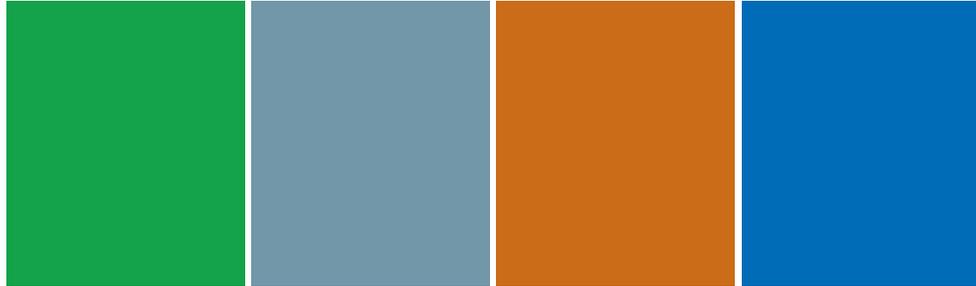


OCTOBER 2015



# A Plan of Action to End Hunger in America

# I. INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, then-candidate Barack Obama pledged that as President he would aggressively tackle hunger in America and eliminate childhood hunger. Shortly thereafter, we at the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) issued a set of recommendations on how to meet that goal (<http://frac.org/initiatives/ending-child-hunger-by-2015/>). When Mr. Obama became President, however, he inherited an economy suffering the most drastic downturn in three-quarters of a century. Giant banks and businesses teetered on the brink. Unemployment leapt up and wages fell. Hunger and poverty both rose rapidly. In 2007, 36 million Americans lived in food insecure households. In 2009, that number was 50 million. The President's pledge met gale-force headwinds.

Now, seven years after Mr. Obama made his anti-hunger pledge, the economy is in considerably better shape, though far from fully recovered. While hunger in this rich nation is unacceptable, even in the worst of times, the recovery changes the dynamic, making American hunger both more unacceptable and more solvable. And it is not just the process of recovery that makes it especially timely for the nation to focus again on dramatically reducing hunger and poverty. A range of economic, political, and research developments — briefly summarized in Part II of this paper — tell us that it is time to move aggressively forward.

In Part III, FRAC revisits, builds on, and adapts to current conditions the recommendations it made in early 2009. The intervening years have underscored the basics FRAC emphasized then:

- > Strong public programs, including federal nutrition programs, are crucial to help struggling people, and must be strengthened;
- > Such programs, however, can only build on a foundation that is a strong economy with shared prosperity, robust employment, and decent wages; and
- > Both public programs and a fair economy depend on a political conversation built around values that recognize the struggle against hunger and poverty in this rich nation is not a matter of us versus them, or Democrat versus Republican, or “takers” versus “makers,” but values that recognize the importance to everyone in the country of eliminating hunger and poverty. Part III lays out a path to accomplish that.

## II. WHY IS FRAC ISSUING THIS RENEWED ANTI-HUNGER PLAN NOW?

In the autumn of 2008, the Obama-Biden campaign issued a paper titled “Obama and Biden: Tackling Domestic Hunger.” Foreshadowed by Mr. Obama’s May 2008 statement on Meet the Press that “My top priority is making sure that people are able to get enough to eat,” that paper set out a range of promising strategies to address hunger among all Americans. The paper is most remembered for its pledge to end childhood hunger by 2015.

Shortly after Mr. Obama’s inauguration, FRAC issued its follow-up plan, “Ending Childhood Hunger by 2015: The Essential Strategies for Achieving the President’s Goal.” FRAC strongly applauded the President’s goal and elaborated on seven strategies that built on the President’s plan in order to reach that goal.

Needless to say, the nation is not close to eliminating childhood hunger in this — the target — year. There are many reasons for that, including the intervention of the worst economic crisis to hit the U.S. in eight decades. The unemployment rate was already a high 6.1 percent in September 2008 when the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy helped trigger the worst of the recession, but 13 months later, unemployment peaked at 10 percent. It took years — and much of the focus, energy, and political capital of the President and his Administration — to lead the recovery from the economic tsunami they inherited.

In significant, but far from all respects, the economy has recovered. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is higher than it was before the recession. For nearly a year now, the official unemployment rate has been below the 6.1 percent rate

of September 2008. Nevertheless, unemployment (especially the “U-6” rate combining unemployed, discouraged, and involuntary part-time workers) is far from low enough. Moreover, the employment ratio for working-age adults is very depressed. Of deepest concern, there has been no recovery in wages for most Americans — indeed, the average income of the bottom fifth of households in 2014 was 10 percent below its level in 2005. Americans aspire to jobs with family-supporting wages and benefits; the economy is not delivering enough to workers and families. Austere government fiscal policy contributed to that: it has meant both less employment and wage growth, and inadequate supports for struggling families.

