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Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment in support of a national strategy to address hunger, nutrition, and health. Northwest Harvest is a food justice organization with a mission to end hunger through collective action. We operate Washington's independent, statewide food bank, providing nutritious food to 375 food pantries, meal programs, and high need schools. We are anti-racist and seek root cause solutions to hunger and that is operationalized through strategies that target our resources to expand food access in Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) communities; ensure that the food we distributed is procured based on community identified needs for nutrition and cultural responsiveness; work in community partnerships to expand economic opportunities for BIPOC owned farms and businesses in our food system; and center first person experience and expertise in our public policy advocacy to achieve a right to food and economic stability for all in Washington.

We applaud this Administration's commitment to developing a bold and comprehensive strategy to end hunger, including the efforts to conduct and encourage listening sessions to gather comment and input. Our recommendations provided below were built in partnership with people who have first person experience of hunger and poverty. We gathered information through an online survey that was translated into Spanish and Vietnamese languages. The survey was disseminated by our food distribution partners throughout the state as well as to policy advisory councils convened by Northwest Harvest and Washington's Statewide Poverty Action Network that are designed to provide consistent stakeholder input on policy development based on first person experience of hunger and poverty. We then did a data walk to gain additional clarity and input on topline messaging and critical priorities for this recommendation from a smaller sample of survey respondents.

Our survey was completed by 83 respondents with widespread geographic representation throughout our state. In terms of demographics, there was pretty even distribution of responses from urban, rural, and suburban communities and across age groups. About half of respondents said that they have children between the ages of 0-18 who live with them; just over half of all respondents said they are currently not working, with the largest reason given that they have a disabling condition that prevents them from working (24 respondents.)

Survey questions were a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions. We asked respondents to identify their top barriers to food and essential needs that contribute to their experiences of food insecurity then asked about desired policy changes to help meet their needs. Respondents were also asked to provide examples of local programs or partnerships that may be innovative and scaled to help relieve hunger. Open ended questions were used to capture specific examples behind a respondent's choices made in multiple choice questions and to capture ideas that we did not otherwise ask about in the survey.

### **Top Line Messages**

Survey respondents and participants in our data walk urged us to make crystal clear the following directives to the White House in formulating a strategic plan on hunger, nutrition, and health:

**1. Design strategies that will address and provide immediate relief and promote long-term economic stability by addressing root causes of hunger in poverty and systemic racism.**

The high costs of food, gas, and other costs of living due to inflation and world supply chain disruptions means people are hurting *now*. People experiencing hunger realize that hunger is a symptom of poverty and truly ending hunger requires long-term, structural changes so they want to see bold, comprehensive strategies across human services programs for food, housing, health care, and other essential needs. At the same time, they also want a national strategy to deal with the here and now by including immediately implementable changes that provide relief by increasing access to food, adequately funding basic needs services to get people through crisis and curb the rising costs of living. As one respondent said, “We shouldn’t have to pay in order to just live.”

**2. Strong partnerships between government and the private sector are best suited to implement strategies to provide immediate relief.**

People experiencing hunger do not assign responsibility for a strategy for hunger response to either the private, charitable sector or to government alone. There was across the board belief and faith that a strong partnership between government agencies working with the private sector can do powerful work in implementing strategies designed to provide immediate relief from high costs for essential needs. Key to these partnerships is the understanding that government can provide sustainable adequate funding that the private sector cannot consistently raise to support private sector partnerships and innovations, and that government can and must increase benefits provided by public assistance programs to more adequately reflect current costs for essentials of food, housing, health, childcare, utilities, and other basic needs.

**3. Structural change requires a top to bottom overhaul of federal programs and services to undo the systemic and institutional racism that is keeping people in poverty.**

Survey respondents frequently cited desired policy changes that will expand eligibility for public benefits, provide benefits like direct cash transfer payments that are designed to give people flexibility to direct resources to their greatest budgetary pain points, and increase the adequacy of a variety of resources including rental assistance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and health care. They were also clear that they do not want to live on government handouts forever and were hesitant to ask for these changes if it means contributing to harmful misconceptions about poverty—who’s poor and for what reasons—that have driven the development of policies that limit eligibility and access. The message they want lawmakers to hear is that they don’t want to depend on the government for a lifetime but if we build policy and investment decisions designed to trust poor people then this is more likely to result in longer term economic stability. One respondent summarized this as follows: “Tell me how it’s fair that I pay taxes in the lowest bracket and don’t get nearly enough back. We aren’t poor because we’re lazy-- we’re poor because the system isn’t designed to help us. One bad thing happening is all it takes for folks to become homeless. We’re stuck in a situation we didn’t choose.”

