

Comments by Chef Gregory Silverman, MSc  
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West Side Campaign Against Hunger  
In advance of the White House Conference on  
Food, Nutrition, Hunger & Health  
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Thank you for allowing me to pass along ideas and input regarding hunger in the U.S. in advance of the White House conference this fall. My name is Chef Greg Silverman, and I am the West Side Campaign Against Hunger's Executive Director and CEO. I have worked in the food and hunger space for over 20 years. I previously served as the National Director of Program Partnerships for Share Our Strength and its No Kid Hungry Campaign where I led the national growth of the Cooking Matters nutrition education platform across all 50 states. This work led me to be chosen as one of the three Chefs Move To School coordinators with First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move team at the White House. Previous to this I was in London as a nutrition education specialist for the city government and a food consultant for school food service operations teams across the city of London.

But in truth, I am simply a chef. For over a dozen years I was a successful chef and owner of multiple restaurants in Ithaca, NY. I helped lead the farm to people in charge both in my restaurants and in the soup kitchen I sat on board of directors at. All my work and thoughts related to changing the food system come from the lens of food, the kitchen, and what it means to sit at a dinner table together as a community. In my spare time I have spent time in the U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Mali, received an MSc in Food and Nutrition Policy from the City University of London, volunteered as a Board Member of Farm Africa and #Givehealthy, and cooking up change with communities across the globe.

I give all this context as my personal work experience along with the incredible experience and expertise of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger and its community of 77,000 customers we serve give a unique perspective to what can be achieved to sustainably eliminate food insecurity in America.

### Overview

West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) is one of the largest Emergency Food Providers (EFP's) in NYC and has been at the forefront of innovation for 43 years, developing the first customer-choice supermarket-style pantry in the United States over 3 decades ago. In October 2017, WSCAH's operation expanded to include a Mobile Market Program (MMP), which focused on bringing healthy food into neighborhoods through partnering with community organizations, directly bringing our customer choice model with a state of the art truck to neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and food insecurity in Northern Manhattan and the Bronx. By bringing food to people directly, WSCAH addresses food insecurity head-on by reducing barriers to travel and creates more access points to healthy food and fresh produce.

Beyond the provision of food, WSCAH also offers customers a comprehensive suite of services aimed at helping families on their journey to food security. All first-time customers who come through WSCAH's door meet with a member of the Social Services team who guides them through an initial intake assessment, informing them what benefits and services they might be eligible for. Services included referrals to access shelter, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, financial counseling and tax preparation, educational programs, immigration legal assistance, and sign-ups for health insurance, SNAP (food stamps), Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE), and Disability Rent Increase Exemption (DRIE).

Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, WSCAH's 86th Street Market offered customers their choice of healthy, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, protein, and dairy to best suit their diets and lifestyles. Since the onset of the pandemic, WSCAH's operations have been reimaged and dramatically shifted in order to meet the continued rise of food insecurity across NYC resulting from the pandemic. To comply with public health measures, ensure continuity of access to healthy food, WSCAH transformed its entire 86th Street customer-choice basement level pantry to an outside street level pantry while redesigning the interior workspace into a safe, food packing assembly system. The MMP sites have adjusted to a 'no contact drop-off' model and expanded to include new partner sites across all the city. Alongside MMP partnerships, we pursued new partners with food delivery services, such as DoorDash, to address the specific challenges of COVID-19 for older adult customers (+65) to deliver healthy food and worked with New York City Hospitals and Mt. Sinai to meet emergency food needs for vulnerable COVID-19 patients. To ensure continuity of benefits access, WSCAH converted its Social Services Department into a virtual call center and expanded the suite of services we provide to include a variety of COVID-19 specific relief, such as coronavirus unemployment assistance and rent relief.

The pandemic has been devastating to our community and at same time it has allowed WSCAH to drive more change for more people in need and in the last three years, have expanded from a dozen distribution points to 52 sites, and moved from serving 25,000 customers to over 77,000 customers in need in last year alone.

