



The content of this document represents information collected through a national listening session jointly hosted by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy and the Board on Human Sciences of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). Technical support related to the administration of the listening session was provided by the Extension Foundation.

The Host Organizations

The Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) is the representative leadership and governing body of the Cooperative Extension System. Cooperative Extension is the nationwide nonformal education system operated by the nation's 112 Land-Grant Universities (including HBCUs and Tribal Colleges) in partnership with federal, state, and local governments. The Cooperative Extension System employs more than **32,000 faculty and staff** located on both university campuses and in **3,200 branch offices** located in nearly every county in the nation.

The Board on Human Sciences (BoHS) is an association of administrators of higher education units responsible for teaching, research, and community engagement in the human sciences at universities across the country. Their members are committed to a national agenda that unifies disciplines within and beyond the human sciences to enrich people's lives.

The Extension Foundation was established in 2006 to increase the capacity of the Cooperative Extension System to perform its mission, providing solutions for scaling and sustaining promising programs and investigating new methods and models for accomplishing its work.

The Listening Session

The listening session was held on July 12, 2022 to gather information from statewide leaders of Cooperative Extension's **Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)** as well as those leading Cooperative Extension's work as an implementing agency of **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education (SNAP-Ed)**. Joining them were members of the Board on Human Sciences. In all, 84 individuals from nearly every state in the nation participated in this virtual listening session. A separate breakout room for each Conference pillar was staffed with a facilitator and recorder. Summaries of the discussions which occurred in each breakout room follow immediately below. Ideas listed do not represent official positions of the sponsoring organizations.

Improving Food Access and Affordability

The Cooperative Extension System is actively involved in the development school and community gardens, expanding the reach of food banks and pantries, increasing access to locally-sourced fruits and vegetables by connecting low-income communities with nearby farmers, and helping minority farmers take their operations to scale. Additionally, the CDC funds 15 Land-grant Universities to work with their respective Extension Services to increase access to healthier foods as well as safe and accessible places for physical activity in counties that have more than 40% of adults with obesity.

Ideas for Increasing Food Access and Affordability

- **Streamline and simplify food assistance programs.** Many food assistance programs serve audiences which overlap. Consider consolidating these into a universal program based on income, regardless of age.
- **Ensure that beneficiaries of food assistance programs have transportation to supermarkets and food pantries.** Alternatively, **bring food closer to the people who need it.** Expand app-based ordering of SNAP-eligible food and pantry box programs where eligible families receive complete meal kits.
- Support **universal free school lunches** for all children, eliminating eligibility verification. Elevate the status and compensation for school food service professionals. Incentivize schools for exceeding dietary guidelines in school menus.
- **Subsidize growers of edible, healthy food,** particularly small, minority, and refugee farmers. Help those growers increase production levels. Provide training in farm business management.
- Support **greater involvement of healthcare providers in food access** issues through regular screening for nutrition security and allowing SNAP sign-up through healthcare providers.
- Ensure that policy and language regarding fruits and vegetables is inclusive of **frozen, canned, and dried products.**
- Provide funding for schools, community centers, and food banks to **purchase food storage equipment** such as coolers and freezers.

Integrating Nutrition and Health

Healthcare costs from diet-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, various cancers, osteoporosis, and kidney disease cost the nation as much as \$50 billion each year. When other costs are factored in, the total cost of such illnesses skyrockets to over \$1 trillion annually. The Cooperative Extension System works to prevent or delay the onset of such diseases by offering the CDC's Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) and the Dining with Diabetes (DWD) program in communities across the country. County Extension offices also provide community outlets through which academic medical centers at land grant universities can conduct research, conduct screenings, and provide clinical services.

Ideas for Integrating Nutrition and Health

- Access to food and health is largely determined by an individual's ability to pay. Without a **federally-mandated living wage**, haphazard, unreliable, and poorly administered band-aid programs become the mechanism by which millions of Americans get access to necessary resources needed to sustain life.
- **Address fragmentation** by promoting better coordination of nutrition and health programs administered by various federal and state agencies. Alignment of nutrition and health programs should become a federal priority.
- **Individuals currently suffer the consequences of flawed social systems** despite their best efforts to obtain optimal health. An increased focus on creating thriving communities in which all people can experience optimal health is needed to put health within reach of all residents.
- Explore opportunities to **incentivize large retailers to provide food** to nutrition-insecure populations.
- **Regulations and guidance for use of food assistance and education programs need to be informed by** authentic engagement with the individuals who are beneficiaries of the programs. Create more user panels to realign policy to the real-life contexts and cultures in which recipients of assistance live. Evaluate current policies which exclude such things as prepared foods and meal kits from being purchased on SNAP dollars, when in fact they can be a logical healthy choice for chronically stressed families.
- **More nutrition education materials (such as My Plate) should** be translated into various languages at the federal level. Currently the translation burden is on resource-constrained non-profits and local agencies.
- **Establish a food system driven by central goal of ensuring a nutrition-secure population.** Food production, processing, and distribution, as well as related policies, should support achievement of this central goal. As one participant said, we need an "eating system" rather than "food system."

