

Empowering Eaters: Access, Affordability, Healthy Choices

“The Health and Wellbeing of Future Generations in Policy”

Summit in Support of the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

March 3, 2024

Durham, North Carolina

Presented By:

Food Tank

Duke University World Food Policy Center

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I. Summit Overview

This report summarizes takeaways from a Summit held in Durham, North Carolina, on March 3, 2024, in support of the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health.

The Summit was co-hosted by Food Tank, the White House, and Duke University's World Food Policy Center, housed in the Sanford School of Public Policy.

The goals of this session were to highlight progress, elevate solutions to barriers, and identify areas for continued effort toward each of the National Strategy's five pillars. Plenary conversations took place on the main stage, and breakout sessions were held to facilitate more focused discussions on key topics.

The following experts (in alphabetical order) participated as speakers and/or facilitators:

Alma S. Adams, U.S. Member of Congress (via video); **Craig Albanese**, Duke University Health System; **Alice Ammerman**, UNC-Chapel Hill; **Kelliann Blazek**, The White House; **Sean B. Cash**, Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy; **Chris M. Collins**, The Duke Endowment; **Roy Cooper**, North Carolina Governor (via video); **Don Davis**, U.S. Member of Congress (via video); **Lauren Davis**, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University; **Merry Davis**, Blue Cross Blue Shield NC Foundation; **Rachel Ferencik**, CDC Foundation; **Gavan Fitzsimons**, Duke Fuqua School of Business; **Valerie Foushee**, U.S. Member of Congress; **Maggie Funkhouser**, Carrboro Farmers Market and NC Farmers Market Network; **Luis Guardia**, Food Research & Action Center; **Debbie Hamrick**, North Carolina Farm Bureau; **Jeff Jackson**, U.S. Member of Congress (via video); **Steven Jennings**, Ahold Delhaize USA; **Debra Clark Jones**, Community Health at Duke University; **Rob Kinneen**, Native Alaskan Chef + NĀTIFS; **Ken Kolb**, Furman University; **Kathy Manning**, U.S. Member of Congress (via video); **Will McIntee**, White House; Dr. **Greg Murphy**, U.S. Member of Congress (via video); **Jennifer Norka**, American Frozen Food Institute; **Mary Oxendine**, Potlikker Capital; **Justine Post**, Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA; **Deborah Ross**, U.S. Member of Congress (via video); **Luke Saunders**, Farmer's Fridge; **Sean**

Sherman, Executive Director of NĀTIFS; **Baldemar Velasquez**, Farm Labor Organizing Committee; **Eric Wiebe**, Emanuel Food Pantry; **Leonardo Williams**, Mayor of Durham; and **Norbert Wilson**, Duke World Food Policy Center.

Following the main stage program, participants chose one breakout session to attend. Conversations during these breakout sessions inform the “The Community Perspective” sections of this report. Sessions included the following:

1. Community-Based Efforts to Improve Local Food Environments, focusing on how community-driven initiatives are ensuring all residents have access to healthy, nutritious, and culturally relevant food options. Participants discussed the qualities that define successful programs and strategies to overcome barriers to developing/scaling these initiatives.
2. The Role of Food Business in Increasing Access to Healthy Foods, focusing on how food businesses can help eaters access healthy food options. Participants discussed opportunities for companies of all sizes to take action, as well as the potential of public-private partnerships.
3. Good Food Purchasing for Farmers, Eaters, and the Planet, focusing on links between producers and resilient communities. Participants discussed the importance of farmers toward food and nutrition security, the power of procurement practices, and the resources farmers in rural and urban environments need to thrive.

A full replay of the mainstage program is available here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zUUqYmGEEo&ab_channel=FoodTank

II. Introduction

Before Leonardo Williams became the Mayor of Durham, North Carolina—and a restaurateur there—he grew up in a rural eastern part of the state.

“I attended just as many funerals as I did family reunions, and it was always because of the same thing,” he said: Diet.

“In one of the most agricultural parts of the state, we had some of the most unhealthy eating practices,” Williams said. “That is something that is very concerning to me personally.”

Scenes like these are playing out around the country. People cannot afford or access nourishing, nutritious foods, and their health and livelihoods are suffering as a result.

Since the worst days of the Covid-19 pandemic, the state food insecurity in the U.S. has not gotten better — it’s deteriorated. More than 17 million households reported being food-insecure in 2022, a higher percentage than in 2021 and 2020, [according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data](#). Kids and marginalized communities are also more likely to experience food-insecurity. **In 2022, nearly 1 in every 11 children (8.8 percent) faced low or very low food security.**

Through priorities including the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, the White House is pushing for several beneficial policy solutions, including expanding access to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and boosting access to grocery-purchasing benefits during summer months when children may not have school meals.

