HUNGRY FOR CHANGE: REIMAGINING FOOD SECURITY

Kristina Peterson 00:22

Hello. My name is Kristina Peterson. I cover the food industry for Bloomberg News, which means I have a lot of thoughts about seed oils and protein. But today, we'll be discussing food security on this panel, and I'd like to start by introducing our speakers. We have Dr. Brendan Carr, CEO of the Mount Sinai Health System; Anne Filipic, CEO of Share Our Strength; Javier Garcia, CEO of World Central Kitchen; and Caitlin Welsh, the director of the Global Food and Water Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. So, I thought we would start by talking about SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. That's sort of the backbone of traditional food assistance. And there have been some pretty major changes that were made in SNAP since the One Big Beautiful Bill was passed in the summer of 2025. The work requirements were expanded. States now have to pay a larger share of the administrative costs and potentially part of the benefits themselves in the next year. So, Anne, maybe you could start a little bit by talking about what your top priorities are with SNAP. We're coming off a big election. Democrats potentially have some opportunities to push for SNAP changes. What should they prioritize, and what kind of leverage do they have to do that?

Anne Filipic 01:36

Yeah, absolutely. Well, hey, everyone. Great to be with you this afternoon. And there's been a lot of attention in recent months, for very good reason, to the affordability crisis in this country. And I think, in particular, as you just referenced in the context of the election, it was sort of really the number one issue that we saw voters getting out to the polls about. But how I've been thinking about it is really there's been sort of a dual set of crises that American families have been navigating. Yes, the affordability crisis, the rising cost of groceries and gas and everything that affects their ability to just meet basic needs for their family. But the second is that, at the exact same time, the social safety net in this country has been under attack. So, programs like SNAP that were designed actually to sort of fill a gap exactly in a moment like this have been pulled away from families exactly at the moment that they need it. And just to put some specific numbers behind that, since H.R. 1, the Big Beautiful Bill, was passed just a year and a few months ago, five and a half million people have lost SNAP benefits. Two million of them have been children. And this far exceeds what the Congressional Budget Office suggested would happen years from now, at the point that all of the provisions were implemented. So, we are seeing a real crisis for families. And we are at a point now that we're on the cusp of some of the biggest provisions that will really affect, I think, the future of this program. And if we don't see a change in direction, it's actually quite likely that some states will stop implementing the program altogether. So, to your question of sort of the opportunity ahead of us, the first thing is that we have to delay some of these provisions just to give states at least a little more time to get their ducks in a row. There's a lot of details here that I will not get into that sound super technocratic and

sort of administrative inconveniences, but are actually making it nearly impossible for families to participate in the program, creating so much red tape. So, we have to delay this. We have to make sure that those who are eligible for the program can participate in the program. Right now, that's not what's happening. They're getting kicked off. And ultimately, we do need to get to the point of repealing H.R. 1. The final point I'll make is that actually, I think the moment is so much bigger than that. The goal here is not just to return to the status quo. There is so much that—SNAP is the number one anti-hunger program in the country. But we know that in so many ways, even before H.R. 1, it wasn't meeting the needs of families. So, to me, the bigger opportunity, we can't jump over the defend piece of this, but the bigger opportunity is really to look at how can we design programs that work around people's lives, as opposed to asking them to redesign their lives to participate in these programs.

Kristina Peterson 04:22

SNAP has long been the traditional food aid program that we have turned to as a country to make sure people are getting enough food. Dr. Carr, from a health-care vantage point, are we thinking about food security in all the right ways? Do we need to be layering nutrition on top of this, or are those two separate ways to think about this?

Brendan G. Carr 04:45

First, thanks for the opportunity to be here. It's funny, maybe, for a health system to be here. We're really proud to be here and excited to be here as a part of this conversation. Everything that you say resonates so deeply because food is one of the most foundational components of the social safety net. There are others, of course, and those are happening in rooms down the hall. But they all manifest, when things go sideways, in health outcomes that are just unacceptable for the nation that we live in and the resources that we have. I'm an emergency physician, and so, for me, every failed social policy shows up at some point or time in the emergency department with someone asking for help. And central to that is, at the root of your question, I would say, we know that starvation, hunger, has decreased in America. Not gone, but has decreased. And we have traded off for that chronic diseases. We have made calories inexpensive, but we've made them unhealthy. So, yes, the bottom of this pyramid is that people need to have food. The next step up is they need to have nutrition, and then they need to have targeted nutrition and education. And we will get there. The foundational work is critical, but the foundational work is foundational. And I guess just the thread that I want people to be aware of is that as we solved for one problem, we created another problem. And when we did that, it was not because there's an evil actor in the room that was trying to get that done. It was done because it was what we were told to solve for: to try to solve for hunger, make calories cheap. But now we have diabetes, chronic disease, hypertension, most Americans living with at least one, if not two, chronic diseases. That's next for us. We have to get there next.

Kristina Peterson 06:34

And how do we shape getting healthier food in the food supply on people's tables? There's been some really interesting efforts this year at the state level to restrict what can be sold in SNAP by restricting soda and candy in some states. Is this the purview of state or federal governments? How do we actually get a nation of people who are eating more fruits and vegetables?

Brendan G. Carr 07:00

God, I hope that's not for me.

Kristina Peterson 07:02

For anyone.

Brendan G. Carr 07:03

How do we shape complicated human behavior?

Kristina Peterson 07:05

Yeah. Exactly. Yeah.

Brendan G. Carr 07:06

Right. Yeah. Turns out it might be complicated and it's because it's human behavior.

