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The Case for State Food Action Plans

Laboratories of Food Democracy

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Introduction and summary

States are currently facing unprecedented challenges. Budgets are shrinking at the exact moment that the needs of residents, and particularly low-income and unemployed residents, are greatest. It will take both states and residents some time to fully recover. The times necessitate well-thought-out policy choices that most effectively take advantage of existing resources. Ideally, solutions developed during times of limited resources will inform the best use of more plentiful resources when times are good again.

When it comes to food, that means states efficiently using federal resources to increase the nutrition assistance available to struggling families, while further leveraging those resources—as well as untapped market forces—to increase the direct income obtained by small- and medium-scale farmers. In large states, increasing the use of federal entitlement programs among eligible households can pump hundreds of millions of additional dollars into their economies. Even in the very smallest states, the increase could be tens of millions of dollars.

While the best long-term strategy for reducing hunger is to increase the number of residents who hold living-wage jobs, maximizing the use of the countercyclical safety net—which expands when the economy is weak—is the best short-term way to slash hunger.

States can rapidly achieve these solutions by:

- Identifying pressing hunger, food, nutrition, and agriculture problems in their state
- Gathering a diverse knowledge base or group of experts who understand different pieces of the puzzle
- Discussing and evaluating known best practices and a limited number of innovations worthy of appropriate investments
- Establishing goals and developing a plan for achieving those goals

- Tasking key point people and granting them authority to quickly achieve those goals
- Ensuring accountability for swift, high-quality enactment of those goals

We argue that states' food systems and nutrition needs—particularly the food-insecurity and obesity-reduction needs of low-income citizens and the plight of struggling family farms—are worthy of attention and deserving of such a process that should result in the development and implementation of what we call “food action plans,” or “These plans can be sensitive to the restraints on many states’ resources by making smart choices about the use of federal funds and increasing participation in underutilized federal entitlement programs. Even though programs such as SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), and school meals are under the direction of the federal government, states have great flexibility in how they administer them and can vary in the degree to which they draw upon those resources.

CAP urges that food action plans take a more comprehensive approach that systematically reinvents state food systems from farm to fork. A wide variety of effective antihunger and food-security practices have been implemented in a broad range of states. Yet no one state has implemented all or even most of the best practices at once, even though working comprehensively is the best way for states to obtain the biggest “bang for the buck.” For instance, using a process called direct certification, states that enroll the highest proportion of eligible families in SNAP also receive the highest proportion of automatic reimbursements for schools for school meals. To give another example, it is nearly impossible to dramatically increase the number of state farmers selling products through farmers’ markets or community-supported agriculture, or CSA, if policies are not in place to preserve farmland. Efforts to fight both hunger and obesity by improving the quality and affordability of food in low-income neighborhoods and communities can also boost job creation and aid agricultural producers.

Since there are numerous, interrelated problems that affect both consumers and producers and food, the best way to address them is holistically through proposed food action plans.

Food action plans further provide states with an opportunity to reduce paperwork and bureaucracy while improving the provision of services. In [“Doing What Works to End U.S. Hunger,”](#) CAP pointed to the general effectiveness of each federal food program but suggested that taken as a whole the federal nutrition safety net can be confusing and burdensome to navigate. Those who qualify for more

than one program soon learn that each can have different eligibility requirements, application procedures, and physical locations to attend. This system requires states to develop far-reaching bureaucracies and collect vast mountains of paperwork, costing state and local governments untold amounts of administrative costs.

To address these concerns, we recommended that the federal government combine some of these programs into a new program that could be called the “American Family Food, Opportunity, and Responsibility” program, or AFFORD. It remains to be seen whether such changes will actually occur. State Action Plans, however, can capture the spirit of such reform by including “Virtual AFFORD” items aimed at simplifying application requirements and procedures and better coordinating programs to reduce burdens on participants. Examples of such efforts include the direct certification of SNAP participants for school meals without further application, or the Single Stop or Benefit Bank model that provides access to multiple services under one roof.

Such efforts are being done by our partner Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry Campaign, by state-level policy work conducted by the Food Research Action Center and state and local antihunger groups, and by existing and new food policy councils. They must also rely on the collaborative efforts of a diversity of community actors, including governors, legislatures, service providers, advocates, religious organizations, farmers, and other members of the business community.

With these general principles in mind, we would suggest that FAPs include items such as the following:

- **Maximizing the use of SNAP.** States should evaluate their SNAP application processes to determine if they can minimize the number of questions asked and paperwork to be completed while still maintaining their goals for determining eligibility and limiting fraud. They can also elect such other program options as categorical eligibility (coordinating eligibility for SNAP with other programs), improving technology, eliminating asset limits, increasing income eligibility limits, reducing required office visits, and expanding office hours.
- **Expanding participation in school breakfasts.** It is important for states to set ambitious goals for the number of children participating in school breakfasts that is at least comparable to numbers participating in school lunch. In working toward that goal, they should use best practices such as in-classroom and “grab and go” breakfasts.

- **Improving the administration of school lunches.** School lunch bureaucracy reduction and hunger and obesity reduction efforts would be greatly advanced through better utilizing direct certification procedures, expanding the use of universal meal programs, improving the quality of meals, and easing access for homeless students.
- **Expanding access to summer meals for children.** States should develop plans that improve outreach and multiply the number of locations serving food.
- **Make use of available after-school meal dollars.** States can enroll greater numbers of children in after-school snack and supper programs.
- **Creatively using commodity distribution funding.** Efforts such as developing creative public-private partnerships can improve the administration of a program in which the USDA provides commodities to nonprofits that deliver food to those in need.
- **Making use of federal national service programs.** Incorporating national service programs such as AmeriCorps and VISTA into hunger- and obesity-reduction efforts allows national service participants—as well as the volunteers they recruit and manage—to engage in activities related to outreach, enrollment assistance, community gardening, and food delivery.
- **Merging food programs into benefit banks.** States can ease access to a broad range of public benefits by making them centrally available to those who need them. Those applying for food services should be able to apply for other public benefits such as Medicaid and child care at one-stop locations.
- **Partnering the interests of farmers and businesses with those of low-income communities.** Many recommendations otherwise included within this paper will generate new business for farmers and other segments of the food industry due to increased consumption. States should also consider private investments in food-related businesses, shifts in procurement rules, tax breaks, land swaps, and other options that benefit businesses but also grow jobs and the availability and quality of foods in communities. Included within these efforts should be incentives to build supermarkets and develop other nutritious food resources in low-income neighborhoods known as “food deserts” due to the absence of affordable and healthy food options.

- **Supporting efforts to reduce poverty.** Those working on action plans should consider how they can affect general poverty reduction and living wage efforts, reducing reliance on government programs, without experiencing any form of mission creep.

Although there is much that states can do to reduce hunger and obesity via their FAPs, other levels of government do have a role to play. Localities can create and implement similar plans. The federal government can provide technical support for the creation and implementation of FAPs while also appropriating sufficient funds for federal programs that are accounted for in such plans and state budgets.

Taken together, all of these efforts will bring states much closer to reaching hunger and obesity- reduction goals while also benefiting business development and job creation targets.

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