

The USDA's Actions to Promote and Elevate Nutrition Security During the First 1000 Days

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In March 2022,¹ the secretary of agriculture Thomas Vilsack announced the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Actions on Nutrition Security, which outlines our department's commitment to prioritizing bold nutrition security efforts that will help ensure all US children and families have consistent access to safe, healthy, affordable foods essential to optimal health and well-being.² Without question, poor nutrition is a leading cause of illness in the United States and is responsible for more than 600 000 deaths per year—a problem that is getting worse and disproportionately affecting historically underserved communities.^{3,4} These disparities start early and are in part driven by structural barriers; for example, the breastfeeding rate among women of color continues to be significantly less than that of White women.⁵ Often, racial disparities stem from structural racism in food access, education, housing, health care, and employment and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶

We highlight how the USDA and hopefully all our allies in the field of public health can make a difference. USDA's nutrition security work builds

on and complements our long-standing efforts to address food insecurity but is different. The concept of nutrition security—unlike food security—explicitly recognizes we are all not maintaining an active, healthy life given the increasing rise in the coexistence of food insecurity and diet-related chronic diseases, and it emphasizes a focus on equity, which is consistent with President Biden's goal to advance racial equity. Some examples of how the USDA is applying an equity lens to our nutrition security efforts include expanding online shopping options for participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); bridging language barriers to nutrition education resources and recipes; reaching underserved populations; and bringing together diverse partners to foster healthy food options.¹ Specific to supporting tribal sovereignty, the USDA is taking historic steps to promote traditional food ways, Indian Country food and agriculture markets, and Indigenous health through foods tailored to American Indian/Alaska Native dietary needs.

Ensuring nutrition security during the critical time from pregnancy through a child's second birthday is woven throughout our nutrition security approach, highlighting USDA's commitment to ensuring access to nutritional supports during this time.¹ Women who are pregnant or postpartum, infants, and toddlers require nutritional supports that can improve lifetime health.⁷ The USDA supports these populations through several long-standing nutrition assistance programs administered by our Food and Nutrition Service, including improving and updating the WIC food package; strengthening the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)—a federal program that reaches more than 4.2 million children each day through participating child care centers; expanding the scope of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA)* to focus on these critical life stages; reevaluating the Thrifty Food Plan, which serves as the basis for calculating SNAP benefits; and ensuring access to nutrition benefits in rural and remote areas.

With a whole-of-department approach, we are using all our resources for nutrition assistance, which totaled \$163 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2022.⁸ Our current and future responses are connected to the COVID-19 public health emergency and congressional authorities, which might end as the public health emergency-related waivers end. We are working with Congress and other stakeholders to help us transition out of the pandemic, recognizing the implications of waivers that might not be extended. We are also actively working to engage our MyPlate National Strategic Partners—which include large, national organizations such as health care organizations, media outlets, grocery retailers, health professional

associations, restaurant chains, and food manufacturers—on ways to promote and elevate nutrition security. In addition, we aim to enhance and build new partnerships across a variety of sectors, including antihunger, faith-based, health care, and public health.

Using our four pillars, our engagement strategy aims to build awareness of our relevant activities and identify ways to engage with the USDA or other complementary approaches: (1) providing meaningful nutrition support from pregnancy to birth and beyond; (2) connecting all Americans with healthy, safe, affordable food sources; (3) developing, translating, and enacting nutrition science through partnership; and (4) prioritizing equity every step of the way.

MEANINGFUL SUPPORT

The USDA's efforts include revising the WIC food package based on National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine recommendations⁹ and the latest edition of the *DGA*,¹⁰ which are the cornerstones of federal nutrition policy. WIC has become one of the most successful nutrition intervention policies for improving maternal and child health for those who are at nutrition risk (e.g., medically based risks such as anemia and diet-based risks such as inadequate dietary pattern) and living in or near poverty.⁷ Through WIC, we also provide nutrition counseling and breastfeeding promotion; in FY 2021, we supported 1.4 million breastfeeding participants through 9000 WIC clinics across the country. As Congress directed in the 2018 Farm Bill (Pub L No. 115–334)—and with the express support of President Biden's January 22, 2021, executive order—we reevaluated the Thrifty Food Plan. Based on our reevaluation, SNAP benefits were increased by 21% or

about \$36.24 per person per month. The reevaluation resulted in the first permanent increase to the purchasing power of SNAP benefits since the Thrifty Food Plan was introduced 45 years ago. SNAP helps support more than 42 million Americans each month, nearly half of whom are children.¹¹