Kristina Peterson 07:11

Maybe just at the hospital level—

[Crosstalk]

Brendan G. Carr 07:12

Yeah. I would say, but our role in that, right? There's a big push there. Yeah. If we can reestablish—we have a trust problem in health care. I don't know if you guys saw what happened in the last five or so years. We have a trust problem in health care. We're working really hard to build back trust and to make sure that we take our place again as a voice that is meaningful to people and to their families as they're trying really, really hard to balance affordability with maybe a little bit of enjoyment of life. So, yes, the answer is, I'm glad to be here to say that we have to be front and center for this. We have to be one of the bright, shining examples of how we can do things. Like, it's very safe to go to our pediatricians' offices because it's a pediatrician's office, right? Nobody is ashamed to go to the doctor. But when you leave with bags of groceries discreetly, that can help your family to be healthy. It's very nice. Everybody goes to a farmers' market. We don't need to advertise that the assisted housing projects near our hospitals have access to that market on us. So, then, what are the next steps? The next steps are, how do we start to educate folks, not just the food security piece, but the nutritional piece? And we've not done enough of that. The places that exist is in people that already have advanced diseases, right? I don't know if people know. Maybe this room knows about this, but a lot of people do not understand how advanced these programs are. It's real. If you are diabetic, if you have heart failure, you can eat in a way that improves your health outcomes. I say it, and you saw me apologize three times about "Did you know this?" because people don't know this. This is not a thing that people recognize, that this is a targeted intervention. But I would say, so we have to do that to help people to eat correctly if it's going to, like a medication, improve their health outcomes. We have to do the foundational stuff to make sure that people have food, but we also have to keep thinking bigger about what our role in shaping education around this is, and shaping policy around this is, and setting examples for others are. There's a lot of work to do. This is a massive, massive, massive component of the cost of health care in America. And we just need to keep reminding ourselves of that. The interventions are straightforward, but they are not consistent with the actuarial calendar that we want them to be. They take years, decades, a generation.

Anne Filipic 09:43

Can I, just one quick addition to that?

Kristina Peterson 09:45

Yes, please.

Anne Filipic 09:45

Because I do think there is a question about policy design here that—and first, just want to say, I completely agree with Dr. Carr that this needs to be a conversation, yes, about food security, but also nutrition security. And from a policy design place, this is a question that has come up a lot in SNAP and SNAP program implementation, and actually, there's been a fair amount of research looking at different approaches to guide healthier choices in using SNAP benefits. And the question is sort of a carrot-versus-stick approach, right? And actually, the research shows that restrictions alone are not effective, in part because they're not really getting to the heart of the issue of what's guiding people's choices. So, some of it is education, but also very real issues of price and accessibility. And so, what has actually proven to be more effective is when you incentivize making healthy choices so that your SNAP dollars go farther when you're buying fresh produce. And if you're only using restrictions, of course, it limits what people can use those dollars for, but the research shows it doesn't actually lead to long-term healthier choices, right? And so, I do think that there can be places you look at the combination of incentives and restrictions, but the research is very clear that restrictions alone will not solve this problem.

Kristina Peterson 11:05

So, something like the GusNIP program, which gives you extra spending, purchasing power for fruits and vegetables—

Anne Filipic 11:13

Exactly!

Kristina Peterson 11:13

Is that an example of—where it's more useful?

Anne Filipic 11:15

Exactly!

Kristina Peterson 11:16

Yes. Okay, great. We used to have a pretty good sense of what levels of food insecurity in the country look like. Recently, USDA said it was ending its annual survey tracking food security levels. What are the implications of not having this federal data? And maybe Caitlin could jump in.

Caitlin Welsh 11:32

Yeah, happy to answer that question. Thanks so much for that great question. Thanks for having us here for this important conversation. Yes, about a year ago, USDA announced the termination of the *Household Food Security in the United States* report, which was a report that was put out publishing results of a survey that had been implemented annually for about 30 years. The reasons that USDA gave for terminating the survey and the report were that it was costly, politicized, and redundant, and I could take issue with all of those reasons. But what I will say is that it certainly wasn't politicized. It wasn't political or politicized. It grew out of a bipartisan effort, really tracing back to President Nixon, but President George H. W. Bush's presidency is when the survey was refined and then began to be implemented in the 1990s. And what we lose with this survey—actually, I'll also say that this was considered a gold standard in food security measurement. There were, again, many experts and many years put into determining what those questions should be and what the survey looked like. But considered a gold standard in food security measurement to the point that the UN adopted the same questions and applied them through a Gallup survey to around about 140 countries around the world, and the results of that became one of the indicators for the Sustainable Development Goal on reducing hunger globally. So, it was the main report on hunger and food insecurity in the United States, and also adopted and replicated in many countries around the world. What

we lose with the end of this survey and the end of the report is a number of things. We lose the ability to track trends in food security over time, and what we were able to see through decades of implementation of this survey is what it was that influenced food insecurity domestically. And I will say that food insecurity spiked at the onset of the Great Recession, and it didn't fall considerably until 2014, until the economy started to recover noticeably. So, by and large, food insecurity in our country is a function of the economy, is a function of economic health and poverty and that. Also, we lose the ability to compare food insecurity among subgroups of the population, by various characteristics of the individual and of the household. And also, we lose the ability to compare food insecurity among those subgroups to food security nationwide. And I'll give one example. There were a lot of groups that replicated USDA's survey so that they would have the ability to compare the results of their food insecurity among the population they were looking at to food insecurity nationwide. One was DoD, and they implemented a shorter form of USDA's survey. And by doing that, and by making the results available, USDA reported a few years ago that between 2018 and 2020, the rate of food insecurity among active-duty military members was 25.3 percent, compared to, among comparable individuals nationwide, 10.1 percent. So, the rate of food insecurity among active-duty military members was more than two and a half times the rate nationwide. Again, we won't be able to know what that is when we don't have a national average, and I could give lots of other examples of subgroups that we're losing the ability to make that comparison.

Kristina Peterson 15:04

Do we have a sense of why that is, about why food insecurity is higher within the military?