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The fact that GDP is restored and rising, yet the recovery is far from complete and is especially falling short for lower-income households, underscores how overdue is a concerted attack on the nation’s poverty and hunger. The struggle to pull out of the recession was certainly, in key part, also a struggle to minimize the poverty and hunger it generated, and some of the most effective stimulus strategies addressed hunger and poverty directly. Three examples were the improvements made in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and the Child Tax Credit. But more needed to be done then, and the nation is now very much at a point at which it must address head-on these fundamental problems of social and economic justice. Certainly, the nation can afford it.

Multiple other events are converging to underscore that it is time to move forward and vigorously tackle hunger:

- > In 2008, the Obama-Biden paper pointed out some of the health, developmental, and other harms that hunger causes. Since then, the state of our knowledge about the dramatic harms — including fiscal and economic — that hunger causes has advanced hugely, as has the state of our knowledge on the efficacy of the cures for hunger. An explosion of research within the last few years provides more and more evidence that food insecurity is linked with costly chronic diseases and unfavorable medical outcomes, including diabetes, hypertension, obesity, poor mental health, iron deficiency, poor disease management, cost-related medication underuse, and increased health care utilization and costs. One estimate of the cost of these and other harms to the nation is more than \$167 billion per year.

On the positive side of the equation, recent research (much of it captured in a review by RTI International for the National Commission on Hunger, [http://www.rti.org/pubs/full\\_hunger\\_report\\_final\\_07-24-14.pdf](http://www.rti.org/pubs/full_hunger_report_final_07-24-14.pdf)) demonstrates how effective the federal nutrition programs, including SNAP, are at improving food security, health, and well-being. For example, the temporary increase in SNAP benefit levels from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) helped significantly reduce food insecurity and improve the health of young children. Recent studies also link SNAP participation with favorable impacts on metabolic syndrome incidence, body mass index, psychological distress, depression, and economic self-sufficiency.

- > Last month the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued its annual analysis (with 2014 data) of what Census Bureau surveys show about households struggling with hunger. While that rate of food insecurity has declined modestly from its peak levels in 2011, it is still

## FOOD INSECURITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Number of Americans Living in Households Struggling Against Hunger



Source: Household Food Security in the United States in 2014, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service

far higher than the 2006 number that Mr. Obama was identifying as national problem, which must be addressed. At that time, Mr. Obama referred to 35.5 million people in households struggling with hunger. In 2014, there were 48.1 million people in such households.

- > The United Nations recently reported on the world's progress toward meeting the Millennium Development Goals it set in 2000 for the year 2015, including the goal of reducing hunger by one-half. Remarkably, the "proportion of undernourished people in the developing regions has fallen by almost half since 1990." During those same 15 years when the nations of the world actively pursued that goal, and made extraordinary gains, the United States has gone in the opposite direction for its own people, both before and since the recession. The United Nations, moreover, has now set a goal of zero hunger by 2030.
- > Pope Francis has called hunger "a global scandal." Dozens of members of Congress sent a letter to the Pope in August with their thoughts about his visit, including the fact that they are "trouble[d] deeply [by the nation's]"

failure to eliminate hunger.” In his speech to Congress, Pope Francis said, “The fight against poverty and hunger must be fought constantly and on many fronts, especially in its causes.” The faith community has always had a special commitment to the fight against hunger and a special role in speaking to its immorality in any community, and especially a country as rich as ours. The country needs to heed this renewed call to action.

- > Before the end of 2015, the National Commission on Hunger will issue recommendations to combat domestic hunger and food insecurity. While the Commission has a limited mandate from Congress, the Commission should put forward an aggressive and comprehensive agenda of ideas to make progress. The Commission’s consulting firm, RTI International, has issued a report with an impressive list of suggested strategies for preventing and reducing food insecurity in the U.S., ranging from raising wages for low-paid workers, to making SNAP benefits more adequate, to reaching more women and children with the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).
- > Our nation is chronologically halfway toward its own 2020 deadline for accomplishing certain health promotion and disease prevention goals set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2010. These Healthy People 2020 goals include important targets for nutrition; and in particular, the **elimination of very low food security among children**, and **reduction of household food insecurity by more than one-half**, to a rate of 6.0 percent. (It was 14 percent in 2014.) To reach these goals, the nation will have to accelerate its progress dramatically.

