

## Priorities for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

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**MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger**

July 15, 2022

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger (MAZON) takes to heart the Jewish teachings that tell us that we all share the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst, without judgement or precondition. In the United States, since the New Deal, we have been blessed with a government that shares this vision of responsibility. At the same time, We have seen the growth of a robust charitable sector, striving to supplement the government's response to hunger, but whose structure, resources, and approach were never designed to provide the vital response that those who are food insecure need and deserve.

MAZON's founder, Leibel Fein (of blessed memory) articulated the moral foundation of our work, and the essential role of government in addressing hunger. He wrote that, "By focusing citizens' attention on voluntary charitable efforts, we relieve the polity of the burden for policy reform, that by emphasizing kindness, we run the risk of postponing justice, of depressing the necessary sense of urgency that justice requires." Those words from 1985 still ring true today, and the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health (hereinafter "the White House Conference" or "Conference") manifests this urgency in a most profound way. I am pleased to share MAZON's priorities for the White House Conference.

As demonstrated by the New Deal and the War on Poverty, when our government prioritizes social issues, we can significantly improve the lives of millions of Americans. Leadership mattered then, and it matters now. We commend the Biden Administration's leadership in hosting the Conference. It is a clear acknowledgment that President Biden understands the breadth and depth of hunger in America and the federal government's vital role in responding to it.

Our history has also proven that we can construct and invest in federal nutrition programs to provide meaningful assistance to those struggling with food insecurity. However, progress for some is not felt equally by all, and some people are overlooked or left out. That is why MAZON — centered in the Jewish value of *b'tselem Elohim* (respecting the inherent dignity of every person) — shines a spotlight on issues and populations where larger organizations and the government have yet to turn their focus, including military families, veterans, Native Americans, single mothers, LGBTQ seniors, and the people of Puerto Rico and the territories.

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It is also essential to acknowledge the shameful reality that hunger — like many other forms of inequity — is exacerbated and perpetuated by systemic racism. Historically marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, are often overlooked by lawmakers and by the media. Too often, the public narrative focuses on how charity programs temporarily keep hunger at bay, while ignoring the need to strengthen safety net programs and address systemic issues and root causes.

Moreover, the Conference is an opportunity to eliminate the negative and offensive language surrounding food insecure people and the programs that they utilize. There are hungry people in every county, community, and congressional district in this country. These people are worthy of support to feed themselves and their families with dignity, regardless of where they live, and without judgment.

The federal government is obligated to lead the way with comprehensive solutions to address hunger in America. Nonprofit and charitable organizations provide a tremendous service in the short-term, providing temporary food and support. However, the real need is for leadership from our government to implement changes to our current system and show us the long-term vision that is possible.

### ***Short-Term Change in our Nation's Current Approach***

Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and other federal nutrition programs, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and school nutrition programs, lift millions out of poverty. Contrary to accusations that these programs incentivize government dependence or fraud, evidence shows that these programmatic investments improve economic and educational opportunities — as well as health outcomes — for working families.

The 1977 Food Stamp Act makes it clear where the problem lies and how we must think about the solution:

#### ***DECLARATION OF POLICY***

***SEC. 2. 7 U.S.C. 2011ġ “It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, in order to promote the general welfare, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s population by raising levels of nutrition among low-income households. Congress hereby finds that the limited food purchasing power of low-income households contributes to hunger and malnutrition among members of such households.... To alleviate such hunger and malnutrition, a food stamp program is herein authorized which will permit low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet through normal channels of trade by increasing food purchasing power for***

***all eligible households who apply for participation.”***

With over 37 years of experience in the anti-hunger field, MAZON recommends the following critical steps to actualize meaningful change *now*, as we work toward a future vision of ending hunger:

**1. Access: All those who struggle must be able to access help from their government to feed themselves and their families.**

- The federal government must publicly advocate for and identify more and **better access to nutrition safety net programs**. MAZON recommends a national campaign to educate Americans about how and where to apply for benefits, with awareness of the acute and widespread stigma existing in many communities. We must communicate that these programs enable us to invest in families facing hunger, which leads to a more educated, healthy, and competitive America.
- Flexibility is the key to applying for and using federal nutrition benefits, and our current system is failing. Policies and regulations must have optimal flexibility to **ensure access to those benefits** and in turn **access to adequate nutritious foods**.
  - The Administration should work directly with states to utilize the many options available to increase participation and use of benefits, beginning with eliminating the asset tests for SNAP.
  - The Administration must allow prepared foods purchases using SNAP benefits and incentivize states to simplify and streamline this process.
  - The Administration must increase SNAP funding and benefits to allow for and incentivize healthier food choices. We recognize that poor nutrition leads to poor health outcomes. While those on SNAP constitute a mere fraction of the Americans suffering from diet related diseases and the epidemics of obesity and diabetes, healthier food is more expensive, and many people simply cannot afford to make healthier dietary choices. Limitations on how SNAP can be used to constrain consumer food choices are not supported by research, and restricting SNAP would be inconsistent with the dignity and respect that were cornerstones of SNAP’s creation. Disincentives or outright prohibitions on food choices are not only punitive, but irresponsible. Rather, SNAP benefits must increase to match the reality of the cost of a healthy diet today, allowing people the freedom to make sound nutritional choices instead of selecting items out of a necessity to maximize SNAP’s inadequate benefit.
  - We must eliminate work requirements for SNAP. They are antithetical to both the values and approach inherent in our nutrition safety net.
  - Even in the short term, cross-agency coordination is vital to security, health, and well-being — particularly for families