## **Recommendations**

Our recommendations are organized in accordance with the topline message framework discussed above: using a mix of the prioritized policy recommendations from our survey plus individual comments to open-ended questions in the survey and in our data walk, we present the following recommendations for short-term, immediate relief and for structural changes to enhance long-term sustainable stability from the crises of hunger and poverty.

### ***Immediate, Short-term Relief***

About 90% of survey respondents cited higher, inflated costs of living as being their biggest barrier to affording food and other essential needs, thereby being the biggest driver of their experiencing food insecurity and inability to access nutritious food or maintain good health. People experiencing hunger felt that the following strategies could provide the most relief to this problem:

- **Provide flexible, direct cash transfer programs.**

Direct cash transfers such as stimulus checks or last year's child tax credit payments that were distributed as monthly payments was cited as the most important way that the federal government can provide immediate relief to help mitigate hunger by nearly 40% of our survey respondents. Direct cash transfers allow recipients to have more flexibility to direct this resource to pay down what they feel are the most pressing pain points in their household budget so that they do not have to choose between essential needs for food, housing, health care, and other bills. Flexibility in spending this resource also helps stimulate local economies so the return on investment helps sustain jobs, local businesses, and economic activity.

- **Provide rental assistance and incentivize renting property at affordable prices.**

For our survey and data walk participants, the cost of housing was most frequently cited as the biggest cost for a household budget that results in forgoing spending any resources on food. Respondents want to see immediate relief for this in the form of providing rental assistance, expanding housing vouchers, and incentivizing landlords to invest in more rental properties offered at affordable rates. Our data walk participants further suggest targeting these investments equitably by prioritizing areas that have seen the highest sudden jumps in housing costs and lack of rental properties.

- **Expand health care coverage for basic, preventative care.**

Health care was also frequently cited by our respondents as a driver of hunger because they pay high prescription drug costs and medical bills when their insurance does not cover needed services. Respondents felt that immediate relief could be provided if there were free of cost—including no co-pay—for basic, annual physical exams in order to promote preventative care that could pay off with decreased needs for more intensive or specialized services in the long-run. Respondents also asked for expanded coverage for other preventative, baseline care for vision and dental. One of our data walk respondents suggested expansion of Veterans Administration health benefits to all people who have been honorably discharged, citing how she is currently ineligible for the health plan because she served her country but did so for one year, yet she still has health issues that could be addressed if she had access to this health plan.

- **Increase the adequacy of public assistance benefits for food, housing, childcare, and other essential needs.**

The need for investments to raise the adequacy of public assistance benefits was also a top priority to provide more immediate relief for people living in poverty to meet their basic needs in the face of higher costs of food, housing, gas, and other essential needs. Benefits were designed to provide a temporary safety net, but with costs of living growing exponentially while benefits remain relatively unchanged, there is no room to build assets and savings needed to become self-sufficient from government programs. Respondents living on fixed incomes provided by Social Security Insurance (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), overwhelmingly reported the problems caused when a cost of living adjustment to SSI or SSDI is wiped out by a commensurate cut to their SNAP benefits, leaving them stuck with an effective zero net gain, so that they feel no choice but to go hungry because

the cost of living adjustment must be spent on higher costs for rent and other bills. Respondents especially cited a need for immediate investments to subsidize childcare and expand the availability of childcare providers, crucial so that parents can find and keep jobs to earn income. Otherwise, respondents described how they are unable to work because the cost of childcare would outstrip the wages offered to them, or in some cases, they don't have a safe place to care for a child to do a job interview.

In open-ended responses to questions, respondents also provided examples of programmatic and policy changes needed to overcome accessibility barriers to nutritious food or the resources that could help them afford more basic needs.

