The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics’ Priorities in the 2018 Farm Bill

EVERY 5 YEARS, THE US Congress considers a new farm bill, which is the primary legislation authorizing agriculture and food policy in the United States. The farm bill is a mechanism through which many of the public policy priorities of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Academy) come to life and is due to be reauthorized in 2018. The farm bill guides the US and global food supply and improves food security for millions of people. Farm bill programs provide support for the jobs held by Academy members who work in nutrition education and research, and who help Americans at risk of food insecurity, hunger, and chronic illnesses.

The Academy is committed to improving the health of Americans by ensuring that the US food supply is nourishing, safe, and affordable. Nutrition education and quality nutrition services should be integral components of nutrition assistance programs. The Academy’s guiding principle for farm bill recommendations is a commitment to policies that improve health for everyone, especially those who are most vulnerable to food insecurity.

THE STAKES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity affects millions of Americans every year from children to seniors, including veterans and active duty military, families, and people with disabilities. In 2016, 12.3% of American households experienced limited access to adequate food because of a lack of money or other resources.1 Households can face a wide variety of barriers that hinder their ability to attain food security, including inadequate transportation; a lack of variety of nutritious foods; or unaffordable nutritious food, particularly for families in economic distress.2 The number of people experiencing food insecurity has declined in recent years, but has not yet fallen below prerecession levels in 2007.3

Research clearly shows that the consequences of food insecurity are grave and long lasting. An inadequate diet can lead to physical and behavioral health impairments and increased risk for illnesses ranging from hypertension to asthma to cancer.4 The risk for chronic diseases increases along with the severity of food insecurity.5 Children face lasting consequences that include the development of chronic health conditions and a greater risk for other poorer developmental outcomes, including learning readiness.6 These outcomes underscore why the Academy is committed to ensuring access to a nourishing, safe, and affordable food supply, and why the farm bill is so important for the health of Americans.

FARM BILL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Academy has identified recommendations to strengthen the farm bill’s current programs, to increase access to affordable and nutritious food (particularly for those most in need), and to improve the marketplace for the diversity of foods that is necessary for health and food security.

The Academy’s Farm Bill Work Group developed recommendations for Congress that span three types of federal program:

History of Nutrition in the Farm Bill

Nutrition assistance programs have been entwined with agriculture programs since the nation’s very first farm bill, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Enacted during the Great Depression, this legislation is among the most lasting pieces of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. At the time, American farmers were producing extensive surpluses because new machinery made farms more productive while crop prices crashed due to pervasive global economic weakness. This set of conditions, along with families in need of support to put food on the table, led to the creation of the program that would become the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The government bought crops at discounted prices and distributed the food to agencies that helped hungry families, providing a market for struggling farmers as well as providing food to economically distressed families.

The first nutrition assistance program ended in 1943 due to the economic improvement and reduction of poverty associated with the US war effort during World War II. A pilot program was revived in several states in 1961, and in 1964 the program was fully revived. Now more than 80 years after the first farm bill, farm and nutrition programs continue to operate in tandem, but with an increasingly complex relationship. Keeping agriculture and nutrition linked can continue to help achieve key policy goals. The farm bill now contains 12 sections: commodities, conservation, trade, nutrition, credit, rural development, research and extension, forestry, energy, horticulture, crop insurance, and a section addressing other related issues.
• nutrition assistance programs that help individuals and families obtain access to healthful and nutritious food;
• nutrition education programs that empower people to develop skills to choose healthful diets and reduce the risks of developing chronic disease; and
• nutrition research programs that expand the frontier of scientific knowledge about nutrition, improve the functioning of nutrition assistance and nutrition education programs, and improve the quality of information provided by Academy members and other health practitioners.

Nutrition Assistance Programs Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest component of the nation’s food safety net and helps many families meet their basic nutrition needs. In 2017, more than 40 million people participated in SNAP. Over the past 4 years, SNAP caseloads and spending have declined, largely due to improvement in the economy, but remain higher than a decade ago. The Congressional Budget Office forecasts that the share of the population receiving SNAP will return close to the 2007 prerecession levels of around 9% by 2027.

Research shows SNAP is effective in preventing food insecurity, and is linked with improved health outcomes and lower health care costs. A survey of 3,000 households with children showed that SNAP participation decreased the odds of experiencing food insecurity by one-third. SNAP is especially beneficial for pregnant mothers, reducing the likelihood by between 5% and 23% that a child will be born with low birthweight. Children participating in SNAP are less likely to have anemia and nutritional deficiencies, and are more likely to thrive and have better academic outcomes.