#### **FY 2021 (July 2020 - June 2021) Selected Achievements:**

- 356,000 customer visits to pick up healthy food from over 60 distribution sites.
- Served over 77,000 unique individuals
- Distributed healthy groceries for 4.2 million meals
- 50% of the food provided was fresh produce of over 4.3 million pounds of food.
- \$2,653,029 in gained SNAP (Food Stamps) benefits
- \$2,110,000 in gained COVID relief assistance (retroactive pay for pandemic unemployment, weekly unemployment assistance, rental assistance)

#### **The Roundtable**

At the same time that our direct service has greatly expanded, we also have spent time and effort collaborating across the city to make change. In 2018, WSCAH led the formation of The Roundtable, which is currently a collective action group consisting of eight of the largest emergency food providers in NYC. This group has already successfully influenced and supported, both indirectly and directly, improving the quality of food at food pantries across NYC, through contract renegotiations, public policy advocacy, and peer-to-peer organizational engagement. In sheer numbers, The Roundtable network this

year served over 40 million meals, 14.3 million pounds of fresh produce across almost 3 million household visits and leveraged our purchasing power in excess of \$10 million. Additionally, The Roundtable recently purchased two tractor trailers of oats, resulting in cost savings of \$40,000 across the eight organizations in this one purchase alone! Collaboration matters and it works.

### The Future is Here

The West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) is a strong community of changemakers who, as evidenced above, have been working to end hunger by ensuring all New Yorkers have access with dignity to a choice of healthy food and supportive services for over four decades. We are not in a four decade emergency, we are in a four decade descent into further systemic poverty for tens of millions of community members across the nation.

The time to make real, powerful, sustainable change is now. We cannot spend another four decades growing emergency feeding work. Charity is not the answer. Charity is a supplement at best.

The historic White House conference this fall must take real, actionable steps to change the trajectory of communities across the nation. **If we truly want to end hunger we must increase access to healthier food.** Access does not mean putting another grocery store in neighborhoods in need. It means economic access, full stop! We have tried spreading out more healthy food via farmers markets, grocery stores, etc but it's not the issue. We can put healthy food on every corner of every city street or main street in America and we will still have rapidly expanding hunger. **We must give community members in need the economic means to eat healthier. Simply put we must increase SNAP benefits, increase wages, drive Food as Medicine efforts forward with speed and precision, and give communities the tools to fight hunger!**

### How do we do this:

Increase snap payments, reach, and ease access to it. Of course we want to push hard to make healthy food more physically accessible but in a delivery focused world, that is the easy part. The key is to make the program turn-key so more people can receive more supportive benefits. A few examples of what this should look like?

- Make permanent the COVID SNAP related programs like P-EBT and suspension of college student restrictions on obtaining SNAP.
- Increase SNAP income cutoff from 130% to 200% of federal poverty line and peg SNAP increases to inflation.
- Ease process to access SNAP by ending restrictions for undocumented immigrants in working families from getting SNAP and lengthen SNAP recertification period.
- Invest significant dollars in the technology to ease the burden of application to all benefits programs and market these programs broadly across communities in need.

Food as Medicine is a powerful set of tools that has been tested and evaluated and is successfully helping communities in need. Below is a recap of how we have worked in this space. This experience is why we ask the Conference to build upon state Medicaid waivers that fund Food as Medicine work across all the states.

- Over the last three years, WSCAH and the NY Presbyterian Hospital network have supported New Yorkers in need with food and social services via the Food FARMacy program. Together we have served 38,644 individuals with almost 2.6 million pounds of healthy food. At the same

time, we have spent time and effort evaluating the effects of this type of project and the results are promising.

- In our evaluation work, we found that despite enrollment in federal supplemental nutrition programs, Food FARMacy participants experience household food insecurity. Food FARMacy participants received food aligned with USDA guidelines up to 14 times over 6 months and the median attendance rate was 10 sessions. Participants had improvements in household food insecurity and dietary quality. Families noted they require a layering of programs to meet nutritional needs, and they valued access to fresh, healthy foods through the Food FARMacy program. In our preliminary findings among a small cohort of infants and children under 6 years, we found that **those who were Food FARMacy participants had smaller gains in body mass index - a marker of obesity - compared to non-participants.** This supports the important role of access to healthy food in obesity and chronic disease prevention among households with food insecurity.
- It's clear from our programs and evaluation that food initiatives such as Food FARMacy work. **Funding value-based organizations to help prevent health issues is an incredible mechanism to truly change the health of and better support the community.**

Raise minimum wage: With a customer base of 77,000 New Yorkers in need, over 70% are Latino and roughly 50% are working age, wages are a huge driver of change to lift families and communities out of food insecurity.

