



July 15, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

RE: Recommendations for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

Dear President Biden:

On behalf of The Rockefeller Foundation, thank you for the opportunity to provide recommendations and policy opportunities to help inform the agenda for the upcoming White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. The challenges facing our food system are urgent and complex. This conference comes at a critical moment as the need to focus on systemic change to ensure our food system is more nourishing, equitable, and sustainable is essential.

We are encouraged in preparing for the conference that the White House and Domestic Policy Council have created the interagency task force and announced that there will be a post-conference food policy road map. We hope that our recommendations, and those provided by the thousands of people and organizations that have participated in pre-conference listening sessions, will help inform that road map and action by government agencies, including the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Health, and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs. Working together and in partnership with non-governmental stakeholders, the federal government can help create a food system that is more equitable, fair, healthy, and sustainable.

## OVERVIEW

Although Americans have some of the most affordable food in the world, our food comes with hidden costs—to our health, our climate, and the farmers, fishers, ranchers, and food workers who ensure food is on store shelves and our tables. The Rockefeller Foundation has estimated through our [True Cost Accounting methodology](#) that for every \$1 trillion in value, the food system generates \$3 trillion in health, environment, and equity costs. That means our food costs three times more than what we see on the price tag. Immediate action is needed to reform this system to produce food that is good for people and the planet.

We are pleased to share our recommendations on shifts that will enable our system to produce and provide nourishing food for all consumers and create economic prosperity for our nation's farmers, fishers, ranchers, and food workers, while also protecting and respecting the natural resources needed to grow and produce food. Our recommendations focus on three areas where we see the most potential for significant impact across the food system:



- **Improving healthy food access and affordability** by strengthening federal nutrition programs and supporting efforts focused on food and nutrition security.
- **Integrating nutrition and health** through the broad adoption of “Food is Medicine” interventions into healthcare delivery, investment in nutrition research and expansion of programs such as medically tailored meals and The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) produce prescription programs.
- **Empowering all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices** by maximizing the return on public investment through adopting and implementing purchasing standards that support healthier, more resilient, equitable food systems across the U.S.

Together, these three areas can drive systemic change across our food system, increase access to healthy food, reduce diet-related diseases, improve health outcomes, and reduce hunger and nutrition insecurity in the country. We provide more detail on specific policy recommendations to achieve these critical pillars below.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Strengthen and expand nutrition benefit programs, including healthy school meal programs for all students.

School meal programs are essential for the health and economic stability of communities. In [our work](#) with the Center for Good Food Purchasing (CGFP), we found that while the two largest school meal programs cost \$18.7 billion per year, they provide nearly \$40 billion in human health and economic benefits. Enhancements to school meal programs can increase their net value even more: we analyzed investments to maximize student participation, improve dietary composition, and optimize food purchasing policies. Together these changes could produce an additional \$10 billion worth of net-positive health, equity, environmental, and economic impacts.

We must ensure that children of all ages are given the nourishment they need to thrive. **We urge policymakers to expand healthy school meals, enabling schools to provide a no-cost breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of income, even when schools are closed.** This expansion will alleviate some of the cumbersome processes burdening school food program staff and enable them to innovate and reshape these programs for the good of students.



## **2. Rapidly expand equitable access to “Food Is Medicine”.**

Diet-related diseases (e.g., diabetes, cardiovascular disease, etc.) burden individuals – with disproportionate impacts on BIPOC individuals and communities, the economy, and national security, yet the healthcare system still places minimal emphasis on nutrition.

The Rockefeller Foundation is investing in the advancement of “Food is Medicine” interventions that help prevent, manage, and treat illness, including medically tailored meals and produce prescription programs. By integrating nutritious food into our healthcare system, doctors could prescribe produce or healthy meals as efficiently as pharmaceuticals and reduce the need for expensive and invasive health services, which are often required because of nutrition insecurity.

**We recommend expanding access to programs that enable healthcare providers to connect patients with healthy food.** This includes a recommendation that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) approve state applications for Medicaid waivers that include nutrition services, such as Section 1115, Section 1135, and Section 1915(c). This would allow healthy food to be covered by existing safety net programs for those struggling with food insecurity or diet-related diseases.

Practically, the integration of nutrition requires reaching consensus on the parameters of a healthy diet, investing in nutrition research, and improving the education of medical providers and the public on nutrition.

Federal agencies can support access to Food is Medicine programs such as produce prescription programs and medically tailored meals. For example, CMS can expand the utilization of produce prescription programs in Medicare Advantage by providing additional guidance encouraging plans to offer this intervention, especially within their Special Supplemental Benefits for the Chronically Ill (SSBCI) programs.

The Veterans Health Administration and Indian Health Services can support the adoption and expansion of produce prescription programs at their facilities to address the social determinants of health, improve health equity, optimize medical spending and improve health outcomes across the country.

## **3. Continue expansion of GusNIP and Produce Prescriptions.**

We see a great deal of potential in produce prescriptions as a way to improve health and reduce healthcare costs. GusNIP is a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) program that provides grant funding for projects to provide incentives to income-eligible consumers to increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables and prescriptions for fresh fruits and vegetables. Currently running in 19 states through 2023, GusNIP [program evaluation data and analysis](#) show that the programs are working. Produce prescription participants increased fruit and vegetable intake



and experienced improvements in food and nutrition security status from baseline to post-project assessments.