- > The 2016 election debate has already begun. It will help frame the issues that the next President and Congress, as well as state and local officials, will address. Hunger — its causes, its impact, and its solutions — must be part of the debate and agenda for all parties and all candidates. Polling shows Democrats, Independents, Republicans, men, women, and voters from all parts of the country think that hunger is a serious problem in this country, and the government needs to invest and lead more to address it. This commitment of American voters must become part of the election discussion, and every candidate at every level of government should be asked to issue a plan to address hunger.

### III. THE STRATEGIES ESSENTIAL TO ENDING HUNGER IN AMERICA

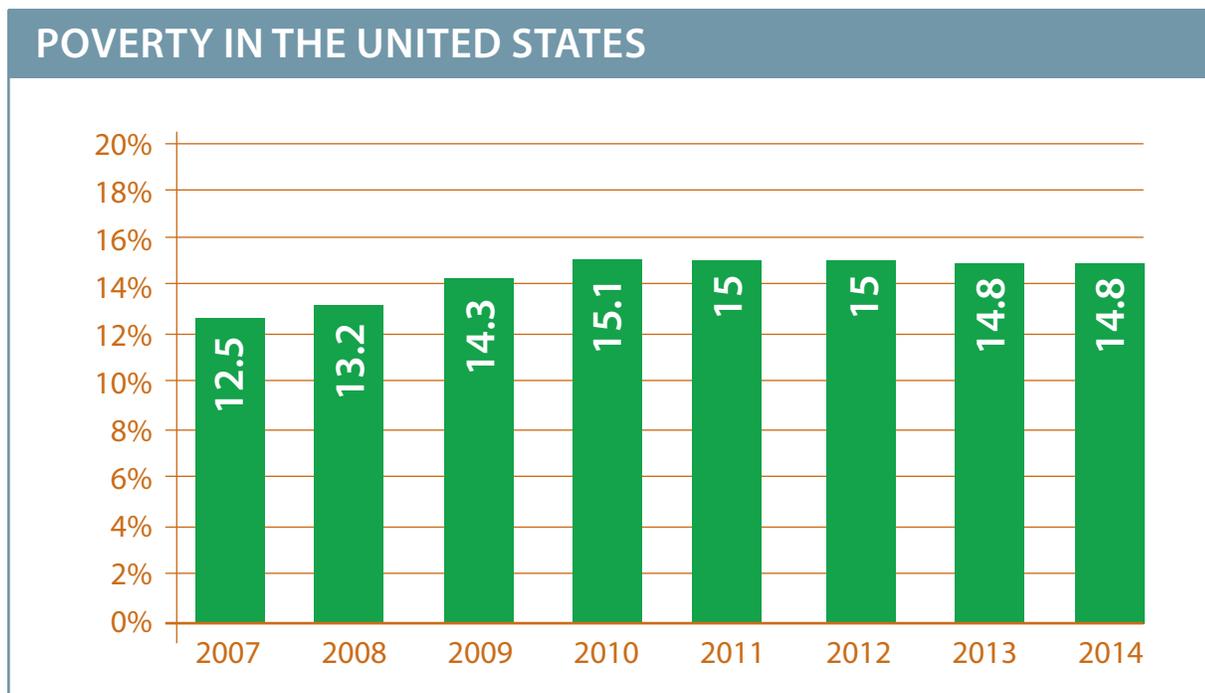
Making the United States a nation in which all people have the adequate and nutritious food they need is an achievable goal. It will require important change, but not wrenching change. It will require public and private investment, but the return on investment — improved health, learning, development, and productivity — will be huge. It will most importantly require political will, but surely this wealthy nation that aspires to greatness and leadership among the nations of the world can summon the political will to end hunger in its midst.

