



HEALTH & NUTRITION SECURITY

Food is the most basic of human needs; still, roughly 41 million adults and children across America live in food-insecure households – a staggering fact that sheds light on one of the nation’s leading health and nutrition issues (FRAC, 2023).

When compared with food security (defined as having access to enough food to lead an active, healthy lifestyle), nutrition security means consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being, prevent disease, and, if needed, treat disease – particularly among racial/ethnic minority, lower income, and rural and remote populations (National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, 2023).

Meanwhile, it must be acknowledged that poverty and food and nutrition security are social determinants of health that are not only inextricably linked but also associated with some of the most serious and costly health problems in this country (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017).

KEY CHALLENGES

Affordability

The same determinants of food and nutrition security are also determinants of health – chief among them poverty (Gunderson & Ziliack, 2015). As such, maintaining good health becomes a steep challenge for those individuals who are often left to decide between consuming a nutritious diet and managing chronic disease or covering the basics like housing, utilities, and transportation.

Accessibility

Neighborhoods geared toward low-income residents historically have fewer resources to promote health (such as full-service grocery stores selling fresh produce and green spaces encouraging physical activity) than higher-income neighborhoods (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017). In turn, food insecurity disproportionately affects individuals from marginalized groups, including those from socioeconomically disadvantaged populations as well as racial and ethnic minorities. In 2021, 20% of Black/African American households and 16% of Hispanic/Latino households were food insecure at some point when compared with just 7% of white households during that same period (National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, 2023).

PROMISING IDEAS

The impact of food and nutrition insecurity on health outcomes is huge: According to the United States Department of Agriculture, 600,000 Americans die each year due to diet-related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and obesity – the bulk of which could be prevented given greater access to nourishing foods, nutrition education, and affordability (Tisch Food Center, 2022).

Increasing Connection

Screening for food insecurity and intervening with resources are a pair of critically important steps among nutrition and health care professionals, especially those who treat children; the practice has proven integral in making a positive impact on the health and well-being of vulnerable patients (FRAC, 2023). Research has shown that utilizing [federal nutrition programs](#) not only reduces food insecurity and helps to alleviate poverty but also improves diet, protects against obesity, and boosts learning and development (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017).

Engaging Community Partners

Food access sites offering fresh local produce and culturally appropriate foods have been shown to elicit powerful benefits for those who utilize them. Because individuals with limited financial resources are prone to coping strategies that stretch budgets and harm their health, it is essential to engage community partners – from schools and religious organizations to pantries and meal sites – as a means of meeting individuals who are food and nutrition insecure where they are. Furthermore, community partners are often poised to provide resources and education rather than leave vulnerable populations to purchase low-cost, nutrient-poor foods (Hartline-Grafton & Dean, 2017).

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT



Photo from a 2022 meeting of the Tri-Corner Nutrition Security Coalition. Photo courtesy of Jordan Schmidt.

Jordan Schmidt is well-versed in the role food and nutrition security play in keeping the community healthy and the toll it takes when they are lacking or absent.

In her role as Food Program Director at North East Community Center, Jordan leads the Tri-Corner Nutrition Security Coalition. The coalition launched in 2022 with the goal to name southern Columbia County, northeastern Dutchess County and northwestern Litchfield County as a functional region and to strengthen opportunities for collaboration.



Volunteers at Comida de Vida organizing food for community members. Every Friday from 3:00 to 5:00, Comida de Vida supplies anyone in need with food for nine meals per week, with an emphasis on nutritious, vitamin-rich, healthy food. Visitors receive fresh vegetables and fruit, eggs, fresh or frozen meat, bread, milk, cheese, and canned and dry goods, as well as toiletries, paper products and diapers. Photo by Anne Day.

“[Understanding] the capacity of providers and the needs of residents, especially those who are low- and middle-income, [is key],” says Schmidt whose curiosity, of late, has been piqued by the changing agricultural sector and what is needed to grow it.

“There’s a lot of pressure on people’s food budgets right now,” she says, citing more folks seeking assistance at food pantries now than at the height of lockdown during the pandemic, especially in the days surrounding first-of-the-month housing payments. In parts of the region, the issue gets even more specific than shelter and sustenance.

“We’re an international community overall, with predominantly Latino and Black households, [who have] specific cultural needs,” says Danny Hutnick of Comida de Vida food pantry, whose mission is to provide fresh, nutritious food (including vegetables grown on site) to neighbors in need.

“Food of Life has always had a consciousness around dignity and the experience of choice,” says Hutnick whose clinical experience as a bilingual LMSW has left him fluent in the link between cultural consideration and supplemental nutrition.

As pantry manager, Hutnick is in constant communication with neighbors who visit the Amenia pantry each Friday knowing they will find staples that meet their culture-bound norms — like dry black beans, long-grain white rice and Maseca (the leading global brand of corn flour) — invaluable ingredients in creating a language around inclusivity and representation.

“Fridays are like a meet up, it’s a happening,” says Hutnik, painting a vivid

picture of a space where neighbors engage in the garden, help one another out, and everyone belongs.

“Each neighbor is seen and honored for who they are...and we’re taking out a lot of the stigma and shame around what it means to be a participant in a food support program.”

COMING UP

In our next installment, we’ll take a closer look at how food aggregation and distribution systems like food hubs — defined by the USDA as any business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers — can strengthen the overall health and well-being of the communities they serve.

References

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