Food relief can address the short-term impacts of food insecurity. But satiety is not the ultimate goal—food justice is. And because the root cause of food insecurity is economic instability and inequality, panelists said, strengthening peoples’ long-term ability to access and afford food must be treated as a top priority.

To be clear, expanding enrollment in emergency food relief programs remains critical, especially as hunger continues to affect Americans acutely. But conceptualizing such relief programs as a long-term solution in and of themselves, without being accompanied by serious steps toward food justice, is an abdication.

“We should never forget about taking care of the (immediate) food challenges that families face,” said Norbert Wilson, a Professor at Duke Divinity and in the Sanford School of Public Policy, and the Director of the World Food Policy Center at Duke University. “But if we’re not also thinking about the economic opportunities for those families, we’re never going to get to the root causes.”

These challenges are complex, and no one stakeholder can solve them alone. A “whole-of-society approach” is urgently necessary, said Will McIntee, Senior Advisor for Public Engagement at The White House.

And while “it takes a while to build those relationships,” as Rachel Ferencik, Senior Program Officer at the Centers for Disease Control Foundation, phrased it, that effort pays off.

In discussions about implementing solutions and identifying barriers, panelists described the need for **stronger cross-sector partnerships, creative and community-centric policy, and more just payment and profit models.**

III. Progress + Priorities for the Public Sector

Governmental bodies, from local to state to federal, have a significant role to play in pairing food relief with sustainability and health initiatives.

The role of governments is to take meaningful, community-centric action, panelists concurred, which should take the form of transparent public policy.

“People are not just wanting to see — but people need to see — us address their needs, particularly as it relates to poverty, nutrition, and housing,” said U.S. Congresswoman Valerie Foushee (NC-4). “Particularly as it relates to helping people understand how you build wealth in such a manner that, when situations come that don’t allow us to function as we normally have, that there are reserves.”

This means respecting the lived experience of community members, building accessible infrastructure, supporting green spaces, and securing funding for farmers and children’s well-being, Foushee said.

a. Policy Steps to Support the Five Pillars of the National Strategy

Summit panelists identified several specific steps that should be prioritized:

> **Fund food and health relief programs:** It’s vital to ensure folks in need can access the social safety net, panelists said.

Just take the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, which Luis Guardia, President of the Food Research & Action Center, said is “our country’s first line of defense against hunger.” And companion programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are hugely influential as well.

“We have these programs that have been proven time and time again to improve health outcomes in this country,” Guardia said. “And if we’re making it harder for

folks to access, it really makes it quite difficult for folks to achieve the health outcomes and improve their livelihoods.”

But it’s not just food relief. Funding health care programs like Medicaid can be a pathway toward addressing food insecurity, particularly through the potential to implement food is medicine programs.

“Medicaid dollars don’t just buy health care—they buy health,” said Elizabeth Cuervo Tilton, State Health Director and Chief Medical Officer at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

“We don’t think about Medicaid as a food program, but when we can cover people’s medical costs, then their dollars can go to food and housing,” she said. “And we can help people get access to care, so they can be healthy and get a job and be stably employed.”

Lawmakers at all levels would do well to follow the advice of U.S. Congressman Jeff Jackson (NC–14).

“The danger in this debate is that, when we talk about things like WIC and SNAP and the child tax credit, we reduce those things to lines on a budget or lines on a spreadsheet,” he said. “They’re lives, very often the lives of children, and we have to make sure that we’re humanizing the impacts of policy proposals that folks are kicking around.”

> Stand up for farmers and farmworkers with fair compensation and resources:

Just as food production starts in the soil, food justice also grows from farmers and food producers.

Every day, farmworkers apply their detailed and specific botanical knowledge of plant growing patterns to their understanding of corporate needs to make sure they pick crops to manufacturers’ specifications, said Baldemar Velasquez, International President of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. This is incredibly detailed and skilled work.

As the first people to interact with freshly picked crops, farmworkers are the first stage in the cold chain infrastructure that's vital to keeping food fresh, said Debbie Hamrick, Director of Specialty Crops at the North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation. So their work matters immensely.

Yet farm laborers often find themselves locked out of fair compensation. Agricultural workers are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, Velasquez said, and government food and welfare relief programs are no substitute for the stability of fair wages. Ag workers need a seat at the table, and they need to be paid fairly.

“If Congress can set prevailing wages for workers—set minimum wages for American workers—why can't they set minimum commodity prices for farmers?” he asked.

Additionally, both policy initiatives and efforts by agencies including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state-funded Extension services should **build resources to sustain the next generation of farmers.**

Beginning farmers face significant costs, from land to equipment, that can feel insurmountable without capital resources, said Mary Oxendine, Relationship Management Fellow at Potlikker Capital. People who carried out agricultural work while incarcerated or whose ancestors were enslaved may also experience additional barriers.