FRAC has identified eight essential strategies for decisively attacking hunger, which this paper discusses. They are:

- (1) Create jobs, raise wages, increase opportunity, and share prosperity;**
- (2) Improve government income-support programs for struggling families;**
- (3) Strengthen SNAP;**
- (4) Strengthen Child Nutrition Programs;**
- (5) Target supports to especially vulnerable populations;**
- (6) Work with states, localities, and nonprofits to expand and improve participation in federal nutrition programs;**
- (7) Make sure all families have convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food; and**
- (8) Build political will.**

## (1) Create jobs, raise wages, increase opportunity, and share prosperity.

Seven years ago, FRAC led its recommendations with the need to “Restore economic growth and create jobs with better wages for lower-income workers.” What the nation has learned over the last seven years is that restoring growth itself is not enough if wages lag and growth virtually all goes to the top. The nation’s GDP is larger (in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars) than at its pre-recession peak in 2007, which is one way to measure if we are in recovery mode. But the radically uneven distribution of growth is evident in the rate of Americans in poverty — 12.5 percent in 2007, peaking at 15.1 percent in 2010, and barely reduced since then — at 14.8 percent in 2014.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

We must return to an economy and politics that provide for the nation’s economic strength and growth be shared in an equitable way. That means restoring the value of the minimum wage, higher wages for struggling workers, enforcing wage and hour laws, more robust public and private job creation, job training that is effective and targeted for today’s economy, and a rising share of the working-age population active in the labor force. It also means parental leave policies and child care supports that make such work feasible. Americans need jobs with adequate hours, good wages, reliable hours, and benefits that support families.

## **(2) Improve government income-support programs for struggling families.**

Mr. Obama’s 2008 analysis focused not just on wages, but also called for other initiatives “to reduce and alleviate poverty, including...expanding the Earned Income [Tax] Credit...and providing affordable, accessible health insurance” as a means to reduce hunger. In 2008, both Mr. Obama as a candidate and the Democratic National Party platform set a goal of reducing poverty in half over 10 years.

This point is crucial: for families and individuals unable to work — or work full-time because of unemployment, age, or disability, or whose earnings and benefits from work are not adequate to meet basic needs — the safety net must be robust enough so their basic needs can be met. Nutrition programs alone cannot carry the whole burden of public anti-poverty and anti-hunger supports when employment falls short. When work, even with an increased minimum wage, a restoration of job growth, and other factors pushing up employment and wages, falls short of meeting the basic needs of tens of millions of Americans, even substantially improved SNAP, school meals, and other food programs — while able to greatly reduce suffering and boost economic security, health, and well-being — will not end hunger if acting alone.

Other essential safety net improvement strategies to help meet basic needs include:

- > **Improving tax credits for low-income families.** We should retain and build on the improvements that the 2009 ARRA made in the EITC and the refundable Child Tax Credit. Since then, they were extended twice, but will expire at the end of 2017 if Congress does not act. These steps are a fundamentally essential boost to the earnings of low-income working families. There also is bipartisan agreement on the need to improve the currently very small EITC for childless workers; that improvement should be enacted.
- > **Protect and improve Social Security, SSI, and pension programs for seniors and people with disabilities.** Rates of food insecurity are extraordinarily high for people with disabilities and for struggling workers in their 50s and early 60s, while Social Security benefits are barely enough for many retired beneficiaries to keep adequate food in the house. It is essential to protect Social Security from growing attacks (the disability program is particularly a target) and to improve benefits and program reach in both Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). It is crucial also to stop and reverse the erosion of public and private pension plans since Social Security and SSI cannot fully meet the basic needs of disabled and retired low-wage workers and their families when the private and public employment pension systems fail to meet their share of the responsibility.

As Mr. Obama recognized in the campaign paper, health coverage helps families reduce their out-of-pocket health costs, improves health (including learning and employability), and thereby is a building block for ending hunger. High out-of-pocket health expenses are associated with an increased incidence of food insecurity. Right now, the most important health coverage step needed is for the states holding out against Medicaid expansion (primarily disadvantaging low-wage workers) to opt into that expansion.

> **Improve other income supports.** Among other strategies, the nation needs to: restore a stronger unemployment insurance program that meets the needs of a much larger share of unemployed people than the badly eroded, current system does; provide housing assistance to a far larger share of struggling households than are currently receiving help; strengthen child support recovery; and improve the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program’s eligibility and benefits rules. The cash welfare program for the poorest families with children (the predecessor to TANF) helped 9.6 million children and 4.6 million adults in 1994. Today, TANF reaches fewer than three million children and about one million adults — and does so with lower benefits than in 1994.

### **(3) Strengthen SNAP.**

Even with better wages and a stronger health and cash income safety net, it will be crucial to strengthen the nation’s nutrition programs. SNAP is the nation’s most important direct defense against hunger, doing the most to eliminate hunger, and doing so by helping families use mainstream systems of commercial food outlets.