- **Facilitate practices that increase access to food resources provided by food banks and food pantries.** Food pantries, faith based charitable meals programs, and food banks were most frequently cited as examples of local programs relied on by people experiencing hunger to help them attain food for their households. Yet respondents also lamented how the end of COVID-era practices that helped facilitate access need to be renewed. Many of these practices could be more likely to be reinstated with support from the federal government including funding and reinstatement of proven successful COVID-era waivers of income eligibility requirements for federal commodities offered by food banks. The most successful practices that were cited by survey respondents include the following:
  - Home delivery of food boxes
  - Drive-thru style pick-up of food resources
  - Grocery store gift cards provided by food banks so that recipients can have access to food outside of food bank operating hours and also shop for non-food necessities like hygiene and cleaning products when not offered at the food bank

Additional things that federal, state, and local government can do to facilitate access to food banks:

- Provide funding that is contingent upon or incentivizes food bank partnership with other community-based organizations in order to increase distribution sites and hours of services.
  - Remove income eligibility caps for commodity foods so that more households can access this resource in these times when high food costs are driving up temporary food insecurity for more households.
  - Review how requirements to collect household information may be having a chilling effect on immigrant and other communities of color from accessing food bank resources.
- **Remove barriers to using SNAP for hot, prepared food items.** Respondents across all age groups asked for a removal of barriers to using SNAP to purchase hot, prepared food items. For working age adults, the ability to buy hot prepared food items from a grocery deli or to have more restaurant options that are certified SNAP retailers was seen as a policy solution that could expand the variety of affordable food options or have time saving ingredients or meals, especially when busy going to appointments that have been consolidated to reduce costs of gas for travel. For older adults and people with disabilities, this policy change would be welcomed as it could increase access to nutritious meals for people with limited physical capability or storage and kitchen prep areas to prepare meals.
  - **Promote more grocery retail access by expanding certified SNAP retailers paired with investments in SNAP incentives programs to increase affordability of nutritious foods.**

For many respondents in rural communities, the cost of travel to get to a larger chain grocery store that can offer lower prices than a local, mom and pop store, is putting people in a tough bind: the cost of gas is expensive and mileage cited was often 35 miles or more to get to a larger town with larger retailers, almost making it not worth the trip since gas money is cutting into the food budget.

Respondents in more isolated, rural areas complained that selections of fresh produce at their local, more independent stores was both limited and too expensive. It's believed that the costs of transporting fresher food items are expensive, and the costs are passed to the shopper. Our recommendation is to develop partnerships across public and private entities and available programs that will reduce costs for stores to stock fresh produce items and make these items more affordable to purchase. An ideal example was demonstrated in Seattle with our Fresh Bucks program—partially funded by the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program grant at USDA. A local Somali-owned grocery store could not afford to stock a wider selection of fresh produce without raising costs on the produce which would make it unaffordable for lower income shoppers. A deal was struck with a local food bank to purchase any unsold produce if the store invested in stocking a wider selection. By offering Fresh Bucks, or matching dollars when SNAP is used to buy produce, the product became more affordable for SNAP shoppers. In other words, the most successful partnerships to help address food apartheid areas help defray the costs for retailers to stock more nutritious food items and use available programs to make those items more affordable to low-income shoppers.

- **Fund mobile markets to increase food access in areas with limited retailer options**

Many of our respondents cited their appreciation for farmers market voucher programs offered to low-income seniors and families on WIC as a helpful tool for accessing more fruits and vegetables. However, respondents also highlighted access issues for using this program in areas where farmers markets are not open year-round or in areas where there are no farmers markets. A suggestion is to fund and reduce certification barriers for farmers to work together and create mobile markets—loading up a bus or a truck to go into a community year-round with fresh food items to purchase, made more accessible by certifying mobile programs to accept SNAP and other farmers market access programs.

- **Provide universal school meals.**

COVID-era waivers that allowed schools to provide universal meals to school aged children demonstrated the efficacy of eliminating cost and application barriers for families to ensure that children have consistent, healthy meals at school and demonstrated to school districts the efficacy of eliminating unpaid meal debt and reducing administrative barriers so that school nutrition staff can focus on making and distributing nutritious meals. Respondents not only saw universal school meals as a way to ensure healthy meals for their children but also appreciated the other household cost-savings from being eligible for subsidized meals, seen in the form of waiving school athletic fees, registration fees for dual credit learning programs at local colleges, and other resources that help increase opportunity for their students.

- **Provide clear, understandable outreach materials about available government assistance programs in partnership with community-based organizations that are trusted messengers.**

Just 14% of survey respondents said that not knowing what government assistance and other resources were available to them as a barrier contributes to their experiencing food insecurity. One respondent described the problem has been heightened during COVID: a rapidly changing environment of expanded government resources also increased the number of phone calls and emails from

scammers purporting to be from the federal government offering resources in order to phish for personal information. Our recommendation is to develop clear, easy to understand descriptions of government assistance programs that can be used by community-based organizations that are trusted messengers in their communities. Outreach materials that are clearly branded as coming from the federal government and explained and distributed by service organizations trusted by low-income people, would help foster trust and increase awareness of resources to acquire food, health care, housing, and other essential needs.