Caitlin Welsh 15:09

Yeah. At CSIS, we did some research on that over a couple of years, and a number of reasons that influenced that. And we started looking at this around the pandemic, when the number of military members who were availing themselves of food pantries and food banks around military installations was just—it was in the news a lot. There are food banks and food pantries outside of every major installation around the country. But with a lot of questions about food security, the solution doesn't lie in just access to food. I mean, the solutions lie much more upstream than that. One thing that we found that was, I think, a cause that we didn't expect to find was the culture of PCSing, a permanent change of station, and this was just one of several factors, but that made it so that families had to move places every couple of years. When a family relies on two incomes, then the spouse has a more difficult time having an income, and then you essentially have one income that you're relying on for a household that often has children. And so, that was one of the major factors that we found. Also, complications like different access to SNAP, depending on if you live on-base or off-base. I don't want to go down a rabbit hole on this.

Kristina Peterson 16:27

Yes. Yeah.

Caitlin Welsh 16:28

But anyway, the solution to food insecurity in the military is not more access to SNAP. They should not be relying on SNAP in the first place.

Kristina Peterson 16:34

Yeah. Interesting.

Brendan G. Carr 16:35

Can I have a random piggyback?

Kristina Peterson 16:36

Yes, please.

Brendan G. Carr 16:37

So, the number of young adults that are eligible to enter the military because of their underlying chronic disease and obesity is shocking. It's about half are too obese, and then of those, there's a portion that do not have the ability, because of their cardiovascular fitness, to enter. So, there's now camps ahead of time that give opportunity for folks to get to a position where they could enter the military. It's just, again, it's these two sides of the same coin. There's absolute insecurity. By the way, the two-family income thing—

Caitlin Welsh 17:14

Yeah.

Brendan G. Carr 17:15

Is an amazing causal pathway to have identified. And then there's this other side where we have made people so sick that they can't.

Caitlin Welsh 17:22

Yeah. And I will say, to piggyback on that, there are a lot of reasons that I consider food security in the United States to be a national security issue for the United States, but one is influence on military readiness, and this is not a new idea. And in fact, we had talked about before, but food insecurity domestically was one of the reasons that—it was one of the causes for the passage of the National School Meal Program, National School Lunch Act, I'm forgetting the exact name of it. But after World War II, malnutrition was identified to be one of the major causes for turning recruits away. And there's reporting of, there's a hearing before Congress, and essentially, the act was passed after this as a matter of national security to safeguard the health and well-being of our nation's children. So, it's not a new idea. I just think it needs more traction, more attention these days.

Kristina Peterson 18:15

Yeah. I want to come back to nutrition and school meals in a minute, but I did want to ask Javier about what you're seeing, not just in food security, but water insecurity in places like Gary, Indiana, where I know World Central Kitchen spent some time in. When you go to a place that has power outages, how does that affect people's ability to eat on a regular basis?

Javier Garcia 18:38

What I think we bring to the conversation of food security is a different dimension. That dimension is when the lights go off.

Kristina Peterson 18:45

Right.

Javier Garcia 18:47

When the lights go off, it's the same communities that are suffering food insecurity when the lights are on, in this case of Indiana, are the ones that suffer the most. And that's something that, unfortunately, we are seeing everywhere. The pattern that we see is that we rely on a food system, a supply chain that is built for

efficiency. It is not built for resilience. So, what happens? In the case of Indiana, the power was off for 15 days. About 70,000 people didn't have access to a grocery store. They didn't have refrigeration. So, the food is there. The issue is not the lack of food when that happened. The issue is getting the food to where the people are. And so, we are starting 30 distribution points. We are starting—opening farmers' market. So, we switch to a centralized distribution supply chain to a localized supply chain. And so, what comes back to are the same communities that are suffering the most when the lights—we call the lights are on—when the power is on, when there is not a conflict, and that rely on a supply chain that is so centralized that it cannot meet the demands of the crises that we're living. It is not only power goes off. We've seen, a few weeks ago, in Belgium and France and the UK, the cyberattacks that turn off the refrigeration systems of grocery stores.

Kristina Peterson 20:16

Right.

Javier Garcia 20:17

So, it goes back to the point I just mentioned about food security. For us, it is a national security issue. We see everywhere, from all the places that we are working right now internationally, how food becomes a weapon of war. And how do we solve that problem? And A, we need to recognize that food is critical infrastructure. It's not only for the conversation that we are having here about SNAP, about those communities that need that support. But who is in charge of food, feeding people when a crisis happens like Indiana, or could be something much bigger, a hurricane, an earthquake, a nationwide cyberattack? So, who is responsible for feeding the people? I think that's A, need to start by recognizing first that food is a critical infrastructure. And second, recognizing the supply chain, not only of this country, but any country, so centralized, are designed for efficiency but are not designed for resilience. A, we need to switch back to—with the alternative. The alternative is not building a second one. It's switching to local. Mention local farmers. Local farmers' market, we can connect with hundreds of thousands of farmers. Local restaurants are the modality that we work on, but needs to start by recognizing that, A, food, it's a critical infrastructure. B, that no government, not even the government in this country, is so powerful, so effective that can, when the worst day comes, are capable of feeding everyone. So, we need to be honest with the communities, with our neighbors, with our citizens, get them ready. And for them to know, A, what to expect and what not to expect, and what they are responsible for. But again, going back to A, recognizing first that food is critical infrastructure, and understanding who is in charge of feeding people going through a crisis.

Kristina Peterson 22:22

You guys are obviously working in very difficult situations. In crises, how much planning do you put into the nutritional aspect of what you're serving? When we're thinking about balancing just getting people fed but wanting it to be healthy, are you actively thinking, "How do we get vegetables and fruit into this meal?" Or are you just thinking, "How do we feed as many people as possible?"

