

July 15, 2022

President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Ambassador Susan Rice
Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden and Ambassador Rice,

On July 7th and 8th, 2022, the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#) (CSPI)ⁱ and [Impact Justice](#)ⁱⁱ co-hosted a partner-led convening with the Food/Nutrition in Corrections Affinity Group to discuss priorities for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. Established in 2020 by CSPI, Impact Justice, and others, the Food/Nutrition in Corrections Affinity Group is a network of over 100 individuals and organizations who share an interest in fostering health and dignity through food for people who are incarcerated. This group grew out of two years of research and relationship-building both of our organizations undertook to produce two reports, which we enclose as supplements to this letter. CSPI and Impact Justice maintain that society must ultimately address overincarceration, especially of people of color, and other root causes of health inequities. At the same time, improving food conditions in correctional facilities is critical to minimize harm to people impacted by the justice system.

Recognizing that the White House is “especially interested in actions that will help eliminate disparities and support the diverse range of individuals and communities that are impacted by hunger and diet-related diseases,” we held this convening to lift up lived experiences and recommendations regarding the food environment and eating experience for incarcerated people and returning citizens. Approximately 30 individuals around the country participated in two virtual listening sessions. Attendees included returning citizens, family members of currently incarcerated people, justice reform advocates, public health advocates, state and local public health nutritionists, correctional dietitians, and researchers.

Participants shared stories that echo the profound impacts of prison food on physical health, mental well-being, and sense of human dignity that are described in Impact Justice’s national report, [Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison](#). One convening attendee shared, “I had a heart attack and a triple bypass 17 months after release, and I was one of the fortunate ones to have made it and to recover. There was a direct correlation with the 23 years of poor diet I had while incarcerated—a prison sentence can turn into a death sentence for many.” Another participant recalled how the experience of hunger while incarcerated led to disordered eating, explaining, “In prison, I hovered between 90 and 95 pounds . . . And I think that mentally, I still haven’t recovered from that.” She went on to question why incarcerated individuals are able to select what they want to watch on television, but are not given the choice to eat a healthful diet while inside. Another attendee told us, “I entered county jail 134 pounds, fit and healthy. I was 206 pounds ten months later in prison, and I had high blood pressure for the first and only time in my life.” She went on to describe the two-tiered system inside prison in which people with resources can afford to supplement insufficient, unhealthy, and inedible meals with (tastier but still largely unhealthy) food from the commissary, yet those without financial support from the outside cannot. She also added that pregnant women and diabetic people did not receive adequate nutrition for their conditions. These are not just individual stories, but rather all-too-common experiences among the millions of Americans who spend time in correctional facilities each year.

Perhaps most poignantly, several attendees reminded us how the impacts of eating while incarcerated not only affect the individual serving time, but also ripple out to families and communities. As one participant explained, “When someone is incarcerated, it impacts the rest of the family’s ability to put food on the

table . . . And they come back with bad [eating] habits that get passed on and become an intergenerational problem.” It is critical to note that the issue of food in prisons and jails does not exist in a vacuum, but rather as part of a cycle in which differential access to food is a given. Communities with the highest rates of incarceration are also those with higher rates of food and nutrition insecurity—meaning this issue disproportionately affects those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color, and people with low incomes.

It is crucial that our federal, state, and local governments take steps to address the ways in which the intersection of food and carceral systems serves to perpetuate health inequities and cycles of harm. As one attendee pointed out, “You don’t need to reinvent the wheel—better practices do exist and should be replicated.” While no model correctional food service operation yet exists, there are innovative initiatives to support [farm-to-corrections procurement](#), [menu-planning based on accepted nutrition standards](#), and [access to healthier commissary items](#) already in action around the country.

These promising practices should be adopted across the nation, but they should not limit our ambition for improving food and nutrition security for people impacted by the justice system. To that end, we would like to lift up the specific policy recommendations that were noted by convening participants:

Recommendations for the federal government:

- 1. Ensure that people impacted by the justice system are substantively engaged in all aspects of the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health and the associated national strategy.** Attendees noted that this underserved population that disproportionately bears food system inequities has not yet been recognized in public-facing communications from the Conference. As the Conference organizers continue to solicit a diverse group of stakeholders with lived experience and expertise to inform the Conference and implementation of the strategic report, we urge you to include returning citizens, people with loved ones who are incarcerated, and others impacted by the justice system in a transparent manner.
- 2. Strengthen nutrition assistance for returning citizens.** Congress should end the cruel policy that prohibits those previously incarcerated for drug-related felonies from receiving SNAP unless individual states modify the policies. Re-entering society from confinement is hard enough for those individuals—and their children—without being denied access to this important nutritional lifeline. Attendees also urged policymakers to improve federal and state infrastructure for connecting returning citizens with benefits immediately upon release.
- 3. Establish a program to make federal funding available to state and local correctional facility food service operations if they meet standards for nutrition and other aspects of the food environment.** This could be modeled after the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, which are already available to juvenile justice facilities. Attendees expressed that there is an urgent need to raise standards for health, palatability, and dignity in correctional facility food service, which currently vary considerably by jurisdiction. Equally urgent is the need for more resources to support meeting higher standards. Among adult state prisons, the food budget per person per *day* ranges from \$1 to \$4.50, which is comparable to the federal reimbursement rate per *meal* for schools. Many correctional facilities also need resources to update their kitchen equipment to accommodate more fresh produce and other improvements. Some or all of the additional recommendations below could be required of facilities that participate in the national meal program.

Recommendations for all governments with authority over correctional facilities:

4. **Adopt food and nutrition standards** based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGA) for all facility menus.
5. **Require independent oversight of food service** by the health department or other third party, including unannounced site inspections and review of menus for compliance with the DGA.
6. **Offer people in custody a selection of items to choose from at each meal.** Currently the norm is limited or no choice.
7. **Provide at least 20 minutes of seated eating time at each meal.** In many facilities, time to eat depends on one's place in the serving line, making it often a stressful and rushed experience.
8. **Prohibit food-related punishments** such as providing an alternative, less palatable meal.
9. **Implement values-aligned food procurement** to support more local, minority-owned businesses and vendors that protect the environment and workers.
10. **Require transparent reporting of correctional agency spending** to facilitate optimal allocation of resources for food service.
11. **Permit facilities to serve produce grown in on-site gardens.** Many facilities give away garden produce to food pantries, and people in custody can be punished for keeping it.
12. **Offer nutrition education** to people in custody through partnerships with extension agencies and community-based organizations.

Additional recommendations and context can be found in the enclosed reports. CSPI and Impact Justice are ready and willing to work with the Biden Administration to bring these ideas to fruition. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Conference.

Sincerely,



Peter Lurie, MD, MPH
President
Center for Science in the Public Interest



Alex Busansky
President
Impact Justice

ⁱ CSPI, your food and health watchdog, envisions a healthy population with reduced impact and burden of preventable diseases and an equitable food system that makes healthy, sustainable food accessible to all. CSPI is one of the nation's oldest independent, science-based consumer advocacy organizations.

ⁱⁱ Impact Justice is a national innovation and research center advancing new ideas and solutions for justice reform. We work in three main areas: preventing more youth and adults from becoming involved in the criminal legal system, improving conditions for those currently incarcerated, and helping people returning from incarceration to successfully rejoin their communities.