HEALTHY FOODS

With congressional authority, we were able to expand access to and increase consumption of healthy food through the temporary increase in the WIC monthly cash value benefit, used to purchase fruits and vegetables, to \$35 monthly for women and children for up to four months in the American Rescue Plan of 2021 (Pub L No. 117–2). The FY 2022 continuing resolution extended that increase, shifting the monthly amounts to \$25 for children, \$43 for pregnant and postpartum women, and \$47 for fully and partially breastfeeding women, which are all substantially higher than the standard amount of \$9 for children and \$11 for women.

As part of the USDA's efforts to provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free meals to children each school day, the USDA has made significant strides in working with industry on providing lower sodium foods in school meals; these efforts have ripple effects for the CACFP. Research indicates that, following the recent changes to the CACFP meal pattern, children participating in the program consumed meals and snacks with higher nutritional quality and had higher intakes of vegetables, whole grains, and dairy.¹²

COLLABORATIVE ACTION

As directed by the 2014 Farm Bill (Pub L No. 113–79), we expanded *DGA* to

include infants and toddlers (from birth to 2 years) and are offering additional guidance for women who are pregnant, beginning with the 2020–2025 edition. We also provide resources through our Team Nutrition program to help implement these recommendations across the federal nutrition safety net, for example, by equipping the CACFP operators with tools that make it easy to serve nutritious meals to children attending childcare centers and day care homes. We plan to continue a life stage focus in the 2025–2030 edition of the *DGA* and to continue to bolster our implementation of the *DGA* across the Food and Nutrition Service's programs. By translating the science from the *DGA*'s process using a life stage lens into our nutrition education and promotion resources like MyPlate.gov, which provides consumer-oriented messages based on the latest edition of the *DGA*, we can help families and those who support parents and children focus on the quality of what they eat. This may ultimately help reduce diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, that disproportionately affect historically underserved communities.

EQUITABLE SYSTEMS

Prioritizing equity includes our efforts noted earlier to support tribal sovereignty through demonstration projects that empower tribal nations to select Indigenous foods for their Food Distribution on Indian Reservation Program food packages and to purchase directly from tribal producers. In addition, we are working to ensure that much needed nutrition benefits are available in rural and other hard-to-reach areas through Emergency Food Assistance Program Reach and Resiliency grants.

These grants will help build infrastructure to expand the Emergency Food Assistance Program's reach into remote, rural, tribal, and low-income areas the program currently underserves. These efforts are fundamental to supporting early interventions that promote healthy eating.

Another component of our equity focus is ensuring participation in our nutrition assistance programs because less than 6 out of 10 who are eligible for WIC are enrolled in the program (<https://bit.ly/3wflG6a>).

And although participation is high among infants, it falls off as children get older. With a historic investment of \$390 million from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (Pub L No. 117-2), the USDA is working to improve WIC outreach, innovation, and modernization. This work includes improving the in-store shopping experience, creating easier program entry, and testing new technological solutions that improve and streamline the participant experience, such as improving the WIC certification or enrollment process. Going forward, we anticipate more insights from our new USDA Equity Commission, which is charged with evaluating our programs and services and providing recommendations on how we can reduce barriers to accessing them.

CONCLUSIONS

As we continue to ensure that the benefits from our federal nutrition assistance programs are meaningful, accessible, and equitable and to use every available resource to put healthy foods within reach of *all* Americans, we recognize that the USDA alone cannot improve nutrition security. To be successful, we need to effectively and efficiently engage and collaborate with

external stakeholders to make progress and build back better. We hope you can join us! [AJPH](#)

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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