

POSITION STATEMENT:

SUPPORT POLICIES TO INCREASE NUTRIENT-DENSE FOOD ACCESS ACROSS FEDERAL FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

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SUMMARY STATEMENT:

The Society of Behavioral Medicine supports policies to enhance consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods/beverages that promote well-being, via greater access to nutrient-rich foods across federal food assistance programs.

THE PROBLEM:

There is a growing recognition that food assistance programs should promote greater access to nutrient-rich, high-quality foods, rather than access to any food (e.g., “empty calories”) [1]. Currently, nutrient-dense food access is not well-addressed in the implementation of federal assistance programs [1]. Families with low income often rely on programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and/or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and are more likely to have poorer diet quality (i.e., low fruit and vegetable intake) [2,3] that increases risk for diet-related diseases, compared to families who do not participate in these programs.

Historically, U.S. federal food assistance programs were established to reduce hunger and malnutrition [4]; yet, as malnutrition waned, diet-related diseases (e.g., obesity, type 2 diabetes) have vastly increased [5,6]. While federal food assistance programs help millions nationwide, efforts must be made to prioritize program guidelines to ensure sufficient food provision, and improve nutrient-rich food access, while aligning with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Novel program flexibilities and waivers, due to the Coronavirus 2019 pandemic, and ongoing legislation, such as the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, provide timely opportunities to make policy changes that promote nutrient-dense food access [7]. Thus, Congress must act now to ensure coordinated efforts across nutrition assistance programs that align with our nation’s most pressing issues by prioritizing nutrient-dense food access to mitigate existing nutrition inequities.



CURRENT POLICY:

(NSLP / SBP)

NSLP/SBP nutrition standards do not fully align with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans [8]. Thus, new school meal standards were recently created to transition schools from current pandemic operations to serving nutritious meals in 2022-2024 [9]. These include: 1) permitting flavored low-fat/nonfat milk, 2) serving >80% of weekly grains as whole grain-rich, 3) maintaining/reducing sodium limits for the NSLP, and 4) maintaining fruit and vegetable requirements from the 2012 Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act [10]. In Fall 2022, USDA will propose long-term nutrition standards for 2024 and beyond, thus providing an imminent opportunity to improve school meals, prioritize nutrient-dense foods, and create nutrition standards that align with Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommendations.

(WIC)

In 2009, WIC implemented a cash-value benefit (CVB) (\$9-11/month) to purchase fruits and vegetables [11], resulting in increased fruit and vegetable purchasing [12,13] and decreased obesity among WIC-enrolled toddlers [14]. In 2017, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) recommended an increased CVB benefit, to better align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans [15]. During COVID-19, a short-term increase to the CVB was introduced to align with the NASEM recommendations [16], and since this expansion, children’s fruit and vegetable consumption has increased [16]. However, this current legislation will expire in September 2022, and the CVB will be cut by about two-thirds or more.

(SNAP)

The cost of affording nutrient-rich foods is a large barrier to consuming a nutritious diet on SNAP^[17, 18]. Recent legislation made tremendous strides in reducing cost barriers by authorizing \$56 million for the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)^[19]. GusNIP provides rebates for fruit and vegetable purchases at qualified locations using SNAP dollars, resulting in increased fruit and vegetable consumption^[20]. Despite this progress, further improvements are recommended to expand reach and maximize impact of these programs^[21]. Incentive programs have greater uptake when implemented at supermarkets and electronically^[22], and other healthy food purchases (e.g., whole grains) are not often incentivized^[23], thus limiting the impact of these programs on nutrient-dense food access.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation #1: Enhance nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs in the pending United States Department of Agriculture legislation occurring Fall 2022, to align fully with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (e.g., 100% whole grain requirement, <10% total calories from added sugar limit).

Recommendation #2: Support legislation on the expanded WIC fruit and vegetable cash value benefit to promote nutrient-dense food access by making the increased CVB rate permanent (\$24/month for children; \$43-47/month for pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding individuals). These increased rates should align with the NASEM recommendations.

Recommendation #3: Support SNAP legislation to provide incentives for healthy food purchases (e.g., increase funding for fruit and vegetable incentive programs, create minimum standards for rebates on fruit and vegetable purchases, and expand financial incentives to more nutrient-dense food purchases like whole grains).

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ENDORSEMENTS