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SNAP is fundamentally strong — it particularly proved its strengths with its effective response to the recession — and it has shown very substantial impacts in reducing hunger and poverty, as well as boosting health and nutrition. Yet it needs some key improvements to carry its share of the weight in eliminating hunger more fully. In particular, it is essential to:

- > **Improve benefit levels.** Benefit levels are too low to stave off hunger for the full month, much less allow a family to purchase a healthy diet. A 2013 report by the Institute of Medicine found the benefit level simply is not adequate for most families. The monthly allotment is predicated on the “Thrifty Food Plan” — the successor to a hypothetical budget that was developed during the Depression in the 1930’s “as a restricted diet for emergency use.” The allotment typically carries even the most careful of families only three-quarters or four-fifths of the way through the month. The amount of the federal government’s own Low-Cost Food Budget — the lowest of three government budgets for normal use — is approximately 25 percent higher than the Thrifty Food Plan, and should be the basis for SNAP allotments. That Low-Cost Food Budget is generally in line with what low and moderate-income families report they need to spend on food. The temporary (2009 to 2013) increase in the monthly SNAP allotment created by the economic recovery act — ARRA — had a substantial impact on reducing food insecurity and hunger precisely because it closed much of the gap between the Thrifty Food Plan and the Low-Cost Food Budget.
- > **Recognize in the SNAP allotment computation when a family’s high housing costs mean it cannot afford food.** In 1996, Congress capped the amount of housing costs that a family can deduct from gross income in figuring out what share of food costs the family can pay without SNAP’s help. The reduced deduction means the SNAP allotment shrinks by assuming the family can use some of its income for food when in fact that money is owed to the landlord. (Households with seniors or members with disabilities kept the full deduction, so this problem mainly affects

adults and children in low-income working families.) As housing costs have risen in the two decades since Congress made this cut, this cap on the shelter deduction has meant SNAP allotment inadequacy has become a far deeper and broader problem. The cap needs to be lifted.

> **Provide SNAP to Unemployed Adults Without Dependents.**

SNAP requires unemployed, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD) to work or engage in qualified work-related activities for 20 hours per week. For those who do not meet this rule, no matter how hard they are looking for work, benefits are limited to three months per three years. There are potential exceptions for geographic areas with high unemployment, which applied broadly during the worst of the recession, but their reach is shrinking. This harsh rule denies food to struggling unemployed people even when they are actively looking for work and the state is not offering jobs, training, or other help to meet the rule. Congress needs to transform this rule. At a minimum, the time limit should not kick in when the unemployed adult is actively looking for work, or unless the state offers a training slot or job.

- > **Eliminate other arbitrary bars to eligibility and improve other benefit computation rules.** Policymakers should also extend the program to needy people excluded from benefits by arbitrary eligibility rules, such as targeting documented immigrant adults, and banning for life drug felons who have served out prison terms. There also is a deep need to: reduce unnecessary red tape that deters participation and produces counter-productive and administratively costly “churning;” improve earnings disregards and other benefit computation rules; and otherwise improve access to — and responsiveness of — SNAP to meet the needs of struggling households.

## (4) Strengthen Child Nutrition Programs.

Mr. Obama's 2008 paper emphasized also that the child nutrition programs (school lunch and breakfast, afterschool and summer food, WIC, and child care food) are essential tools for ending childhood hunger. The paper correctly noted that these programs and SNAP do much good *in addition* to directly addressing hunger: "they reduce poverty, prevent obesity, strengthen schools and child care programs, and boost children's health, development, and school achievement." They are among our nation's most important and cost-effective public interventions, but they must be bolstered in important ways as part of a campaign to eliminate hunger. Here are some of the most essential steps:

- > **Increase participation in the federal free and reduced-price school meals programs, especially breakfast, which is particularly underutilized.** Part of the answer is for schools, localities, and states to work aggressively to enroll into the meals programs the many eligible, but not participating, children. The federal government should assure that lagging states are fully implementing the requirement to enroll automatically ("directly certify") SNAP-recipient children into school meals. This strategy should be expanded to Medicaid-eligible children as well. Wherever possible, paperwork for parents should be reduced or eliminated.

Red tape is also a problem for schools: paperwork for participating schools (and nonprofits, like afterschool and summer programs) should be reduced so they need not file multiple applications to serve children good nutrition year-round. States and districts should aggressively implement the Community Eligibility Provision that lets them offer lunch and breakfast free to all children in schools with substantial numbers of low-income children — this reduces red tape and stigma and boosts participation. Government at all levels should expand initiatives to serve breakfast in the classroom — an increasingly popular nutritional and educational strategy. Children should be given adequate time to eat lunch and breakfast, not be rushed to eat by long lines and short periods,

or squeezed out of overcrowded lunchtime cafeterias. Schools and federal policymakers must treat nutrition as the vital support to health and learning that it is.

