and Shelter Program, the federal government spent about \$167 billion on domestic nutrition assistance. I note that this is likely a significant under-estimate, since it does not include most of the money that FEMA gave states and localities for disaster relief in Fiscal Year 2022; many states and localities used significant amounts of those payments for food purchases and distribution. [Feeding America reported](#) that in, 2021, that their food bank network distributed food that equaled 4.18 billion meals, not including meals funded by the federal government through commodities or SNAP. USDA ERS found that, in 2020, food insecure households overall spent \$50 per person on food per week, which equaled \$2.38 per person per meal. Thus, if the 4.18 billion meals distributed by Feeding America were worth an average of \$2.38 per meal, that would mean that Feeding America and its network distributed \$9.9 billion worth of charitable food in 2021. Those figures include food that Feeding America and its food banks distributed directly to the public and indirectly to the public through neighborhood soup kitchens, food pantries, food cupboards, and food shelves affiliated with food banks, but do *not* include extra food that those soup kitchens, food pantries, food cupboards, food shelves provided to the public *in addition to* the food provided to them by food banks. Neither do these numbers include food distributed directly to the public by mostly small soup kitchens, food pantries, food cupboards that are not affiliated with Feeding America food banks. Nor do these numbers include food distributed to the public by charitable mutual aid societies, food rescue and gleaning groups, community fridges, urban and community farms and gardens, and charitable food voucher programs that are not affiliated with feeding America. In all, such extra charitable food provided in addition to food bank food likely equals tens of millions worth of additional food, but not enough to significantly reduce U.S. hunger. Thus, my undercount in federal spending is likely more significant than my undercount in charitable food distribution. Perhaps, in advance of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health, the White House could ask the USDA Economic Research Service, the Census Bureau, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to work together to provide more exact estimates for the relative value of raising wages, versus expanding the safety net, versus increasing charitable food.

ⁱⁱ Dynamics of Economic Well-Being: Poverty, 2009–2011,” U.S. Census Bureau, Tables 3 and 4 https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/publications/dynamics09_12/index.html (accessed June 21, 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is important to note, that because of the imprecision in targeting noted in this report, not all people who receive emergency food are technically food insecure and many food insecure Americans receive no food from charities.