Making History: The Academy and the White House Conference

September 28, 2022, was an opportunity of a lifetime: I was honored to represent you at the second-ever White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health. The excitement in the room was palpable; every attendee felt the historic nature of the event and the clear necessity of addressing these issues. Academy members and staff were deeply involved in developing the conference, and we look forward to keeping the momentum going, and continuing to serve as a resource in shaping the future of health and nutrition in America.

The conference was moved forward by a bipartisan group led by U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern (Mass.), Sen. Mike Braun (Ind.), Sen. Corey Booker (N.J.) and the late Rep. Jackie Walorski (Ind.). In every session, from speaker after speaker and from conversations I had with other participants, I was so pleased to see a spirit of bipartisanship pervading the conference. It is clear to me that we, the people, can achieve the goals of the conference by the target date of 2030 by working together across party lines.

The White House Conference made clear what we Academy members already knew: Hunger has a huge impact on quality of life. Everyone needs to have access to good, healthy food. We cannot overcome this problem in silos; we must work together on everything from the food supply and agriculture to nutrition education of the public—including school meals. It is clear that current levels of reimbursements are not enough, there is not adequate equipment, and there is not enough nutrition education. Every time universal school meals were mentioned at the White House Conference, there was an unbelievable amount of applause from the audience.

On the day following the White House Conference, the Academy held an online town meeting to reflect on the conference and update our members on what comes next. I noted the sad fact that the U.S. leads so many nations in cases of chronic disease and that there is a disproportionate number of people from underrepresented groups with preventable chronic conditions.

Another takeaway from the White House Conference for me: the need to integrate nutrition and health. We have to connect the path from the doctor’s office to the hospital and to the community. Universal screening for food insecurity is a must: Assess who is the patient/client, what is their level of food security/ insecurity and then connect that prioritize their nutritional health.

We can better make connections and serve our customers via increased reimbursement and nutrition counseling for obesity and diet-related diseases. We have been advocating for these services as part of the Treat and Reduce Obesity Act; TROA would “amend the Social Security Act to enable the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to enhance beneficiary access to the most qualified existing Medicare providers of intensive behavioral therapy for obesity, resulting in decreased health care costs and lower obesity rates among older adults.”

So many wonderful ideas were presented at the White House Conference, and we already are seeing great things happen. In the weeks immediately following the Conference, I attended two follow-up meetings: the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Nutrition Security and Healthcare Summit; and the Industry Collective Commitments in Action conference, sponsored by FMI — The Food Industry Association and Tufts University. And groups of Academy members are coming together to see how they can be actively engaged in meeting the White House Conference’s goals.

That is so important, because it is now time to take action. The White House asked national organizations to submit commitments to end hunger and increase healthful eating and physical activity by 2030. I am proud that our Academy has made a number of commitments to get it done:

1. The Academy will accelerate efforts to diversify the allied health workforce, including the field of nutrition and dietetics.
2. By leveraging the role of nutrition and dietetics professionals within different settings to achieve nutrition security, the Academy will advance efforts to bridge gaps in nutrition services from clinical care to the community.
3. The Academy will advance efforts to increase access to healthy school meals for all students.
Read much more detail about our commitments on eatrightPRO.org.¹

My fellow members: The ball is in our court, exactly where it should be. I can’t wait to work together with you to achieve the White House Conference’s goals and the Academy’s commitments!

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References