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# Land of Plenty

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**How Should We Ensure that People Have the Food They Need?**



# About This Issue Guide

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The purpose of this issue guide is to help us talk productively about a difficult issue that concerns all of us.

## Deliberation

It's not a debate. It's not a contest. It's not even about reaching agreement or seeing eye-to-eye. It's about looking for a shared direction, guided by what we most value.

It's about examining the costs and consequences of possible solutions to daunting problems, and finding out what we, as a society, would or would not accept as a solution.

## A Framework

This guide outlines several alternative ways of looking at the issue, each rooted in a shared concern. It provides strategic facts associated with each approach, and suggests the benefits and drawbacks of possible solutions. We engage in deliberation by:

- ▶ getting beyond the initial positions we hold to our deeper motivations—that is, the things we most care about, such as safety, freedom, or fairness;
- ▶ carefully weighing the views of others and recognizing the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable;
- ▶ working through the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what we—and others—consider valuable.

It is important to remember that, as a group, we are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation, and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as human beings and Americans, rather than as liberals and conservatives.

## How the Guide was Developed

Teams of people from a dozen communities across the country helped develop this guide. They talked with local residents about their concerns and ideas related to food, gathered information from experts, and created the framework for the guide. Their organizations are listed on the last page of the guide.

## One Effective Way to Hold a Deliberative Forum

1. Introduce the topic to be deliberated.
2. Ask people to describe how the issue has affected them—OR—Ask people how the issue has played out in their community.
3. Consider each option one at a time. Allow equal time for each.
4. Review the conversation as a group, identifying any areas of common ground as well as issues that must still be worked through. Allow enough time for this.

Forums typically last two hours, more or less. Forums can also be held as a series of several meetings, giving people more time to talk and consider what actions they might take.

## Ground Rules for a Forum

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion:

- ▶ **Focus on the options**
- ▶ **All options should be considered fairly**
- ▶ **No one or two individuals dominate**
- ▶ **Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere**
- ▶ **Everyone is encouraged to participate**
- ▶ **Listen to each other**





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# Land of Plenty

## How Should We Ensure that People Have the Food They Need?

**T**he nation's food system affects all of us, for better and for worse.

We have much to be grateful for, on the one hand. Our farms, ranches, and fisheries produce more food than we need to feed our entire population. We have what many experts say is the safest food in the world. Most grocery shoppers can find an ample array of produce and other fresh food year-round and within a couple miles of home.

But all is not well in our land of plenty. Our communities still include families who run out of food before the end of the month, children who come to school hungry, and people on fixed incomes who sometimes have to choose between food and other necessities.

Our concerns go beyond people having *enough* to eat. We also need food that is nutritious. We must have grocery stores that are within our reach with whatever transportation is

available to us. We need information, skills, and time for preparing meals. We value food that supports our cultural and family traditions. And finally, we count on a food system that is responsible and sustainable over the long term.

These hopes are echoed in a report by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council, which convened a diverse group of experts to examine the food system and ways to assess its impact. The group proposed that an ideal food system should “support human health; be nutritionally adequate and affordable and provide accessible food for all in a manner that provides a decent living for farmers and farm workers; and protect natural resources and animal welfare while minimizing environmental impacts.”

By “food system,” we mean all the various steps required to bring food from producers to our plates. A food system involves four interdependent parts: production, processing, distribution, and consumption. In each step, decisions must be made about methods and efficiencies, including how we reduce, divert, or dispose of the waste produced.

Food systems can be local, regional, national, or global in scale. Together, these systems have profound effects on the economy. According to the United

## The Food System At a Glance

Processing involves changing plants or animals into what we recognize and buy as food. Processing involves different steps for different kinds of food.

Preparation includes getting food ready to eat and serving it at home and in restaurants, schools, hospitals, and other institutions.



Production involves growing the plants and raising the animals we use for food. Most food comes from domesticated animals and plants, and some foods are caught or harvested from the wild.

Distribution involves getting food from the grower or processing plant directly to consumers or to grocery stores, restaurants, and other entities that sell food to consumers.

Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention “Food Production Chart”

States Department of Agriculture (USDA), American consumers, businesses, and government entities spent \$1.46 trillion on food and beverages in 2014. One in every seven workers in the United States is employed in food-system jobs (production, processing, distribution, retail, and service) according to *No Piece of the Pie*, a 2016 report from the Food Chain Workers Alliance.

There is no one “right” way to build a food system that works for all of us. Rather, it is an ongoing process of examining issues and considering various actions and their potential consequences. Many of these issues are more than professional or technical matters; they also require the active participation of community members regarding what matters most to us.