Javier Garcia 22:44

Well, food comes first. So, feeding comes first, and it depends on—it's not the same in Gaza, where we can only afford to bring protein once a week. But for the nutrition, come from the approach that we see food. We are local. We like to see ourself as dot connectors. Neighbors, what we do is we bring an operation to something as simple as "Love your neighbor." Neighbors want to help their neighbors. What we bring, they don't know how—

Kristina Peterson 23:19

Mm-hmm.

Javier Garcia 23:20

I think I saw recently in a study saying that about one-third of Americans and US citizens want to help, but they don't know how. So, what we do is bring an operation to that simple "Love your neighbor." Love your neighbors come with local recipes, with local ingredients, with nutrition. But again, it depends on what is the context. But for us, food comes first. Food access, using an example of Gaza, is completely different from an emergency happening in Venezuela or Colombia right now. In Haiti, one thing that we've been doing over the last year that we're seeing a tremendous impact—in 2010, after the devastating earthquake, a lot of the humanitarian aid was based on bringing rice to the country. By then, Haiti was a net producer of rice. And what happened? They couldn't compete on the markets with rice prices. So, the infrastructure, the farmers stopped growing rice. So, we now, our program that we are bringing those local ingredients, supporting, giving those farmers, "We're going to be buying from you," at the same time that we are partnering with the local schools, local restaurants to buy from the farmers. So, when we start with a few farmers, now farmers are saying, "Oh, I want to plant more for next year." So, again, it's going back to, I think there's a link between nutrition and eating healthy and eating vegetables with switching back to the local supply chain, which is based on ingredients and what is accessible versus the centralized supply chains.

Kristina Peterson 24:52

Yeah. You mentioned the high cost of protein. I think food prices in general were on everyone's mind leading into the election. How does that affect food security? I've talked to food banks that have said it's just hard, the costs are so high. And what options are out there to try and bring the cost of food down?

Javier Garcia 25:15

Well, we have a little options. I can tell you that our food costs are going up about 20 percent to 30 percent—

Kristina Peterson 25:23

20 to 30 percent.

Javier Garcia 25:24

Which is a lot.

Kristina Peterson 25:25

Yeah.

Javier Garcia 25:25

In Gaza alone, for example, which is the place with the biggest volume, we've been cooking up to one million hot meals a day, and cooked meals, that when commodities go up, the impact is instant. So, our commodities have been going up about 20 percent to 30 percent. That means one simple thing: that we can produce 20 percent to 30 percent fewer meals. And when you are cooking a million meals, that's 200,000 or 300,000 fewer meals a day. So, that's an impact, and I go back to—we live and we're talking about food security here in the US, but the reality is we is a global economy. What happens in Iran, we see that has an impact not only in the region, it has an impact here. So, I think it's important that, A, going back to recognizing that food we recognize is national security, critical infrastructure. What is the impact an event is going to be having in the Middle East? What kind of impact going to be having here? So, I think

that comprehensive understanding of how everything is interconnecting when it comes to food, I think it needs to be part of any conversation that is regarding food security.

Kristina Peterson 26:36

I know we have El Niño on the horizon. It doesn't seem like food costs are poised to go down. What do other people think about how we get affordability more within grasp for people going to the grocery store every week or using their SNAP benefits? Are they not going as far?

[Crosstalk]

Caitlin Welsh 26:59

Globally, what we're looking at right now is this confluence of three crises, one being El Niño that you just mentioned, another one being a flare-up of violence in the Black Sea as part of Russia's war in Ukraine, which is threatening 30 percent of world wheat exports and a large percent of oilseeds and other commodities. And then the Iran war, which is restricting exports of energy and also fertilizers. And I don't mean to be glib, but of those three crises, two of those are man-made. And when we link conflict to food insecurity around the world, the rising number of conflicts in specific locations is the main cause for an increase in acute food insecurity in many countries around the world. And at the global level, we're seeing these conflicts also affect food security in other places. I mean, everywhere. When I think about Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, I don't know that any country didn't experience higher food prices or some food-related impact, be it to labeling of food or access to inputs or anything like that. And then when it comes to the Iran war right now, a lot of attention on fertilizers, again, because that region produces and exports a large share of nitrogen phosphate-based fertilizers. But also, energy was the main food-related issue out of that war because it's high energy prices that put immediate pressure on food prices, which is why, in June, the AP reported that, based on CPI data, food prices had increased 33 percent from 2019 until June of this past year. So, I think that there should be more attention, and this is part of what I do in my job, but should be more attention to the food-related impacts of these global crises. And then knowing that those are difficult solutions to put in place, I think the other solution we can look at is just support for individuals and for households through programs like SNAP and WIC in the United States and through a whole host of other programs globally, but the United States mainly looking at SNAP and WIC programs.

Anne Filipic 29:07

And I'd just say, back to my point at the top around this dual set of crises. A strong functioning safety net does not solve the rising cost of food, but it is exactly the moment that a strong social safety net is needed.

Kristina Peterson 29:21

Mm-hmm.

Anne Filipic 29:22

And we did research this summer, interviewing low-income families, and 80 percent said that they were struggling to get meals on the table for their families. There were stories of really impossible choices between "Do I pay the gas bill or do I buy food?" Yeah. Stories of parents skipping meals for their family. So, this is very real, and it's a moment that we should be investing in the safety net programs like SNAP. And back to, as I said, not just defending them, but really looking at how they can better meet the needs of families. So, it's a moment that we need to be asking that question, but it's certainly an odd time to be attacking these programs that are designed to help fill the gaps in moments like these.

Kristina Peterson 30:07

We're headed into two years of divided government, which always brings risks of government shutdowns, brinksmanship over the debt limit. Are you concerned that we could see SNAP caught up in this, as we did last fall with the government shutdown?