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Not only are they hungry, but they are short-changed by not having access to summer programming that provides physical activity, education and enrichment activities as well as the federally-funded meals.

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- > **Expand access to nutrition in afterschool and summer programs.** Only 16 children receive lunch in the summer from the federal summer nutrition programs for every 100 low-income children who get lunch during the school year. Not only are they hungry, but they are short-changed by not having access to summer programming that provides physical activity, education and enrichment activities as well as the federally-funded meals. One barrier is the difficulty for many afterschool and summer programs in meeting an “area eligibility test” for afterschool and summer nutrition program reimbursement that is too strict (particularly after Congressional cutbacks), and that especially disadvantages rural children. The government should make the eligibility requirement for such funding the same as education and afterschool programs such as the Department of Education’s Title 1 and 21st Century Community Learning Center programs.

Start-up grants and transportation grants (especially for programs in rural areas) also are essential. Reducing red tape that frustrates participation by afterschool and summer providers could boost participation in the programs substantially. Summer EBT cards would help families purchase food for children in communities with limited access to congregate meal programs.

- > **Expand nutrition programs for children in child care.** The federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) offers federal reimbursement for meals and snacks for children in Head Start, child care centers, and family child care. CACFP should be adjusted to make far more low-income preschoolers in child care centers and family child care eligible for a day's worth of federally funded meals and snacks. This will require changes in the area eligibility test, reduction in unnecessary red tape, and a rollback of a shortsighted rule enacted by Congress limiting the number of meals for preschoolers to two a day, even when they are in care for long hours while parents work or are in job training.
  
- > **Improve WIC.** The latest USDA data show the WIC program reaches only 63 percent of eligible people — 71 percent of eligible pregnant women, 85 percent of eligible infants, and 53 percent of eligible children ages 1 to 4. In some states, WIC reaches fewer than half of all eligible people. Congress must increase funding so WIC reaches all eligible people, doing away with triage, waiting lists, and other participant-limiting strategies. Furthermore, WIC state and local agencies must engage in aggressive outreach to enroll the many eligible pregnant women and very young children who need WIC and are not receiving it at this crucial period of physical and mental development.
  
- > **Assure meal quality that meets current scientific standards.** The government must improve the quality of meals provided in child care settings, summer and afterschool programs, and defend and fully implement the new school meals standards and proposed child care food standards. In addition, the government needs to provide reimbursement rates and structures adequate to support healthy eating, assure that children have adequate time to obtain and eat their meals, improve the healthfulness of commodities donated to schools, and enforce the nutrition standards governing all foods offered or sold in schools.

## (5) Target supports to especially vulnerable populations.

Food security rates are especially high among key vulnerable groups — particularly groups that are long-standing victims of discriminatory treatment or that suffer disproportionately from low wages, high unemployment, and inadequate public support programs. Children, people with disabilities, immigrants, seniors, struggling veterans, ex-offenders trying to reintegrate into society, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and rural Americans are among these populations. They have appallingly high food insecurity rates and represent large proportions of the 48 million Americans struggling with hunger. To take just three examples:

- > Among the hungriest households — those with “very low food security” — two out of five (38 percent) were households where one or more working-age adults are disabled;
- > In 2014, 43 percent of food insecure households were households with children in them; and
- > One study showed more than one in four veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan reported food insecurity.

Successfully attacking hunger in the U.S. includes strategies focused on those populations struggling the most. Here are just a few examples of targeted strategies to help America’s hungriest communities:

- > Particularly helpful to children would be the earlier recommendations that would: increase parents’ employment rates, wages, and stability of job hours; reflect fully in determining SNAP benefits the high housing costs families incur; raise the monthly SNAP allotment for all participants, and increase participation in the child nutrition programs — especially child care food, breakfast, and summer food (children’s hunger spikes in the summer when they are not receiving school-based meals).

- > Necessary strategies for seniors and households with people with disabilities include SSI benefits that are more adequate and ensuring states follow the mandate when computing SNAP benefits to account for the high medical costs seniors and people with disabilities incur. Other recommendations are addressing the disproportionately low participation rates in SNAP for these groups, including better coordination among Social Security, SSI, and SNAP; tackling the transportation, mobility, and other problems that keep many seniors and people with disabilities from accessing SNAP; and expanding the Commodity Supplemental Food Program's reach. The government must close the huge gap between the need for home-delivered and congregate meals on the one hand, and the Older Americans Act (OAA) funding for them on the other hand (earlier this year the Government Accountability Office estimated that 90 percent of low-income older adults do not receive OAA-type meal services).
  
