



White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health: Creating a National Food Agency

Chef José Andrés and World Central Kitchen

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Vision:

A new federal agency that advances food health, safety and security for all Americans

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed overlapping, chronic food-related crises in the United States: vulnerable populations concentrated in economically challenged areas, a fragile food economy unable to withstand systemic shocks, and a fragmented and unfocused public sector.

While there are multiple agencies and departments with responsibilities for food health, safety and security, there is no single organization that prioritizes our citizens' food and nutrition. If everyone is responsible for food, then nobody is held accountable for food. The recent disruption to the nation's critical infant formula supplies underscores how this patchwork of oversight is failing American families.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has made the case for reform for several decades. In 2017, it argued for a national food safety strategy because of the fragmentation of oversight across 16 federal agencies.¹ The GAO has been urging reform since 1970, just one year after the last White House food conference.² In 2021, the GAO identified 200 efforts, spread across 21 federal agencies, to address diet-related efforts, including food assistance and access.³ As the GAO pointed out, there is no federal strategy for diet-related efforts aimed at reducing Americans' risk of chronic health conditions. This continues to lead directly to unequal health outcomes in disadvantaged communities across the country.

The second White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health provides a rare opportunity to enact bold changes to champion the urgent needs of food consumers. Embracing the ambitious

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Food Safety: A National Strategy Is Needed to Address Fragmentation in Federal Oversight*. GAO-17-74. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-74>

² U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Need To Reassess Food Inspection Roles Of Federal Organizations*. GAO-B-168966. <https://www.gao.gov/products/b-168966>

³ U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Chronic Health Conditions: Federal Strategy Needed to Coordinate Diet-Related Efforts*. GAO-21-593. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-593>.



spirit of the first White House Conference, Chef José Andrés and World Central Kitchen propose to finally heed the call for a single, cabinet-level federal food agency with a holistic mission to not only ensure the safety of the nation's food supply, but also to also ensure that all Americans have access to fresh, healthy, and nourishing foods.

The agency will build community outreach to help represent and meet grassroots needs, including an office of faith-based partnerships to assist with mass feeding after disasters and build real-world solutions to under-served areas through food improvement districts. The agency will also support state and local governments as the lead federal point of contact for mass feeding after disasters.

As an interim step, we recommend that the President appoint a special assistant for food to lay the groundwork for the agency's creation and serve as the central point for interagency coordination to respond to immediate food crises in the United States and internationally.

Food is a universal human right that requires equitable access for all Americans at times of peace, prosperity, hardship and crisis. To fulfill the nation's food needs, American leadership must be bold and embrace structural change to drive improved health outcomes for all.

Proposed National Food Agency (NFA)

The new NFA centers food policy on the urgent needs of American citizens. The creation of a new federal agency is warranted by multiple overlapping public health crises that have exposed the systemic faults of our national food system. There is no single advocate for the food needs of American citizens, and no agency or department that prioritizes those needs above others.

The focus of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has historically been dominated by the agricultural industry and the rural economy. There is an inherent conflict of interest in supporting both the fortunes of the agricultural sector and the vital needs of food consumers. At the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), it is widely acknowledged that food safety is the poor sibling of the agency's extensive work on drugs.

The NFA brings together the nutritional programs of the USDA, the food inspection duties of the FDA and USDA, and serves as the lead for food-related issues when partnering with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in responding to domestic and international crises.

For example, the NFA would include the duties of the following federal agencies:

- US Department of Agriculture
 - Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)
 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and disaster assistance
 - National School Lunch Program
 - Food Safety and Inspection Service
 - National Institute of Food and Agriculture (nutrition research)



- Food and Drug Administration
 - Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition
 - Office of Food Policy and Response
- US Department of Health and Human Services
 - Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (Nutritional guidance in the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion)

Bringing together the key functions of food health, safety and security under one agency will reduce fragmentation and overlap, as well clarify roles and responsibilities, provide clearer lines of accountability, and improve coordination across these key functions. In doing so, we as a nation would be better positioned to provide streamlined information and implement more holistic programs to assist those experiencing food insecurity, and more nimbly provide food in the immediate aftermath of natural and man-made disasters.

To assist in the creation of the NFA, we recommend the immediate appointment of a special assistant to the president for food. The special assistant will serve as an interagency coordinator on immediate food crises, and work closely with appropriate members of the executive and legislative branches to create the NFA with the broadest possible support.

International Counterparts

The creation of a single government department to oversee food is neither a new nor novel idea. Other nations have a single government agency responsible for food.