Anne Filipic 30:26

Yeah, it is an uncertain time as we proceed, but I will say this. I think we're actually seeing—the Farm Bill was sort of considered, I think, during the lame duck, sort of not going to be moving forward before the election. We've actually, this week, seen some potential progress where Republican leaders are saying they're willing… The big thing that Democrats have been holding strong on is connected to what I was saying earlier around SNAP and the cost-sharing provision that is just putting states in a nearly impossible position. And so, the number one thing that Democrats have been holding strong on is that, and Republicans have just in the last couple of days said they're willing to negotiate there. So, I think there is some potential that that moves forward. But just in terms of the general, as we move forward into the next couple of years in divided government, we certainly have seen that division. We have seen the results of that division, but we also have seen moments where we see bipartisan action. So, the prime example of division is that government shutdown that happened a year or so ago went so much farther than it should. It was the first time in the history of the SNAP program that benefits did not go out to constituents in the way that they should have. However, we also did see a bipartisan response. We saw senators, leaders on both sides of the aisle, eventually say, "This is unacceptable," and intervene and stop the shutdown. So, I do think, ultimately, part of what drew me to this work a few years ago was that it is addressing hunger as a bipartisan issue. It is something that I think, especially in this moment after the election, I have been happy to see leaders on, I think, both sides of the aisle communicating that they got the message, they heard the cry for help, and that the American people are expecting answers, not divisiveness, out of their leaders. So, I do think we're at a moment. I am not naive about any of it, but I do think we're at a moment that the American people have spoken. We have a history of making this a bipartisan issue, and it's a moment that hopefully our leaders step in and lead us forward.

Caitlin Welsh 32:31

Yeah. Just another note on shutdowns. As you mentioned, and depending on the length of the shutdown, shutdowns can complicate enrollment and SNAP benefits and access to those benefits. But it also, during periods of shutdown, you see increases in food insecurity rates, particularly locally, where there's a large percent of the population who rely on federal paychecks. So, you see a higher number of people accessing food pantries and food banks during shutdowns, and that's one of the reasons that the Capital Area Food Bank saw that, in 2025, it was the highest level of food insecurity regionally in DC, Maryland, and Virginia since they've been implementing their survey, so even higher than the pandemic.

Brendan G. Carr 33:11

Can I just add in here? I was in DC having some dialogues with elected officials and it turns out we get ready for that. We talk about our issues in health care, and the only issue that one of the folks that we met with wanted to talk about was ag policy and the impact of food on health care. It turns out I would lean on any of them to answer that question instead of me. They just weren't there with me that day.

[Laughter]

But I sort of say that to say that the recognition—because there is hope—I think the recognition that these things are connected is incredibly important. And a piece of my—and then listening to Javier talk about who's responsible, who in the community is responsible for when something goes bump in the night, to make sure that people have food. We think like that all the time, except not like that. We don't think about food. We in health care think about the fact that there are very, very vulnerable folks, electricity-dependent, that need near-continuous or frequent medical intervention, and it turns out we know who they are. There are federal government programs and CMS, using CMS data, that identified very vulnerable

people so that there could be targeted outreach if and when a weather-related event happened, to make sure that they had electricity, that they had whatever they needed in their home, or that we brought them to the hospital. But we never pushed so far as to say, "Do they have the other components of the social safety net?" as a health-care entity. But we are a large employer in Manhattan. We're all over, but our biggest hospital is at the intersection of the Upper East Side and East Harlem. We have a very, very varied population, and I should spend more time thinking about—we think of health care as a component of the health security apparatus. COVID, good example of that, right? Any kind of terror event or weather displacement event are good examples of that. Cyber that shuts down people's ability to use the technology they need to stay alive is a good example of that. But I've not reached as far as to think I'm a massive hub in many of the communities, a massive employer in many of the communities, and what should we be thinking about as our responsibility when the lights go off to make sure that people can be provided for.

Javier Garcia 35:33

Yeah, I think it's touching a little more on that. I think when the lights go off, so our lights today, our value proposition is not food, it is urgency. And that urgency, especially for these communities that we're talking about—

Brendan G. Carr 35:47

Yeah.

Javier Garcia 35:47

—heat right now, that already have that dependency on this safety net, and they are more at stress, and they cannot go home without food for more than 48 hours. Urgency becomes the commodity. It is not the food. So, and who's responsible for making those decisions? And who's in charge? I think that ownership, again, it starts with recognizing the importance of food and also the importance of the urgency. I think while we, as an organization, what we bring to the table and in our value proposition is the urgency. Recognizing that the governments need some more time to… We're seeing everywhere. It's not something that I can talk about related to any inefficiency of any government. Here is everywhere. Governments, they're big, they're slow, they need time. We fill in the gaps. And into those gaps, it is a recognizing that someone needs to be in charge and bringing that urgency to people need to eat today, not seven days from today. But who is responsible with—unfortunately, the idea of conflict has changed, and it can be done remotely with viruses and computers.

Brendan G. Carr 37:04

Yeah.

Javier Garcia 37:04

So, how we as a society, how do we get ready? On this conversation that we're having here today, how do we bring resilience to our food systems? How do we localize our responses? Because that's the only way. We need to localize. Again, there's nothing better than the who, the what, and the when than a neighbor. What are the roads that are open? What is the food? Who knows a bakery that can start baking tonight? And connecting those dots with that urgency can only happen at the local level.

Kristina Peterson 37:36

I just wanted to say that in a little bit more than five minutes, we're going to start taking audience questions, if you want to scan the QR code and submit them. We will get to them in a little bit. Javier, are

you guys planning more now to respond to food scarcity because of cyberattacks? The freezer shortages in the supermarkets were wild. Is that something that's on your planning dossier now?

Javier Garcia 37:59

We are light in the planning. Because planning, unfortunately, there is only so much you can plan.

Kristina Peterson 38:04

Yeah.