Empowering all Consumers to Make and Have Access to Healthy Choices

Each year more than 50 Land-Grant Universities implement the SNAP-Ed program through their respective Cooperative Extension Services annually reaching more than 1.7 million participants with educational programming delivered at approximately 25,000 delivery sites. Fifty-three percent of the participants are either black or Hispanic. Cooperative Extension reaches an additional 260,000 youth and adults through its Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). Through their participation in EFNEP, 93% of adult participants report improving their diet quality and 81% say they manage their food dollars more effectively. Extension staff also work in their communities to catalyze policy, systems, and environment changes that make healthy food more appealing, affordable, and available.

Ideas for Empowering Consumers to Make Healthy Choices

- **Expand access to nutrition counseling for Medicaid and Medicare clients** through coverage of a wider range of diagnoses, rather than the current limited disease management approach.
- Develop a **sliding scale where SNAP benefits are not eliminated at a certain dollar threshold** but reduced gradually as income grows. Such a transitional model rewards work rather than penalizes it.
- Invest in efforts to **create a culture of health in communities** where ensuring lifelong health and well-being of all people is a shared value.
- **Combat the assumption that SNAP recipients have the time and resources to shop for food and prepare meals** from scratch when, in reality, family members may work several jobs and have limited time to engage in meal planning, shopping, and food preparation.
- **Increased flexibility and funding for incentive programs that support healthy food access**, including produce vouchers, double bucks programs, and WIC and senior farmers' market vouchers.

Support Physical Activity for All

Sedentary behavior costs the nation roughly \$117 billion per year. We also know that adults who are physically active spend \$1,500 less per year on healthcare costs than inactive adults. In Oklahoma, nearly 4,000 people increased their level of physical activity through participation in Cooperative Extension walking or low-impact exercise programs. Participants reported being better able to perform daily activities, reduced stiffness and pain, and being less afraid of falling. In Texas, more than 155,000 people have participated Cooperative Extension's Walk Across Texas! program since 1996 where they walk more than 832 miles over a period of eight weeks. Participants in a walking program developed by Purdue University doubled the number of minutes they were physically active from 146 to 310 minutes per week.

Ideas for Supporting Physical Activity for All

- **Incorporate structured physical activity into school curricula, starting with pre-K.** Many schools appear to place highest the value on academic development at the cost of physical and social development.
- **Ensure that physical activity is not disconnected from nutrition education**, as an appropriate energy balance can only be achieved when calories expended match calories consumed.
- Initiate marketing efforts that **portray physical activity as enjoyable** rather than an unpleasant task.
- Ensure that **all neighborhoods have safe places for youth and adults of all abilities to exercise and play.**

- Provide more **training for health care providers on the importance of physical activity** in maintaining or improving health, especially mental health. Place less reliance on medication as the first line of treatment.
- Financially **reward schools where all students achieve a minimum level of physical fitness standards.**
- **Provide lifestyle support** for students currently enrolled in colleges and universities.

Enhance Nutrition and Food Security Research

Because of its connection to the nations Land-grant Universities, Cooperative Extension is able to speed new discoveries into widespread application. At the universities, current research focuses on increasing shelf life of healthy foods and increasing their nutritional value. For example, researchers at the University of Illinois and Washington State University have discovered ways to decrease the fat uptake in fried foods. Using high-pressure technology, researchers at Rutgers University in New Jersey were able to enrich “baby” carrots with calcium.

Ideas for Enhancing Nutrition and Food Security Research

- **Develop clear and concise national definitions** for constructs such as nutrition, food security, well-being, and health equity and create standard measures for those constructs.
- **Fund more community-based participatory research and qualitative studies to ensure that the voices of people with lived experience are heard** in developing policy, programs, and strategies for achieving equity in health outcomes. Broaden the scope of what is considered “acceptable” research design beyond randomized control trials.
- USDA AFRI grants should **support investigations into the infrastructural factors that help connect the dots between food production and hunger, food access, food security, and diet-related disease.**
- Establish an **assessment matrix which clearly defines research-informed quality standards** for community nutrition programs.
- Establish **regional or multi-state research centers at land-grant universities** which focus on developing a deeper understanding of the systemic issues influencing diet-related disease, health inequities, food security, nutrition, and overall health outcomes.
- Fund research aimed at determining the **costs of diet-related diseases and the benefits of programs** aimed at preventing, delaying the onset, or managing diet-related disease.
- **Encourage data sharing and dissemination of current research and knowledge** in ways that advance best practices.