- headed by single mothers. Not only are SNAP benefits without work requirements vital, but recognizing and providing childcare for single mothers on SNAP is an essential pre-requisite for lifting them out of food insecurity.
  - The people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Territories must not be treated differently than other Americans with regard to SNAP. There must be parity with both the amount of support and the means through which it is available.
- We must optimize technology to meet Americans where and how they live and work.
  - The Administration should increase SNAP online purchasing nationwide to include more local, independent grocers and increase the number of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) processors to handle the increased demand and ensure access around the country.
  - The Administration should publish a status update on implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill recommendations to increase the use of technology, including mobile phones, to receive and use SNAP benefits.
  - Investing in broadband internet and cellular coverage is a vital pre-requisite for advancing our goals of ending hunger and must be a priority for the Administration.

**2. Accuracy: Accurate data about eligibility and participation in federal nutrition programs is essential to ensuring the programs are effective and reach as many people as possible.**

- The USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) should include information in its annual Food Insecurity Report about program eligibility and participation rates among veterans, active-duty military, Coast Guard, National Guard, LGBTQ people (particularly LGBTQ+ seniors), and the people of Puerto Rico and other U.S. Territories.
- All federal populations surveys must collect disaggregated data about sexual orientation and gender identity.
- The ERS should provide a report 90 days after the Conference about barriers and solutions to ensuring eligibility and participation among the identified groups, so this data can be reported annually.

**3. Accountability: No family in America deserves to be overlooked, stigmatized, or barred from seeking nutrition benefits.**

- The President should sign an Executive Order creating a Federal Interagency Working Group on **Military and Veterans Food Insecurity** (Working Group). The Working Group should provide recommendations to the President, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of Agriculture on immediate regulatory changes to increase education and participation in nutrition programs, provide a roadmap for implementing the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) authorized in the 2022 NDAA that provides support to military families facing financial challenges, and

propose changes to legislation, such as the Farm Bill, 90 days after the adjournment of the Conference.

- Federal agencies must designate a Military and Veterans Liaison (MVL) to respond to concerns from servicemembers, veterans, and their families, and identify and publish all programs that can assist veterans facing food insecurity.
- The Administration must work with Congress to ensure that the 2023 Farm Bill eliminates the Base Allowance for Housing (BAH) as income when military families apply for SNAP.

#### **4. Autonomy: Commit to Tribal food sovereignty.**

- Acknowledging that Tribal governments know their communities' needs best, USDA must give Tribes the authority to administer all federal nutrition programs, including but not limited to SNAP, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).
- USDA must increase access to traditional foods across all federal nutrition programs, expand Tribal food sovereignty initiatives to restore traditional foodways, and keep dietary guidelines simple and culturally relevant.

#### **5. Action: The time to act is now.**

- The Administration should publish recommendations adopted by the Conference within 90 days of the Conference.
- Each recommendation must include a lead Agency and designated point of contact, as well as a clear timeline for implementation.
- Federal agencies should provide quarterly reports to the White House starting on April 1, 2023, and publish their status of implementing recommendations on each agency's website.

We know what it takes to ensure that every American has access to affordable, nutritious food. This Conference is timelier and more important than ever, as Congress begins discussions on the 2023 Farm Bill. Ensuring our country's nutrition safety net is secure and functioning at its maximum efficiency is not only critical to those facing hunger — it is essential for farmers, producers, employers, and all Americans.

#### ***Long-Term Policy Solutions***

MAZON applauds the Biden Administration, Tufts University, and those engaged in planning and executing this Conference for also prioritizing the complex and difficult task of identifying and realizing long term solutions that permanently end hunger.

MAZON looks forward to working with the Administration and leaders from around the country to identify clear, actionable policy solutions and proposed legislation to end hunger in the United States.

Since the last conference in 1969, food insecurity has worsened for many, and our safety net has let too many people fall through its cracks. In this moment of opportunity, it is essential for policymakers and advocates alike to ask ourselves several meaningful questions to build a foundation for advancing long-term solutions:

***What is the history of hunger in the United States? How has the government responded to food insecurity? Where have we made progress? Where have we lost ground? What have we failed to consider? What have we over-emphasized? What is unique about America that offers both difficult challenges and exciting opportunities? What must change in order to implement real solutions?***

We cannot, and do not presume to, have the answers to these questions, but we do know that unless we begin here in visioning for the future, we will never realize grounded and meaningful progress. By convening diverse sectors — including social justice policy, food policy, health and nutrition policy — this Conference is uniquely poised to think bigger, to imagine more, to use the best of what we know, and to realize a brighter future for those who struggle with hunger.

President Biden has offered us a remarkable opportunity to think beyond where we are or where we have been, and to envision a very different future for those who are currently food insecure in the United States. MAZON looks forward to participating in the upcoming Conference, and we stand ready to work with the Administration so we can together transform *how it is* to *how it should be*.