- Day in and day out my team of benefits enrollers hear from families about their multiple sets of part time, low wage jobs. Parents and caregivers want more food from our organization but they also want links to job training as they want to be working. Low-income community members want, from our perspective and direct engagement, to be contributing members of society. The wages being paid to a majority of our customers is holding people in food insecurity and therefore in poverty. Our customers do not have the means to purchase the healthy food they desire for their family. Our tourists do not have the means to pay the rent, buy the back-to-school clothes, or even purchase a birthday gift for their loved ones.
- Our community members often work in food system jobs: restaurants, delivery, food warehouses, agriculture, and all are making substandard wages. First and foremost, the workers of our food system, those who were deemed frontline all through the pandemic, deserve a thriving wage to help our food system thrive.

Community, Dignity, Choice 4 all!: THE WSCAH organization has been focused on these three words for 43 years, building a model of choice for all things from benefits to broccoli, a model of community where in our board is made up of community organizers, customers of our services, partner organizations and supporters, and a model where we keep changing to meeting the needs of our community with the dignity all deserve.

- Fund innovation at community level emergency feeding level through models that bring food to people and not people to food.
  - Digital ordering platforms
  - Mobile pantries
  - Delivery of food partnerships
- Fund training and technical support via collaboration efforts at city level in the model of THE ROUNDTABLE where best practice organizations across a geographic area are working together to share data, drive down prices, increase healthy food in the community, share insights, and support a larger network of providers.

## Why do we do this?

As we think about actionable change to impact the community it's easy for me to see why these three actions can help so much. I want to close with two examples of how collaborative, community based change works and why benefits are central to the fight against food insecurity.

### **Monika Arias**

Our New York Presbyterian partner referred Monika Arias to the social services team. Monika is a mother to a newborn. She was having a hard time adding her baby to her public assistance case. WSCAH offered to help her submit the change case along with the supporting documents. Within a few weeks, our team checked on the case status. HRA had rejected her case change simply because the newborn's social security card was not in the system, although the social security number was provided on the change report. Even more frustrating, HRA **never** sent Monika a follow-up notice via mail or online requesting the social security card. I communicated this issue over to our partner UJC (Urban Justice Center) for public assistance advocacy. UJC diligently resolved the issue with HRA, the social security card was soon uploaded into the system.

As a result, HRA re-opened the case and proceeded to review and approve the case. Monika's benefits increased from \$234 to \$430 in monthly SNAP. Her total rental assistance went from \$215 to \$283. Her total cash assistance increased from \$183 to \$291. WSCAH also helped her obtain a reduced fare MetroCard, which will alleviate transportation costs. In addition, Monika was awarded the annual \$45 HEAP benefit for utility costs. Our team is currently working with her to obtain affordable childcare, which will allow her to seek employment. Monika was also provided with additional food resources, including WSCAH pantry services. Monika is grateful for the help she has received which otherwise would have been impossible without the guidance of WSCAH and our partners.

### **Eric**

Eric, a married father of 5, visited our 86th Street Pantry for the first time seeking healthy food for himself and his family. Due to COVID-19 and remote school learning, he was forced to stay at home with his 5 children while his wife worked at NewYork-Presbyterian as a health care worker. Eric was connected to our pantry and received healthy food for himself and his family. During his virtual intake assessment, the WSCAH team discovered Eric had lost his health coverage. Our dedicated Social Service Counselor applied to the New York State of Health Marketplace, and Eric was approved for Medicaid. Eric's family had also lost his weekly income and was finding it difficult to put food on the table. WSCAH was able to connect him, his wife and children to SNAP benefits of \$226 per month. WSCAH also helped Eric apply for unemployment, and, seeing that his family was living in a one bedroom apartment, it was quickly realized that he was eligible for a larger space through NYCHA Connect and he was instructed on how to apply.

Monika and Eric and the thousands of other community members we work with and serve are why we do this work. It's why we're committed to ending hunger in ways that breed dignity and respect. And it's why we're calling on the White House to implement bold change to end hunger by 2030.

Thank you,

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