### ***Long-term, Structural Changes***

Our survey asked respondents to prioritize from a list of suggested policy changes and investments what changes they felt could contribute to longer-term economic stability that could prevent them from experiencing hunger and have better access to nutrition and health.

- **Raise wages to a living wage.**

About 38% of respondents included this in their top three priorities. One respondent described how despite having a bachelor's degree in social work, the only job she can find is with a public school district and her take-home pay is barely \$1200 per month—not enough to pay her bills but too much to be eligible for government assistance. Respondents also qualify this recommendation, stating that any policy passed to raise wages must be done in a way that does not result in businesses passing the costs on to consumers, thereby driving up the costs of living further.

- **Invest in expanding public transportation systems.**

Expansion of public transportation, especially in rural and suburban communities, was seen as imperative to help individuals have reliable transportation to get to work, to shop for food, and to get to medical appointments without having to worry about the expense of gas or maintaining a car or car insurance.

People who are experiencing hunger and poverty also assert that the key to ending hunger will require structural change to our approach to making public policy and decisions about spending of public dollars. We recommend the following approaches to your process in designing this national strategy to end hunger if it is truly to have sustainable change:

- **Trust the decision-making abilities of the people for whom this strategy is designed.** This means recognizing that poverty and hunger are not the result of a lack of personal responsibility but deep seeded structural barriers rooted in racism and other forms of oppression. Policies and investments to end hunger and poverty should be accessible to all who need the help and provide flexibility so that they can be adapted by beneficiaries to best meet their household needs.
- **Policies should be designed and funded accordingly to target racial disparities in wealth and access to assistance programs.**
- **Strategies should be frequently evaluated with an eye towards whether they are closing or widening racial disparities,** and if the latter, revised with a strong race equity lens.
- **Programs should use human centered design,** centering the expertise of people experiencing hunger and poverty.
- **Government assistance programs should scale down benefits commensurate with rising economic stability,** not cut off assistance when hard set income eligibility caps are attained. This would help promote asset building and promote economic stability over time, especially if families can have enough savings to act as a cushion in case of an emergency that can create a financial setback.

The following are examples of opportunities before Congress and recently passed legislative and anti-poverty initiatives from Washington State that specifically embody these principles that should be used in developing a national strategy to end hunger and promote access to health and nutrition:

- Remove barriers to participating in SNAP for vulnerable populations including ending the three-month time limit for unemployed adults without dependents, lifting the 5-year bar for lawful permanent residents, ending the prohibition on dual use of SNAP and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and removing the work requirement for college and post-secondary students who are otherwise income eligible for SNAP.
- Remove cost and application barriers to school meals by allowing all public schools to provide reimbursable, meals at no cost to all students or by expanding the Community Eligibility Provision, as proposed in the original Build Back Better plan.
- In Washington State, we are about to implement the Working Families Tax Credit, our state's version of a federal earned income tax credit (only based on a return of sales taxes paid since we do not have an income tax.) Our WFTC will be an infusion of cash for lower-income households to give them flexibility in spending according to greatest needs and was designed to target racial disparities in wealth by extending the credit to include ITIN filers, reaching undocumented immigrants who work and pay taxes but who otherwise are not eligible for most government assistance.
- Washington State recently updated our standard of need to use the Self Sufficiency Standard, an instrument developed at the University of Washington that reflects how much income households of various sizes must make in order to be self-sufficient from government assistance and afford local costs for essentials including housing, childcare, food, health care, utilities, and paying taxes. The federal government should similarly consider updating the definition of poverty so that we have more accurate federal poverty guidelines to extend means-tested essential services to more people who need them.
- Washington State is currently implementing recommendations from a 10 Year plan to reduce poverty, designed by following the guidance of a steering committee of people living with poverty. The plan is the basis for state agency request legislation and budget requests and has resulted in some transformative policy change that upholds principles of equitably targeting services to close racial disparities and promote opportunities for low-income households to build assets and economic stability.

Thank you again for convening this conference and providing opportunities for public input to help shape a national strategy on hunger, health, and nutrition. We believe that the relative health and lower food insecurity of Washington State compared to other states is a testament to how structural change that tackles race and inequities works with a return on investment when we have greater economic stability for more people over time. We look forward to more opportunities to inform and help shape this work ahead.

Sincerely,



Christina Wong, Director of Public Policy & Advocacy