

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 6, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear President Biden,

Thank you for your leadership in convening the first White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health in more than 50 years. The last Conference, held in 1969, was pivotal in determining the future of our nation's food policy agenda that is proven to be now, more than ever, instrumental in keeping Americans fed. In one notable example, Representative Shirley Chisholm and Senator Robert Dole recommended a pilot program administered by the USDA to target supplemental food assistance for pregnant woman and their infants and young children.¹ This program was codified shortly thereafter and is now known as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). WIC now services over 6 million Americans each month and in a testament to its success and continued relevance, served as a lifeline for many families during the recent infant formula crisis.

Programs like WIC are critical for America's most vulnerable groups and remind us that bipartisanship and intersectionality are tools of strength, especially on issues concerning hunger, nutrition, and health. While much of the country's landscape has changed since 1969, some facts have stayed the same: marginalized groups and in particular, Black women and children, have been disproportionately impacted by these same issues that will be discussed at September's Conference.

As Co-Chairs of the Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls, we applaud the Conference's five pillars outlined by the Administration: Improve food access and affordability, Integrate nutrition and health, Empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices, Support physical activity for all, and Enhance nutrition and food security research. These strong pillars signal the White House's commitment to ending hunger and increasing healthy habits among the American people. We now urge you to prioritize and keep the most vulnerable in mind to meet this commitment by incorporating these following suggestions to 1) expand participation in federal nutrition programs, such as WIC; 2) address food insecurity and disproportionate access; and 3) close racial/ethnic gaps in nutrition security research.

First, we urge the Conference to look at expanding participation and alleviating disparities in federal nutrition programs specifically for Black women. Expanded eligibility, full participation, and a purposeful focus on servicing the most vulnerable populations are critical steps towards improving access and affordability. In order to fulfill basic dietary needs, we ask that particular attention is paid to the WIC

¹https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/558041/jewish/Turning-Disappointment-Into-Food-for-the-Hungry.htm

program to strengthen its infrastructure while also alleviating disparities in its breastfeeding programs, specifically concerning low-income and Black women.

Despite provisions outlined in the Affordable Care Act and the Family Medical Leave Act that attempt to help mothers establish breastfeeding and pumping times with their infants, mothers are still more likely to have to return to work two weeks after giving birth.² It is recommended that mothers exclusively breastfeed their infants in the first six months after birth.³ However, Black mothers are often disproportionately pushed to formula-feed quicker and are assumed to formula-feed at higher rates than other racial groups.⁴

Second, we ask the Conference to tackle food insecurity and the disproportionate access to healthy nutritious food options facing different populations, specifically divided by geographic region, income, race, or gender. Food insecurity, nutrition security, and the agency to make healthy choices is dependent on access to these options. Often, food insecurity is a cycle that can be perpetuated generationally or temporarily.⁵ Most concerning of all, Black women have the highest rates of food insecurity and face greater challenges associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes as a result.⁶ Placing Black woman at the forefront of increasing access to healthy choices will ultimately benefit all marginalized populations.

Additionally, to address food insecurity, we ask the Conference to re-examine and update its terminology. The catchall usage of the term food desert has become relatively outdated due to changes in economic circumstances and fails to encapsulate the complexities of food accessibility.⁷ The term food desert, defined by the Centers for Disease Control as “areas that lack access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up the full range of a healthy diet” with specific guidelines set by the USDA that can vary, not fully describing the current reality facing many food and nutrition insecure populations.⁸ We ask that the Conference consider other terms that can capture these complexities and streamline more effective policy solutions on the federal level. This can include more inclusive terms such as food mirages and food swamps, as suggested by the National Collaborating Center for Environmental Health in research performed on American cities.⁹

Furthermore, we encourage the Conference to address disparities in access to physical activities. Inadequate physical activity contributes to increased risks of various conditions, including coronary heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers. Conversely, increased physical activity is associated with lower risks of type 2 diabetes, cancer, and stroke.¹⁰ Physical activity plays in a key role in health and wellness, and research has demonstrated that individuals who live closer to sidewalks, parks, and gyms are more likely to exercise.¹¹ However, low-income communities often lack access to green space, recreational facilities, and affordable gyms. Ensuring that all communities and individuals have access to nearby and affordable exercise opportunities is key to supporting physical activity for all.

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/19/the-shocking-number-of-new-moms-who-return-to-work-two-weeks-after-childbirth/>

³ <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/breastfeeding/conditioninfo/recommendations>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/02/11/801343800/from-breastfeeding-to-beyonc-skimmed-tells-a-new-story-about-black-motherhood>

⁵ <https://foodallergyallies.org/2021/12/11/the-food-insecurity-cycle/>

⁶ <https://www.pbrc.edu/news/media/2021/food-insecurity-and-black-women.aspx>

⁷ <https://thecounter.org/critics-say-its-time-to-stop-using-the-term-food-deserts-food-insecurity/>

⁸ <https://onlinemasters.ohio.edu/food-deserts-definition/>

⁹ https://nceeh.ca/sites/default/files/Food_Deserts_Food_Swamps_Primer_Oct_2017.pdf

¹⁰ https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Physical_Activity_Guidelines_2nd_edition.pdf

¹¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2108465/>

Lastly, we ask the Conference to spend time understanding how to best close significant gaps in nutrition security research that do not grasp the lived experiences of marginalized groups. We ask that research approaches that have targeted interventions and are focused on areas that are disproportionately impacted be discussed throughout the Conference. As recently as 2021, a “first-of-a-kind” study was performed on how food insecurity impacts the physical and mental health of Black women.¹² We ask that federal, state, and local governments work with the White House during the Conference to examine how best to allocate research opportunities and resources to community partners who are familiar with the needs on the ground and are better equipped to formulate community-driven solutions.

As millions of Americans face hunger, nutrition, and health challenges, thank you again for convening this critical Conference and for your administration’s ongoing commitment to solving our nation’s greatest challenges. We look forward to working together to implement the above priorities and seeing the Conference take place this September.

Sincerely,



Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress



Robin Kelly
Member of Congress



Yvette D. Clark
Member of Congress

¹²<https://www.pbrc.edu/news/media/2021/food-insecurity-and-black-women.aspx>