Although research shows the numerous health benefits of participating in SNAP, a 2013 report from the National Academy of Medicine (formerly Institute of Medicine) concluded that SNAP’s maximum benefit guarantee might not be sufficient for many families. SNAP is based on the Thrifty Food Plan as defined by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), and makes several assumptions that may not always be warranted, including that families have time to prepare meals from scratch or that food costs are the same across the United States. The plan also calculates benefits by projecting the cost of food 16 months in advance and makes a number of technical adjustments that can leave participants with inadequate benefits.

SNAP has been shown to influence the overall economy by reducing the extent of poverty and encouraging labor-force participation. SNAP benefits are a fast and effective form of stimulus because many low-income individuals, by necessity, spend most of their income meeting daily needs, and therefore quickly spend their SNAP benefits on the purchase of additional food. Moody’s Analytics has estimated that, when the economy is weak, a $1 increase in benefits paid out by SNAP generates $1.70 in economic activity. The Congressional Budget Office reports that SNAP has among the largest “bangs-for-the-buck” among policies that stimulate economic growth and job creation when the economy is weak.

SNAP is an investment in the health of Americans and in our economy. Increasing SNAP benefits may lead to an improvement in diet quality and decrease health care spending. Benefit adequacy could be improved by combining incentives to purchase healthy food with nutrition education. A Healthy Incentives Pilot, completed by the USDA in 2014, showed promise at maximizing the effectiveness of current benefit levels. In the pilot program, a 30% incentive for certain fruits and vegetables significantly increased the amount of fruits and vegetables that participants consumed.

Academy Recommendations. The Academy opposes making changes to the current structure of SNAP, including any effort to shift the program to a state-based grant system. The Academy supports increasing SNAP benefit levels to better prevent hunger and provide families with the resources they need to make healthful food choices. The Academy also supports elimination of the requirement that military members must include their basic housing allowance in their income calculations when receiving SNAP benefits.

Although SNAP is the single largest nutrition assistance program in the United States, there are a number of other important nutrition programs that play a critical role in ensuring people have access to healthy food.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program. As its name describes, this program provides emergency food and nutrition assistance, largely through food banks and pantries that play an important role supplementing the diets of low-income individuals and families. The Academy supports sufficient funding for this program.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program. The Commodity Supplemental Food Program is expected to provide about 697,000 low-income seniors with supplementary USDA foods during 2017, helping to protect older adults from food insecurity or malnutrition. The Academy supports reauthorizing The Commodity Supplemental Food Program and increasing funding to allow the remaining two states (Alabama and Wyoming) to begin participating. The Academy also supports extending the program’s certification period to reduce its administrative burden.

Other Programs. The Academy also supports the innovative programs created in the 2008 and 2014 farm bills that were designed to support healthy food access and stronger food systems. The Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive is a grant-based program which provides financial incentives for families to purchase healthy foods. The Healthy Food Financing Initiative is designed to stimulate economic development and job creation in low-income communities, underserved communities, and communities of color in urban and rural areas. The Healthy Food Financing Initiative supports farmers and healthy food retailers in these communities. The Academy also continues to support projects to improve the distribution of fresh, frozen, and perishable foods on American Indian reservations, and throughout the entire food system.
Nutrition Education Programs

Nutrition assistance programs alone are not enough to help families adopt healthful diet patterns. Families must have access to healthy food in conjunction with nutrition education that empowers them to make food decisions that lead to healthier lifestyles. A comprehensive US nutrition policy must recognize that families need nutrition education in coordination with nutrition assistance programs to maximize the effectiveness of the federal investment in these programs.

The farm bill has the opportunity to reauthorize two nutrition education programs with proven track records at achieving these goals: SNAP Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention grants (SNAP-Ed) and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). These programs are designed to work effectively in low-income areas. They encourage healthy eating by helping people build the skills they need to manage limited financial resources to avoid food insecurity. These programs teach food selection and preparation skills that continue to benefit people after their participation in the programs has ended.

SNAP-Ed. The SNAP-Ed grant program is managed by the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service, which awards grants to the state agencies that administer SNAP. State agencies then contract with organizations ranging from land-grant universities to state health departments to nonprofits that offer a variety of nutrition education programs suited to the specific needs of individuals.

Over the past 7 years, nutrition education provided through SNAP-Ed has evolved significantly. The Healthy Hungry Free Kids Act of 2010 allowed the USDA to establish guidance and regulations that formalized the cooperation between federal and state governments. Changes to SNAP-Ed have included adding a focus on physical activity and obesity prevention, attempting to reach more low-income people, and pursuing a blend of strategies that include education, marketing, public health and community outreach. Cooperation has also increased with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health. The SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework has improved focus toward improved outcomes through the use of evidence-based interventions and the adoption of an accountability system.