Javier Garcia 38:05

We like to say the plan has to be good enough and flexible enough to be able to adapt. Unfortunately, one of the benefits that give us that flexibility is that we can adapt to that kind of incidents. But at the end of the day, the cause becomes irrelevant. Whether it's a cyberattack, it's a conflict, or it's a weather-related event, the cause becomes irrelevant because it is, at the end of the day, someone needs to eat.

Kristina Peterson 38:33

Yeah.

Javier Garcia 38:35

And you focus into not the food, but the urgency. That gives you the flexibility to be able to adapt and respond within the urgency that that event is creating. But there is no doubt that we're seeing in Ukraine, which we've been feeding there for four years, that food is being seen as a weapon of war. The disruption of the food supply chains, and we're seeing in Kyiv, people don't have access to electricity, to water. That's infrastructure. To food. We need to understand that. But the planning—I was at an event a few weeks ago and talking to governors about, we are much better at planning what's happening in—I won't say the name of the city—in this city a few years ago. It would not happen again. But the reality is that you have planned for that event that happened a few years ago, but I'm pretty sure, because we've seen it, that there's not even hurricanes that we're responding to in Florida every year for the last 10 years. Not a single one has had the same impact on the same community. Sometimes it's wind damage, sometimes it's water. So, the planning has to be, A, recognizing that you will not be able to do everything and give the flexibility to be able to adapt to whatever the cause might be.

Kristina Peterson 40:03

Yeah. You mentioned that governments can be hindered in their ability to act swiftly because they're just not as efficient and nimble as smaller groups like yours. What should the government be doing to be more responsive to people who need food aid to connect the health care and food arms together? How do we connect food and health systems in a way that makes everything run better?

Anne Filipic 40:28

Yeah, I can kick us off here. And I was grateful to Dr. Carr for sort of introducing this concept of integration, right? Because I do think, as we think about what the future holds, it's been a moment of great disruption. There is part of this that is rebuilding, but it is also making sure we don't return to the status quo. And that is true in terms of how we think about individual programs. But in some ways, I think at least an equal opportunity, if not a bigger opportunity, is around this integration piece, right? We know that healthy food and health care, strong health outcomes, are connected, but the systems that people access for each of these things are fragmented, right?

Kristina Peterson 41:12

Mm-hmm.

Anne Filipic 41:12

And so, there are some really, and not just, I think, fundamental ideas, but actions that we're seeing happen across the country. We at Share Our Strength lead a coalition called the Medicaid Food Security Network, where we're working with local partners, other nonprofits, state agencies, providers, in terms of how can we move some of these pieces forward? And a few examples. In Georgia, our local partner has been working with the Medicaid and the WIC directors for some back-end work of sort of how do we facilitate data sharing? Georgia's a state where there's a 60 percent gap in WIC participation. And there's some obvious places where those that are participating in Medicaid would certainly benefit from participating in the WIC program. How do we, behind the scenes, facilitate that? In the state of Oklahoma, legislation was passed that achieved a number of things, including streamlining the application process. So, this is more of a front-end fix regarding Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC. And in Michigan, among other states, there's been work to actually use the Medicaid program to pay for food programs such as medically tailored meals, prescription produce, healthy food packs. So, there are plenty of examples that we're seeing of how policymakers and implementers and hospital leaders and local organizations are working together to stitch this together. I think the issue we have is that those are more the rarity than the norm, right? And I think, especially in this age of technology transformation, the solutions exist for us, right? And so, some of this is a real mindset shift of how do we, as many of our private-sector partners do very well, how do we design around for that user experience? And we can bring all of this together, but so often, at least in terms of the federal programs I work on, those are designed to make it easier for the federal government to implement it, not easier for everyday people to use it. And so, to me, that is the fundamental transformation that I would like to see, and it will take the leaders of all of these different sectors to come together, but there are examples of how it's being done well.

Brendan G. Carr 43:24

But it requires that narrative, that narrative of hope and alignment around a social safety net that includes some key components of housing, nutrition, health, a couple others. I actually thought we were going to have a session where we didn't talk about AI, and then you snuck it in there, right? So, if AI and technology is going to create abundance, my God, right? We are waiting for a vision that says there is a foundational set of things that we should do for the American public, and amongst these include some of these social determinants. It is a wonderful way to sort of inject hope into a conversation that has been pretty heavy to this point, and at a time when many of us look to government worried about whether or not they are going to be able to help us to find a path forward. I just wanted to say thanks for conjuring that image about really what that could look like, especially if there is abundance in a way and efficiency is created in a way that allows us to have the one thing we've never really had, at least we've told ourselves we don't have, which is discretionary funding to pay for some of the things that we think are foundational to human health.

Kristina Peterson 44:43

This week, USDA made some changes that restrict states' ability to let people be eligible for SNAP if they are receiving a kind of temporary assistance, TANF, and I think there's some concern that this could lead to fraud. How do you balance wanting to make sure the programs are not allowing any kind of fraud with creating these sorts of efficiencies?

Anne Filipic 45:10

So yes, fraud, that was actually a big part of the storyline behind H.R. 1 implementation and the changes to SNAP.

Brendan G. Carr 45:17

Medicaid.

Anne Filipic 45:18

Yeah. And I think probably all of us have a concern in making sure that we avoid fraud. I think research shows, in terms of SNAP, that fraud is actually more an issue of sort of card skimming, of actually stealing from the recipients, is the number one issue of fraud. And so, there, back to technology, we actually have solutions that we could use to implement that, that we have not been doing yet. So, I think fraud absolutely is an issue. I think the way that the story is told about what is at the root of it is generally wrong and often used to attack programs as opposed to strengthen them.

Kristina Peterson 45:58

Okay. Let's switch to some questions from the audience. Thank you to everyone sending them in. This is a question about how food banks can help in this effort. Beyond SNAP, what are ways food banks can become focused on metabolic health nutrition and not simply solving for hunger? And is that the role of food banks?