“We want to launch the next generation of farmers to help folks develop generational wealth and continue the traditional knowledge of growing, using regenerative practices and traditional and Indigenous knowledge,” she said. “Really helping folks reconnect with the land and see the Earth as healing, rather than a source of trauma.”

b. The Community Perspective: Building Healthy Food Policy for the People

Government policy at all levels can help create an environment where healthy eating is the norm, Summit attendees said during focused breakout discussions after the plenary program. Education can help change consumer behavior, but food affordability and convenience are both significantly more impactful.

The existing commodity crop subsidy structure in the U.S. has the effect of cheapening ultra-processed foods, attendees said. By contrast, subsidy programs should be targeted toward making it as easy as possible for consumers to eat the recommended daily intake of fruits and vegetables.

In some cities, urban farms are successful in transforming empty lots into food production sites that also support pollinators, enhance biodiversity, and shorten supply chains for local produce. Governments can provide economic incentives and reduce bureaucratic hurdles to urban farms/gardens to support community food.

In these conversations, attendees also underscored the extent to which **supporting farmers and farmworkers has massive upstream effects on all parts of the food system—and needs to be a first step.**

Farmers need additional resources, including financial loans/lines of credit, to more effectively compete with major retailers that control much of the food market. Local food needs to be affordable and available to not only consumers but also institutions like schools and restaurants. Incentives that allow for more farmworkers to be hired at competitive and livable wages can also help decrease food loss and waste from crops rotting on fields.

Farmworkers need to be guaranteed the same protections, including paid sick time and access to healthcare and childcare, that many other workers in the U.S. receive.

IV. Progress + Priorities for the Private Sector

Across civil society and the private sector, institutions have significant power to reshape the food system and build environments that support nutrition, food access, knowledge production and sharing, and health activities.

That said, as panelists outlined, private-sector solutions to building healthier food environments remain underutilized.

a. Roles of Civil Society and Business to Support the Five Pillars of the National Strategy

During the Summit, panelists identified top priorities for action for a number of institutions and sectors across society.

> Restaurants and food service institutions, including schools: Bring procurement practices in alignment with a more justice-oriented food system.

When it comes to operationalizing food justice initiatives and building a more sustainable future, food procurement is of particular importance. Entities that bring in wholesale food for service—such as restaurants, schools, and other such institutions—can make a significant difference by connecting culturally relevant food with eaters.

For one, in schools, providing foods that kids of a variety of backgrounds recognize can increase their consumption of the foods that are good for them. And two, supporting small-scale food producers and foragers in this way can help build long-term security and sustainability, said Rob Kinneen, Outreach Director at North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NĀTIFS) and a Native Alaskan Chef.

“Not only are we bringing culturally relevant foods to institutional landscapes,” Kinneen said. “I think what will happen is opening up dialogue for the Indigenous

farmers who are producing those Indigenous foods to start growing their worth by having those foods available (at) bigger corporate dining entities.”

One example of a restaurant leading the way is Owamni, in Minneapolis. The menu represents modern Indigenous food using only pre-colonization ingredients, and it was founded by Chef Sean Sherman, also the Executive Director of NĀTIFS and an award-winning author.

As a popular restaurant, Owamni brings in—and spends—several million dollars a year, Sherman said at the Summit. And as a proudly Indigenous establishment, Sherman is deliberate about food sourcing and where those dollars flow.

“A lot of (our expenses are) food costs, and a lot of that goes directly into the hands of the indigenous food producers that we’re utilizing,” he said.

> Food relief organizations: Work together to advance long-term justice, not only short-term charity.

Connecting growers with eaters in need is a perennial challenge—particularly relating to fresh, local foods that are highly perishable. For food pantries, taking in and distributing these foods takes “money and creativity,” said Eric Wiebe, a Member of the Leadership Committee of Emanuel Food Pantry. This means partnerships across sectors are vital.

“We can do this together and address important facets of climate change and food waste. Good, nutritious food means healthy minds, which means better learning,” he said.

Faith groups represent a significant potential for partnerships, said Justine Post, Program Staff at the Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA. Many churches have anti-hunger initiatives, for example, and it’s incumbent on faith groups to shift from charity-focused to justice-centered approaches, she said. In North Carolina, the Farm and Faith Partnership Project provides a successful model of how faith groups can support family farmers and increase market access for their crops.

“It’s beyond transactional,” she said. “They want to share meals together, they want to be together, and they just want to show up.”

> **Grocery stores: Meet customers where they are to deliver health.**

Shoppers are increasingly cash-strapped and short on time, and their use of traditional grocery stores is dropping in favor of alternatives like dollar stores, said Sean B. Cash, Associate Professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University.