EFNEP. The EFNEP program is managed by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, which provides grants directly to 75 land-grant universities. EFNEP uses a peer-educator model, in which the nutrition educators are paraprofessionals who are typically members of the community in which they work. This system is designed to carefully tailor messages to the specific needs of each individual community.15 In 2016, EFNEP educators worked directly with 118,976 adults and 365,369 youth.15

EFNEP educators provide learning opportunities that are hands-on and evidence-based, with a focus on topics such as diet quality, physical activity, food resource management, food safety, and food security. Up to 94% of adults participating in EFNEP successfully improved their diet by consuming an additional 1/2 cup fruits and vegetables as shown in a 2016 study.15 The study also showed that EFNEP graduates reported a collective food cost savings of about $1.3 billion.15 An analysis by the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association showed that for every $1 spent on the adult EFNEP program, this led to a public health benefit equivalent to $10.96.16

Nutrition education programs like SNAP-Ed and EFNEP are extremely cost-effective. It is estimated that every $1 spent on nutrition education can save $10 in future health care costs and $2 in future food costs.17

Academy Recommendations. The Academy believes that both SNAP-Ed and EFNEP should remain intact and fully funded. With the following recommended improvements, these programs can build on past successes and become even more effective. The Academy recommends that Congress direct USDA to create a network that would share resources and best practices, offer technical assistance, and provide leadership in nutrition education. Currently, the USDA has insufficient resources to share and disseminate best practices. This sharing network could be achieved with additional USDA staff support, specifically a high-level nutrition officer and regional support. These staff members could also gather comprehensive data from the SNAP-Ed evaluation framework, facilitate shared services for social media strategies, and support coordination across nutrition education programs. The Academy believes these activities would maximize federal investment in nutrition education.

Nutrition Research Programs

To complement nutrition assistance and nutrition education, the farm bill provides the opportunity to support nutrition research that can return great dividends by improving the US food and nutrition systems, and ultimately the health of Americans. All nutrition programs benefit from gains in the scientific knowledge of nutrition. Academy members depend on the availability of high-quality and timely nutrition science. The Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion is the gold-standard provider of rigorous systematic reviews. Academy members help perform this research, lead these reviews, and translate the research findings into concrete action plans.

Critical primary research on agriculture and nutrition is conducted by USDA under the Agricultural and Food Research Initiative, which is administered by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Agricultural Research Service Human Nutrition Research Centers. Nutrition science must be supported, and the federal government plays a key role through its investment in basic research around questions of how improved nutrition can improve health and reduce health care costs from diet-related chronic diseases.

Academy Recommendations. The Academy believes that funding should be increased for vital research programs, including Agricultural and Food Research Initiative and the Agricultural Research Service’s Human Nutrition Research Centers. Funding should also be provided to complete the Pregnancy and Birth to 24 Months nutrition guidance project as required by the 2014 farm bill. Adequate funding should be made available for evaluation that can help answer questions around the adequacy of SNAP benefits, frequency of SNAP benefit disbursement, how to reduce the stigma of...
The Academy’s Role in Advancing the Farm Bill

The Academy’s Policy Initiatives and Advocacy staff continue to actively work with members of Congress and Academy members to pass a farm bill that maintains the integrity of nutrition assistance programs, ensures vital nutrition education and nutrition research funding, and enhances access to healthy food. The Academy’s Policy Initiatives and Advocacy staff also influences the programs authorized by the farm bill on a continuous basis by submitting comments on regulations that serve to enhance the quality of law and the realization of the law through rules.

YOUR VOICE IS NEEDED

Academy members have the opportunity to lend their voices to national discussions on the farm bill to ensure that the public and our nation’s leaders understand the positive role nutrition plays in healthy lifestyles.

Registered dietitian nutritionists and nutrition and dietetics technicians, registered, are uniquely positioned with experience and expertise to make valuable advocacy contributions for a farm bill that will improve health for everyone, especially those most vulnerable to food insecurity. Academy members are encouraged to meet with members of Congress and their legislative staff, and to invite them to visit where they work. Calling, e-mailing, or sending an action alert; participating in a town hall; submitting an op-ed to local newspapers; and using social media are vehicles for Academy members to be heard on Capitol Hill and in the district. Now is the time to speak up and raise awareness on these critical farm bill issues.

References