- > Documented and undocumented immigrants, including those working hard at low wages, are often barred from safety net programs like SNAP and have very high rates of food insecurity. Among the key ways to address such hunger are to: increase naturalization rates of eligible immigrants; enact immigration reform; assure higher wages and enforcement of existing wage and hour rules for all workers; change SNAP rules to allow all otherwise eligible lawful residents to participate; and lower language barriers for access to all nutrition programs.

## **(6) Work with states, localities, and nonprofits to expand and improve participation in federal nutrition programs.**

The framework of the federal income support and nutrition programs needs strengthening, but state and local governments, and nonprofit intermediaries for those programs, need to build on the programs' existing considerable strengths and improve on-the-ground access to them. Today, for example, the rate of participation in SNAP among eligible people ranges from fewer than two out of three in some states to more than 90 percent in others. In some states, only half of eligible working families get into the program. The situation is similar with school feeding programs: in some states, about 40 low-income children get school breakfast for every 100 who get school lunch; in others, it is more than 70 per 100. States vary in their coverage of the WIC-eligible population from 45 percent to 82 percent. Even in the best performing states, rates often are not high enough, and low enrollment rates around the nation contribute enormously to the hunger problem and to unnecessary shortfalls in productivity, economic growth, and human capital development.

The low participation rates result from a variety of factors. The differences in official attitudes, state and local processes, and results among the states are one reason it is so important to have even stronger federal programs with robust federal funding and clear national program rules. Whether or not a child is hungry — or is receiving good nutrition and is healthy and able to learn — should not depend on what state or county the child is born in, or moves to, or where she goes to child care, or which school she attends. Strengthening the national framework, therefore, is essential, but so is encouraging full use of federal programs and available federal funds. Here are some basic strategies:

- > **Expand outreach and education.** State and local governments, foundations, and other private-sector stakeholders should increase public education and outreach efforts for nutrition programs, as they have done for health insurance and EITC. This should include expanding support for nonprofit advocacy groups, food banks, seniors, children’s and veterans groups, and other direct-service providers that struggle to improve federal nutrition program participation.
  
- > **Lower unnecessary and ill-considered state and local barriers to participation.** Too often states or localities put unneeded barriers in the way of struggling families participating in nutrition and other safety net programs. States and localities should get rid of processes that “churn” beneficiaries in and out of eligibility, as well as red tape and stigma-creating hurdles that the federal program rules do not require (and often actively discourage or prohibit). In addition, they should simplify access by using multi-program portals and certify eligibility across programs rather than unnecessarily using multiple applications for multiple programs. States need to revise office hours that are particularly hard for low-income working families to navigate as well as overhaul unnecessarily complex systems that are hard for anyone, much less struggling low-income people, to navigate. Many states have made real progress on these fronts in recent years, but far too many barriers remain.

Lowering unnecessary barriers also means that states must use available positive options under federal law to cover more eligible people. In SNAP, this means removing asset tests, raising the “gross income” level, removing the lifetime ban on drug felon eligibility, maximizing waivers to cover unemployed workers without dependents, and using other options federal law gives states to reduce hunger through SNAP improvements.

> **Improve and expand performance bonuses and innovation.**

Federal initiatives that reward states for excellent performance in such areas as reaching higher rates of SNAP-eligible families should be made more robust and extended to all nutrition programs. The federal government also should find innovative ways to encourage or require schools, child care providers, and out-of-school-time providers that receive operational funds from government agencies to also participate in the federal nutrition programs and serve their program beneficiaries healthy food.

> **Buttress TEFAP and other supports for emergency food.**

Expanding The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is an important step, although food banks are the first to point out that it is not a sustainable solution to the nation's widespread hunger problem. All families should have the resources from earnings, safety net programs, and other public supports to purchase the healthy food they need. Overwhelmed pantries and other charitable providers recognize that principle, and the need to focus their resources on emergencies and groups not reached even by a much-improved system of government program supports. Until the nation reaches that goal, however, these organizations will continue to play an important role, and will need more support to play that role.