Take, for example, **Jamie Meadows, a U.S. Army veteran and mother of two, who learned about the “Eat Well” produce prescription program through her V.A. breast cancer support group.** The program is a partnership with Food Lion and Rockefeller grantee Reinvestment Partners. In just a few quick steps, through a phone call and her loyalty rewards card, she was signed up. She shared the positive impact this program has had on her life:

*“The program makes me more aware while shopping. I now typically go directly toward the fresh fruits and vegetables. Rather than choosing easier options like canned goods or instant potatoes as I did before, I expand my recipes and try to make things myself that I used to buy prepared. My children are also eating healthier with me.”*

The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) recently announced nearly \$40 million to support GusNIP produce prescription projects as part of the American Rescue Plan Act. We applaud this significant step and **encourage the continued expansion of GusNIP programs to include all fifty states, territories, and Tribal Nations.**

A national expansion will support efforts already at work in 38 states, according to the National Produce Prescription Collaborative, a coalition of practitioners, researchers, and advocates, supported by The Rockefeller Foundation. Healthcare companies are also piloting produce programs. In Pennsylvania, Geisinger has “Fresh Food Farmacy” centers at three hospitals providing food for patients with diabetes. And in Southern California, Kaiser Permanente is recruiting four hundred patients with diabetes for a randomized controlled trial. On the retailer side, produce prescriptions are becoming so common that the National Grocers Association has set up [a website](#) to help stores manage them.

#### **4. Leverage Federal Purchasing Power for Food System Transformation**

With billions of dollars spent on food annually across various agencies and institutions, the federal government plays a significant economic role in shaping the food industry. Because of that scope and scale, federal food procurement can influence industry and transform the U.S. food system into one that is healthier and more sustainable.

**We recommend that the federal government direct the purchasing power of large institutions toward healthier, more equitable, and sustainable supply chains by incentivizing or otherwise enabling federal institutions’ food procurement strategies to prioritize vendors that embody these values.**



One of the early steps the White House can take is an executive order requiring all federal institutions to apply the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities, increasing the nutritional quality of food served in federally operated institutions. [Recent research](#) estimates that this action would save hundreds of millions of dollars in healthcare costs for diet-related diseases, leveraging existing federal food spending.

As one example of a successful purchasing strategy, the Center for Good Food Purchasing (CGFP), a grantee of The Rockefeller Foundation, offers institutions a data platform to introduce radical transparency into the nutrition, sustainability, and equity performance of the foods they purchase—and technical assistance and guidance for making progress against these goals.

For example, when **Los Angeles Unified School District (more than 640,000 students) became the first major institution to adopt the program, it was quickly able to make and measure significant changes in its purchasing.** Since 2012 LAUSD has:

- Decreased its GHG footprint by 11 percent through a 15 percent reduction in animal protein purchases;
- Redirected nearly \$20 million in food spending to local businesses; and
- Reduced processed meat servings by 21 percent with significant health implications for students.

Since then, CGFP has enrolled city institutions serving more than 450 million meals and \$1.1 billion in food spending annually.

One of the next opportunities is to bring this framework to federal agencies and institutions, scaling its “public dollars for public good” approach to help the federal government shift at least \$8.7 billion in annual spending to support positive health and equity outcomes.

### **The Rockefeller Foundation's Commitment to Good Food**

The Rockefeller Foundation is historically committed to food systems innovation. While historic approaches focused on increasing the quantity of food produced to avert famine, today we are working to ensure that quality foods are widely accessible and affordable and that food policy and purchasing decisions are driven by a complete understanding of the costs and benefits of what we eat.

For the better part of the last decade, we have brought together hundreds of organizations, scientific experts, healthcare professionals, and food system advocates to develop a global strategy for addressing the challenges present in our current food system. This work is outlined in our [Reset the Table](#) and [True Cost of the Food](#) system reports, and earlier this year, we announced that we would spend more than [\\$100 million](#) focused on three levers to increase



access to affordable, healthy food; reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the food system, and expand economic opportunity for small- and mid-size food producers.

There is a tremendous amount of work to be done. Despite the food system's \$9 trillion global market value, two-thirds of people living in extreme poverty are agricultural workers and their families. Unhealthy diets account for one in five deaths worldwide, and the food system generates over a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions. While we understand that the scope of the conference is strategically focused on nutrition, health, and hunger, we hope that it will spur conversation on the other impacts of our global food system.

## **Conclusion**

We are in a moment of tremendous possibility. The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health and the national strategy developed by the interagency task force will inform upcoming policy debates and help begin to redesign the food system in this country. We must act now.

Federal, state, and local governments have a crucial role to play, and so do civil society and faith-based organizations, Indigenous and Native nations, social movements, healthcare and education institutions, national security institutions, philanthropy, research institutions, and private industry. The Rockefeller Foundation is fully committed to ensuring that quality foods are widely accessible and affordable and that food policy and purchasing decisions are driven by a complete understanding of the costs and benefits of what we eat.

Together we can transform the U.S. food system to promote healthy people and a healthy planet more effectively.

