



June 9, 2023

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

RE: 2023 Farm Bill Reauthorization Nutrition Recommendations

Dear Chairman Thompson and Ranking Member Scott:

On behalf of Meals on Wheels America and the nationwide network of senior nutrition programs that we represent, thank you for this opportunity to share our recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill. The reauthorization of this critical piece of legislation comes at a time when millions of Americans face increasingly pervasive barriers to accessing healthy and affordable food, as well as dietary diseases and other nutritional challenges.

The negative social and economic impacts of food insecurity and malnutrition among older adults are severe and costly, but often go unseen and underreported. However, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the unique and stark challenges that older adults face, especially those who are homebound, and called attention to the services and supports needed to serve this growing population of Americans. While nutrition programs under the Farm Bill must ultimately help all low-income individuals who lack access to healthy and adequate nutrition daily, it is vital to ensure strong investment in services and policies that address the diverse needs of older adults.

Over 10 million (12%) older adults aged 60 and older are threatened by hunger—7.6 million (9.8%) of whom experience low or very low food security. Nationwide, that is one in eight older adults struggling with hunger, and it has also been estimated that up to nearly half of all older adults may be at risk of becoming or are already malnourished. Today, millions of older adults are forced to make choices about the foods they eat due to financial strain, often making difficult decisions between eating properly or paying for utilities, rent and/or medication. Even more may grapple with the ability to safely cook or prepare meals and/or have limited access to food, due to mobility or transportation challenges, proximity to grocery stores, etc.

It is well understood that nutrition is a critical part of wellness, development, and overall quality of life. Better nutrition is associated with improved health, lower risk of non-communicable diseases and longevity. Despite the wide recognition of the relationship between healthy aging and access to nutritious food and regular socialization, millions of seniors are unable to meet these basic human needs. **With rising healthcare spending – attributable in part to a rapidly growing population of aging adults with complex and often multiple chronic conditions – it is imperative that we invest more significantly in cost-effective nutrition programs that allow individuals to age with better health, independence, and dignity.**

The Meals on Wheels network has long worked together with other community-based food assistance and nutrition programs to address the ongoing hunger crisis. There is growing awareness of the various services available and how they work in collaboration to help address gaps and combat challenges related to hunger, nutrition security, and health. While the

magnitude and severity of these issues requires significant intervention and coordination, and there is a long way to go before they are resolved, there are innovative models we can test and existing solutions that we can build upon and implement through this reauthorization process.

The Farm Bill recommendations below would directly address the growing problems of senior hunger and isolation as well as make strides toward a healthier and food secure nation. Specifically, we propose the following:

- 1. Enact policies that strengthen and secure access to nutrition assistance programs for older adults, specifically the *Senior Hunger Prevention Act of 2023* and authorization of a demonstration project to reach un- and underserved homebound seniors.**
 - The *Senior Hunger Prevention Act of 2023* improves, expands, and streamlines access to federal nutrition assistance programs and promotes participation for older adults, people with disabilities, grandparents, and kinship caregivers.
 - This legislation addresses common barriers to participation in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) and other federal nutrition programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) by simplifying the application processes, extending certification periods, supporting outreach initiatives to enroll more older adults and improve benefit coordination, and enhancing access, particularly for those who are homebound and in the greatest need.
 - Further, the *Senior Hunger Prevention Act* improves access to healthy food by providing federal grants to support local non-profits and aging service providers to bring fresh food to accessible locations and expanding and strengthening delivery options to make it easier for older SNAP participants to procure food using their program benefits.
 - Lastly, authorize a multi-year demonstration project to reach un- and underserved homebound older adults in need of nutritious meals. Historical under-enrollment of certain programs – especially the SNAP where only 48% of the over 10 million eligible seniors receive benefits – persists because of one’s inability to effectively utilize benefits (i.e., food access, ability to cook and prepare meals safely). We, along with the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, envision a USDA demonstration model that would leverage the senior nutrition program network and community partners, as well as existing federal nutrition programs, to expand services for older adults in geographically isolated areas and/or regions with systemic service-area delivery gaps.

- 2. Protect SNAP from harmful cuts and increase benefit levels for participating households, especially those with older adults.**
 - With the end of the universal pandemic-era SNAP emergency allotments in February, millions of households in dozens of states recently lost much-needed SNAP benefits. The benefits for individuals aged 60 or older have been reduced by \$138 per month on average. These deep cuts, coupled with costs higher than pre-pandemic levels, mean that fewer dollars are now in the households already struggling to purchase enough food. We oppose any legislation that further reduces or eliminates monthly benefits for households participating in SNAP.
 - As the largest federal nutrition program, SNAP also contributes to the health and independence of vulnerable seniors, a particularly important factor for the nearly four

million elderly participants who live alone. Among older adults, SNAP participation has been associated with improved medication adherence and decreased rates of hospitalization and institutionalization, which in turn reduces federal spending on healthcare. Increasing investments in this program and the benefit allotments are vital steps needed to address the nutritional needs of older Americans and to end hunger in this country.

- In addition to promoting greater access to nutrition assistance programs for older adults and people with disabilities, the *Senior Hunger Prevention Act* would also provide a benefit increase for all households participating in SNAP and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP). As food prices have risen greatly since the last Farm Bill reauthorization, this benefit increase would help more low-income older adults who struggle to afford medicine, utilities and other basic living expenses pay for fresh food and groceries.

3. Authorize adequate funding for federal programs that alleviate hunger, address nutrition security, and improve health and wellbeing for older adults and community-based organizations that support them.

- Older adults – including the 2.8 million receiving Older Americans Act (OAA) congregate or home-delivered meals – often rely on several critical USDA nutrition assistance programs. SNAP, CSFP, SFMNP, and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) are targeted programs that make healthy and affordable food more accessible for low-income individuals. As older adults may need the support from more than a single program or social service, many local Meals on Wheels programs participate in various efforts and programming that helps connect and enroll seniors into complementary nutrition programs from which they can benefit.
- Increase federal investments through the Farm Bill and annual appropriations to provide community-based senior nutrition programs and local agencies with the resources they need to maintain operations, expand their capacity, further innovate, and form impactful partnerships with other sectors – such as healthcare – to meet the growing and changing needs of our nation's diverse older adult population.
- Additionally, we support providing supplemental resources for nutrition assistance programs to provide culturally appropriate and medically tailored meals, fresh produce and locally sourced food, options which are often more expensive.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share our perspectives and input on the pressing issue of access to healthy and affordable food for seniors and the importance of a strong and reliable continuum of programs and services that assist individuals in receiving optimal and affordable nutrition. We hope the insights shared are helpful in guiding the Committee's work to advance policies that support the nutrition and food security of American families.

We look forward to working together to ensure that all seniors live nourished lives with independence and dignity.

Sincerely,



Ellie Hollander
President and CEO