## **(7) Make sure all families have convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food.**

Many neighborhoods and towns across America lack decent-sized stores that sell a good variety of food, including fresh produce, at reasonable prices. Lack of access makes it far harder, if not impossible, for a struggling low-income family to stave off hunger and stay healthy. Families face a battery of extra costs and barriers to healthy eating. They wind up forgoing healthy food, paying above-average amounts for food, getting food of lesser nutritional quality, and spending money they can ill afford to travel to better food stores.

Community gardens and school gardens, farmers' markets and greencarts, and improving the offerings of corner stores can help combat this. But they are modest solutions to a very large problem. The more sweepingly impactful answer is to get families the resources to afford adequate, healthy diets, and to make decent grocery stores accessible to all Americans.

The national Healthy Food Financing Initiative and comparable state and private initiatives are important strategies. And all grocery stores that meet program requirements should participate in the SNAP and WIC programs in order to give low-income families better access to quality food. Ultimately, the answer is to strengthen the purchasing power of struggling families and communities, through wages, income supports, and better nutrition programs, so the market responds to the improved buying capacity of communities' residents.

## **(8) Build political will.**

The nation needs its political, religious, and civic leaders — beginning with President Obama, members of Congress, and the 2016 candidates for office at all levels — to speak out about the real causes of, costs of, and solutions to hunger and poverty. Each candidate should be asked for his or her plan to end hunger in America. The public and the media should ask this question and publicize the response. This is an issue that brings Americans together, but suffers from too little aggressive political leadership. For many years, reducing and eliminating American hunger was an issue with deep bipartisan support. At the entrance to FRAC's office is a picture of the late Sen. George McGovern behind a podium lectern sign that says "Make Hunger Illegal." He could well have had Sen. Bob Dole or any number of other distinguished Republican and Democratic leaders standing with him. Some of that bipartisanship remains vital, but too much of it has eroded. Its history, logic, political viability, and importance to the nation should create

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The nation needs a bipartisan recognition that the failure to address hunger is a human, economic, and fiscal disaster.

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a resurgence. The nation needs a bipartisan recognition that the failure to address hunger is a human, economic, and fiscal disaster. Religious, community, business, and labor leaders need to weigh in forcefully on the importance of ending hunger to the nation's economy, health, and moral standing.

Part of this rebuilding of political will requires political leaders from both parties to take responsibility for assertively rejecting the stream of contemptuous and sometimes racially coded attacks on low-income people and those who receive government assistance. When a politician refers to SNAP and other assistance program recipients as “animals,” or claims that all of the African-Americans in his hometown are not working and are on SNAP, decency requires political leaders to respond. When officeholders and political campaigns attack nutrition program “fraud” — although the rate of program fraud in SNAP is lower than that in virtually every other government program, and the same politicians never attack farm program fraud, or taxpayer fraud, or abuse in a range of government programs that do not help the poor — the logical conclusion is that the purpose is to subvert programs and stigmatize struggling beneficiaries. Mainstream leaders from all sectors and all political viewpoints have to end their silence about such statements because they are poisoning the American political debate and our ability to address fundamental social and economic problems.

Attacks on hungry Americans are attacks on America: a substantial majority of Americans needs help at some point to stave off hunger and the other deprivations of poverty. Poverty is a common experience in America; the population of poor people is not static. More than 60 percent of Americans between the ages of 25 and 60 fell into the bottom fifth of the income distribution for at least one year during the period from 1968 to 2011 — and at least 40 percent fell into the bottom tenth during that time. They are of all races and ethnicities, all regions of the country, many occupations, all political beliefs, facing a wide variety of struggles and setbacks. This need for help must not be trivialized or stigmatized.

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## IV. CONCLUSION

President Obama's anti-hunger and anti-poverty goals were important goals for this country. It would be a national tragedy if the events of the last seven years became a reason to forget them or to abandon such goals in the future.

It is time to get back on a path that will aggressively pursue poverty reduction and hunger-reduction goals — for starters, the Healthy People 2020 goals of eliminating very low food security among children, and reducing the household food insecurity rate to six percent are critically important. Our nation is two-and-a-half times as rich (measured in per capita GDP) as when Lyndon Johnson launched the war on poverty fifty years ago; twice as rich as forty years ago when the nation was launching programs like WIC and school breakfast; one-and-a-half times as rich as when Ronald Reagan left office. We have no excuses for leaving hungry Americans behind. There is a clear path to eliminate hunger in this country and create a much healthier, better educated, and more productive society with greater opportunity and commitment to our common ethical, moral, and religious aspirations.

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We have no excuses for leaving hungry Americans behind.

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