Caitlin Welsh 46:17

Can I jump in on this question?

Kristina Peterson 46:19

Yeah.

Caitlin Welsh 46:19

So, I mentioned the Capital Area Food Bank's annual report. We actually had the honor of helping launch that report at CSIS in September. And they talked about trends in food insecurity in the region, talked about their operations. They also put forward long-term solutions to food insecurity in our region. Not one had to do with having more food at food banks or with food itself. It was all about things like, for example, if someone in our region is trying to upskill to get a new degree or something, to have wraparound services to support that person and help that person access food, and their family access food, as they're trying to be in a position to get a higher income. So, I thought that it was very interesting that even the Capital Area Food Bank, which does fantastic work around our region, didn't highlight food banks as the long-term solution. And I had a conversation years ago with someone who also was active in that space, who said, "We can't food bank or food pantry our way out of food insecurity." I just think that's important to remember domestically and globally. The problem might manifest in lack of access to food and lack of access to nutritional food, but the long-term solutions don't rely simply in providing that food on an emergency basis.

Brendan G. Carr 47:29

I totally agree, but I also heard another piece in there, which was the nutrition piece. If we can separate those—the question becomes then, how do we get the American public to think differently about nutrition? If we could achieve some sort of food security, how do we then get to that next level? I think about most of us have a family member or loved one who's had some sort of a cancer, and over the next last couple decades, you've started now to hear stories about, oh, they identified the cancer and now they got the biopsy, and now they did the genetics, and now they're targeting the cancer differently based on the genetics. We waited until something bad happened, and then we sort of created a targeted intervention.

So, we're at a place where we're really close to having your whole genome, and then telling you long before you have the thing manifest what's going to manifest, and we can intervene upstream. I think of this a lot the same way. I think of if we're talking about changing the way a nation, the world, thinks about eating and the way that they eat. It's hard enough to think about getting everybody's genome and then intervening early. It's way harder to think about changing the way that the planet eats. It's also, maybe not AI-level abundance, but it's also a massive financial lever that we have at our fingertips to shape long-term health outcomes and long-term chronic disease management and the expense of that by shaping the upstream cause of that.

Kristina Peterson 49:06

I was listening to a Kraft Heinz presentation yesterday, and they said that one-third of dinners in the US are prepared in five minutes or less. So, I think that's a reality for people, too. It's not just knowledge, it's time and—

Brendan G. Carr 49:18

That's emergency doctors or all people?

Kristina Peterson 49:21

We'll get them to query emergency doctors separately. Yeah. But I think that's another piece of this is people could be working several jobs or coming home really late, and even if you know you should be roasting a sweet potato, that's going to take 40 minutes, so—

Anne Filipic 49:34

Actually, I was going to mention that because that is exactly something that came up in the research I mentioned that we conducted with families with low incomes this summer, and that was, with the rising cost of groceries and gas and everything, that more people were taking on second and third jobs, and more people were saying, "I do not have time to cook a home-cooked meal." Right? So, it is interesting the things that are a step or two removed, but all come back to this core point of what are the barriers that stand between people and healthy food? And I think really understanding that in depth, again, from the eyes of the people that we're trying to serve, is the key piece to building the integrations that are actually effective.

Brendan G. Carr 50:15

And maybe, in a brutal mercenary way, saying there may be a way to save long-term dollars by investing front-end.

Anne Filipic 50:25

Mm-hmm.

Caitlin Welsh 50:25

Yeah. Can I jump in too? I actually looked that up before this panel, but the cost of treating diet-related diseases and the economic cost of lost productivity in 2023, Tufts University estimated that to be $1.1 trillion. That was in 2023. So, I think that there's an enormous economic case to be made for improving access to nutritious food. I also want to say, to bring it back to the first question that you asked me about USDA's survey, which again is the gold standard, and there was already money appropriated to continue it for the rest of this administration, so really, it should be picked up. I'm hopeful it'll be picked up again by another administration. But that's not to say there aren't improvements to be made to it, because when you look at the 18 questions that are asked in the fullest version of the survey, only one of those questions,

I think, has to do with the quality of food that's consumed. All of the rest of the questions have to do with just food being consumed, which gets to something that we've all been talking about, which is just solving for hunger. When that survey was designed over 30 years ago, I think that consumption of ultra-processed foods and time poverty, all these things were not the same issues that they are today. So, I'm hopeful that the survey will be implemented again and also improved upon so that we're actually asking households about the quality of the food that they're consuming and the nutritional value of the food that they're consuming, so that we can then have some numbers on which to base policy that's going to encourage consumption of healthier food.

Brendan G. Carr 51:48

Can I just pick up on that trillion-dollar number? Because people talk about this. Thank you for bringing that up. People talk about this and say we pay for food twice—

Unidentified speaker 51:55

Yeah.

Brendan G. Carr 51:55

—the first time when you pay for the food, the second time when you pay for the chronic disease that food costs downstream.

Unidentified speaker 51:59

Wow.

Kristina Peterson 52:01

There are a couple of questions here about incentives and if we should be building in incentives at the grocery store level or at the private sector level to help combat food insecurity and nutritional inadequacy. I know California is in the process of rolling out a non-UPF label that grocery stores then have to give more prominent display to, which I think is an interesting state effort.

Brendan G. Carr 52:27

I'm happy to say, back once upon a time, we did this in hospital cafeterias. Just placement matters, cost, price matters. And at the same time, I will say that we have failed a couple times because of choice. Our employees want what they want. A 12-hour, which becomes a 14-hour shift, is exhausting, and sometimes comfort food is comfort food, right? And that is what you're up against, like that—and I'm as guilty as everybody, and yes, it's french fries. That's a real consideration. Grocery store is an easier and safer place than a hospital cafeteria, but I don't know the science on it and how well it works. I defer to anybody who does. Behavioral economics, I deeply believe in. We can shape behavior.