- United Kingdom: The UK's [Food Standards Agency](#)'s mission is to safeguard public health and protect the interests of consumers in relation to food. The agency's work includes food inspection, labeling, and dietary health and sustainability.
- Spain: Spain's [Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition](#) houses activities related to food safety and the promotion of health and nutrition.
- Sweden: The [Swedish Food Agency](#) focuses on healthy diets, food safety, and fair practices across the food industry.
- European Union: The [European Food Safety Agency](#) is an independent organization that gives scientific advice on food safety.

New Initiatives of the NFA

In addition to the existing responsibilities of the USDA, FDA and HHS, we propose the following new initiatives to fulfill the vision of food health, safety and security for all Americans:



Expand access to healthy food for all Americans

- Create Food Improvement Districts (FIDs) with a focus on improving access to healthy food through private sector incentives and focused rule changes for nutrition programs.
- In FIDs, (1) invest in local communities by increasing the ways SNAP can be used, including expanding the use of SNAP at restaurants, cafeterias, and NGOs; (2) implement grant programs for local food access and food justice organizations to open grocery stores in FIDs to fight food deserts and food swamps.
- Invest in the nation's school kitchens to enable every school to prepare nutritious and tasty universal meals and to serve as community kitchens, during school hours as well as after school, and when schools are not in session.
- Invest in programs that encourage existing businesses in under-served areas, like corner stores, bodegas and discount stores, to offer local, fresh produce—as well as making SNAP easier to use at farmers markets.
- Prohibit retailers from charging transaction fees for online purchases.
- Allow SNAP dollars to be redeemed at school cafeterias outside of school hours/school year, and use a whole-of-government approach to create community markets and food distribution sites through existing community spaces, including schools and post offices. Supplement with private incentives.
- Distribute food to senior centers/assisted living facilities.
- Date labeling: The Agency will lead efforts to determine and communicate date labeling standards which are currently determined by the manufacturers and not based on consistent methods.
- Donated food items: The Agency will coordinate improvements and communications regarding liability protection afforded to good-faith donors of food to people and organizations in need.

Align nutritional guidance with federal nutrition programs

- Incentivize healthier SNAP purchases through subsidized prices for food that aligns with national nutritional guidelines.
- End low-bid procurement practices to improve the nutritional quality of school lunches through the National School Lunch Program to meet national nutritional guidelines.
- Train local food service professionals (Food Corps for proper labor force training), incentivize family engagement through Double Up-type initiative.
- Increase funding to pilot programs that teach school food education.

Ensure immediate feeding after disasters

- Direct FEMA to establish a process for federal recognition of qualified NGOs for immediate activation and federal reimbursement of food and water distribution for any Presidentially declared disaster. FEMA should also share information regarding recognized organizations with state, local, tribal, and territorial governments.



- Grow existing AmeriCorps/Food Corps programs to provide trained men and women to activate during natural disasters and acute food shortages. Such programs would create special teams for food access and distribution during times of need. Making use of these established programs ensures efficient implementation to the current crisis.
- Recognizing food and water are the most urgent life-sustaining needs after a disaster, require 100 percent federal reimbursement from FEMA for food and water relief for the length of the disaster if less than 30 days, or the first 30 days of disaster at a minimum.
- Create an Office of Faith-Based Partnerships within the newly formed NFA to enhance feeding efforts after disasters. Faith-based organizations, including local churches, synagogues, and mosques, have long been active in providing food, water, and care after disasters, and have valuable information on where food and water needs are most urgent after disasters occur. An NFA Office of Faith-Based Partnerships would leverage these relationships, and partner with similar offices within other federal agencies to understand where food and water needs exist and more efficiently target food and water distribution. This Office would also facilitate information sharing between community organizations and local, state, and federal emergency managers, and coordinate efforts among these entities to ensure food and water get to all survivors, especially those most vulnerable after disasters.
- Enable schools to partner with NGOs and community-based organizations to feed survivors.
- Partner with USAID on international food aid in the aftermath of crises, to leverage best practices developed through mass feeding after disasters in the United States.

The first responsibility of public officials is to protect our fellow citizens and communities. We may not be able to eliminate global pandemics or extreme weather events, but we can build resilience in the homeland by improving our nation's health. A country that suffers from vulnerable food supplies and food-related sickness is less likely to withstand internal and external shocks and disruptions.

The United States has long developed a national energy strategy and a national security strategy, along with the agencies, departments and processes to implement them. Food is our most important energy source, with profound impact on our nation's security, yet there is no agency dedicated to the needs of Americans as food consumers.

The recent shocks to our food system represent all the alarm signals we should need: from the Covid-19 pandemic, to the infant formula crisis, to frequent floods, hurricanes and wildfires. With the fierce urgency of now, we need as a nation to prioritize food for our national and homeland security. That can only be achieved through bold, structural change that will lead to the creation of a new agency dedicated to our citizens' food health, safety and security.