Dollar stores, therefore, have a significant potential to step up and serve their communities, which could mean partnering with other companies. Providing healthy foods in the parking lots of dollar stores—foods that, for a variety of reasons, dollar stores may be unable to stock—could be a way to facilitate access to these ingredients where people are already shopping in a noncompetitive way, said Ken Kolb, Professor of Sociology at Furman University.

As more shoppers use online grocery purchasing, stores also need to update their labeling protocols so ingredient lists, allergens, and other nutrition information is clearly available to consumers using web or app-based ordering platforms.

> **Corporations and food businesses: Scale up solutions efficiently in partnership with advocates.**

Food corporations are indeed interested in providing healthier food, because keeping up with consumer preferences can mean significant profits, explained Gavan Fitzsimons, Professor at Duke Fuqua School of Business.

Rather than viewing this negatively, Fitzsimons said, food advocates can see this as a potential for collaboration. The profit motive means corporations can scale solutions incredibly quickly, he said — if advocates and researchers can clearly communicate their recommendations.

Additionally, food purveyors in the private sector include more than large corporations: “Farmers are part of the private sector, too,” Alice Ammerman,

Director of the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, reminded attendees.

> Healthcare institutions: Use collaborative methods to realize solutions while letting communities lead the way.

Healthcare institutions simultaneously have access to significant capital and research resources and regular contact with a variety of individuals across communities, so their responsibility in operationalizing food is medicine initiatives is central.

The most effective role they can play, though, is as connectors and partners. When it comes to designing food is medicine interventions, healthcare institutions can best serve local populations by making sure those communities have equal say in decision-making.

For example, the Collaborative for Advancing Clinical Health Equity (CACHE), housed at Duke University, brings patients, families, and local civic leaders together to help design interventions to address inequities in clinical outcomes, said Debra Clark Jones, Associate Vice President of Community Health at Duke University.

“Most folks that are in the healthcare profession are excellent at what they do,” she said. “But we don’t often or always recognize the assets in our community.”

Ultimately, a collaborative food is medicine model can help health-promoting initiatives be more successful, because of the authentic trust that community members have with their local leaders. It is important that healthcare institutions lead the way in approaching these partnerships with humility and open-mindedness.

“The wonderful thing about community-based organizations being involved in food is medicine is that they have strong and long-standing relationships with the communities that they serve,” said Merry Davis, Healthy Food Director at Blue Cross and Blue Shield North Carolina Foundation. “They’ve been there. They’re not popping in because this is the new hottest topic. The challenge is, partnering with healthcare in a way that is mutually supportive, sustainable, and recognizes the unique value of community-based organizations’ in delivering food is medicine ”

b. The Community Perspective: Creative and Authentic Cross-Sector Partnerships Can Feed People and Change Lives

Food corporations in particular should consider food production not as a profit generator but as a way to change lives, attendees said during focused breakout sessions.

Partnerships between these corporations and other institutions across civil society are necessary, especially so business leaders can better understand how food and farming systems work. These collaborative relationships need to be built globally, attendees said, but each must focus on and respond to hyperlocal issues.

And by incorporating community organizations into these partnerships, consumer education can improve. This is especially beneficial in the context of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of food relief programs, attendees said.

In some cases, donations to food banks and pantries are of poor quality and not suitable to be distributed. A better understanding among consumers of food relief could improve the organizations' operations. Consumers may also not fully understand how to purchase local food or even prepare certain ingredients they're able to access.

However, attendees said, though education could be helpful in this regard, it cannot stand alone. Many families also face time constraints or other accessibility challenges that prevent them from purchasing or preparing certain foods.

Finally, stronger and more authentic partnerships with community-rooted organizations can elevate “out-of-the-box” thinking and creative solutions, attendees said. One topic ripe for discussion is the connection between gut microbiomes in the body and the health of soils. Another involves the insurance implications for farmers whose lands are affected by climate change. Or how can a variety of stakeholders step in to strengthen and ensure the success of cooperative stores?

V. Conclusion

Progress is underway toward meeting the goals of each of the five pillars of the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health.

As discussed during a Summit on March 3, 2024, in Durham, N.C., both the public and private sectors need to continue taking action to build food access and affordability and empower eaters to make healthy choices.

Policymakers and governmental agencies at federal, state, and local levels, as well as leaders of food businesses, healthcare providers, hunger relief organizations, faith institutions, community advocacy groups, farms, and more, have begun to recognize the primacy of food systems in addressing a variety of challenges.

Necessary changes cannot be made without strong cross-sector **partnerships**. Collaborative, educational, interdependent relationships are a central tool in building healthier societies. Outcomes from discussions among these groups must subsequently be codified in **policies** that universalize human rights, fair compensation, and access to nourishing local food. As these silos are broken down, private-sector actors will also see that sustainable food systems are good for **profits** and in their economic best interest, and institutional procurement practices will help money flow in a more just manner.