Anne Filipic 53:16

Yeah, I think so. I'd also just point back to, I do think we fundamentally understand education, accessibility, price. There are some fundamental things that are the barriers, and I think focusing on that, there are probably also some clever fixes, right, beyond that. But I would argue not to let that become a distraction from these core things that we know are the barriers that stand with families.

Kristina Peterson 53:43

There's a question about nutrition education, and I know that the SNAP Education program, the funding for that was eliminated. That's the traditional federal nutrition education program for SNAP households. What do you think fills that void?

Anne Filipic 54:02

I think fundamentally, I would argue a challenge is, like, when you—and the Food Security Index is another example of this—that there are things that the government is particularly well-positioned to do, and when you pull it away, there are others, nonprofit organizations, providers, and others, who can help fill the gap. But ultimately, you're not going to fill the gap of what the government was doing, right? And I think that is something we just need to fundamentally understand, and goes back to—that's something, your quote about food banks, and we're not going to food bank our way out of this. That was something I heard a lot during the government shutdown last year, right? And a lot in the context of the cuts to SNAP through H.R. 1. So, yes, I think there are a lot of organizations, a lot of leaders on the local level who are trying to fill that gap, but we need the government to lead these programs for a reason.

Brendan G. Carr 54:55

I think it's important to acknowledge, though, that we have made tons and tons of progress in the overall understanding and knowledge about nutrition in the American public.

Kristina Peterson 55:03

Mm-hmm.

Brendan G. Carr 55:04

And now, yes, populations have been left out, and we have to always call that out. It's essential. We can't forget. But on average, the knowledge that people have is incredible. And just think, 20, 30 years ago, remember early days when people started telling you what the calories were? We used to not be able to look at what the calories were in what you were about to eat, and now it's everywhere, and now you can take a picture with your phone and it will tell you probably what it is, or you can scan the QR code and it'll tell you exactly what it is. Or you can watch TikTok, and it will teach you a million food hacks. But I'm raising kids, and their knowledge is way more than mine was when I graduated from medical school. Also, their misinformation is greater than what mine was when I was coming up. The good with the bad.

Kristina Peterson 55:52

We've brought it back to seed oils. I knew we could do it.

Brendan G. Carr 55:54

Yeah. There, I got you. I'm your plant.

Kristina Peterson 55:57

Caitlin mentioned ultra-processed foods. We are expecting to see a definition of what the federal government considers an ultra-processed food. And the reason I bring that up is because Health Secretary Kennedy has said he may want to use that for a front-of-pack label or maybe as restrictions within SNAP. Do you see that as a way to make SNAP a provider of healthier food, to try and limit what's ultra-processed within it? It can be tricky. As for yogurt, some yogurts would probably be considered ultra-processed, some not. Same with bread. It's the food industry's favorite subject.

Brendan G. Carr 56:33

She's definitely not asking me.

Javier Garcia 56:37

Not me either.

Kristina Peterson 56:39

All right. Well, we can wait and see what happens there.

Brendan G. Carr 56:42

Wait, Kristina, you can answer the question. We know you're a resource.

Anne Filipic 56:45

Yeah, what are your thoughts?

Brendan G. Carr 56:45

What are your thoughts?

Kristina Peterson 56:46

Well, I think we will see a definition come out in a little bit. The food industry says it will make food more expensive, but I think there is still an effort to see if that can be used for some sort of label, and yeah, I don't know. We'll see. Okay. Are there any other big opportunities you see for the private sector to be involved here?

Anne Filipic 57:12

I would go back to, and I talked about integration. I sort of approached that more from the government lane. But I do think this piece, and I think Dr. Carr was touching on it, but we have had some great partnerships. NYC Health + Hospitals, we've been working with in terms of how do you bring opportunities for education and enrollment in programs like SNAP and WIC into a clinical setting? I think understanding that there are administrative barriers to do that, understanding that in a clinical setting, there is a whole lot that is being managed already. But I think we've found some really powerful examples of how to do that in a manageable way that can lead to stronger outcomes. So, I do think we have talked a lot about the government interventions and the… important role that we need strong government programs. But absolutely, there's a role for private sector leaders and the systems, right? I think it goes back to, again, where are there opportunities to redesign, reimagine systems in a way that's sort of rooted around the lived experience?

Brendan G. Carr 58:16

I think incentives are important and consumerism is important, too. As I said before, we asked Big Food to solve for cheap calories. They did a great job. We have to just ask a different question now. Who has eaten gluten-free bread and pancakes 10 years ago and again recently? It's really good now, right? It's an interesting thing, right?

Kristina Peterson 58:38

Right. And GLP-1s, I think, are an incentive for them to make more nutrient-dense food as consumers seek that out—

Brendan G. Carr 58:44

Oh, that's a perfect connection. Yeah. I think that there are amazingly good actors in the corporate realm, in private sector realm, and it is on either the American public to demand it through consumerism or the government to help to create incentives that make sense.

Kristina Peterson 59:01

Yeah. Maybe just our final question. Someone was asking if the definition of food insecurity should include a nutritional element.

Caitlin Welsh 59:08

It actually does, both at the global level and the domestic level—

Kristina Peterson 59:11

There we go.

Caitlin Welsh 59:12

Yeah, I could rattle them off, but we have 40 seconds left. But it does. It does, and I think that the fact that we create this other term, nutrition security, means that we don't emphasize the nutrition aspect of the global or domestic definition enough. But essentially, I think of it as nutrition security. If you only have access to food that is not nutritious, then you are not food secure.

Kristina Peterson 59:30

Right. Great. Well, thank you so much to all of our panelists, and thanks to the audience.

[Applause]

Announcer 59:36

We hope you enjoyed—

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