## A Framework for Deliberation

This issue guide asks: How we can build a food system that works not just for some of us, but for all of us? It presents three different options for deliberation, each rooted in something held widely valuable, and each presenting a different way of looking at the problem. No one option offers the “correct” approach. Each includes drawbacks and trade-offs that we will have to face if we are to make progress on this issue. The options are presented as a starting point for deliberation.

### **Option 1** focuses on ensuring that people have access to nutritious food.

Despite our nation’s abundance of food, some people still don’t have enough to eat, which undermines their health, productivity, and overall well-being. According to this option, we need a food system that ensures everyone of a stable source of affordable, nutritious food. We must strengthen our school nutrition and food-assistance programs for low-income families, as well as improve access to fresh food in rural and low-income communities.

### **Option 2** is about paying more attention to the multiple benefits of food.

We have drifted away from traditions and principles that once helped us enjoy a healthier relationship to food, according to this option. We all need to be better informed about the foods we choose, their nutritional value, and how they’re produced and processed. Rather than allowing food advertisements to determine our choices, we should pay closer attention to what we value about our food, traditions, and well-being.

### **Option 3** calls upon all of us to be good stewards of the food system.

We are not managing our food system as well as we should, according to this option. We must do more to safeguard the quality and availability of food for generations to come. Good stewardship is needed at every link in the food-supply chain, from the seeds we plant to the reduction of food waste. We must preserve our natural resources, choosing sustainable methods of production and strengthening our food and farm workforce.



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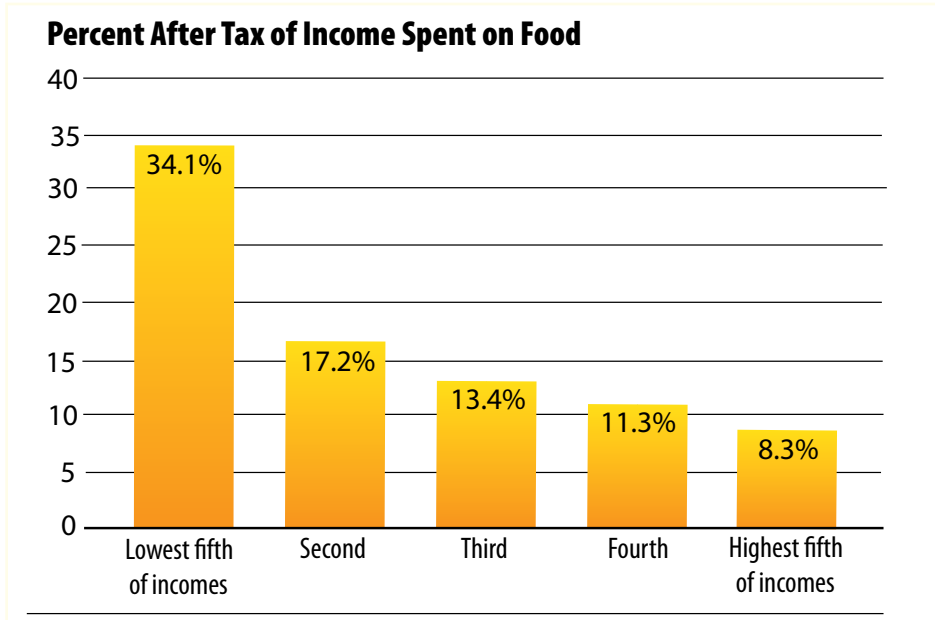
## Improve Access to Nutritious Food

“I will always let them eat before I eat,” said Neidra Dowe, a wife and mother of three in Pontiac, Michigan.

The Dowe family had to tighten their belts after disability forced Neidra to leave her job. Her husband had only been able to find part-time work. They did their best to piece together what they needed from his paycheck, her monthly disability allowance, and public-assistance programs like SNAP (formerly food stamps) and Medicaid. They strived to cook nutritious meals and shop for bargains at the grocery store. Still, Dowe knew that, by the end of each

month, there might not be enough food to go around. Her story is featured in *Small Plates: Five Personal Stories of Food Insecurity in Metropolitan Detroit*, published by the Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan on the Fair Food Network website.

The Dowe family’s story is all too common. According to the USDA study *Household Food Security in the United States in 2015*, almost 15.8 million US households—about one in eight—experienced food insecurity, which means they don’t have consistent access to the food they need to lead healthy, active lives. The odds are



Source: USDA, *Food spending as a share of income declines as income rises, 2014*

the worst for households with children, especially single-parent families. Black and Hispanic households, with and without children, also have higher rates of food insecurity.

The consequences of food insecurity are far reaching, affecting our health, daily activities, relationships, and sense of well-being. It undermines children’s success in school and the safety and productivity of workers. *Hunger in America*, a 2011 study by the Center for American Progress, estimated that hunger costs our nation at least \$167.5 billion annually in lost economic productivity, poor educational outcomes, avoidable health-care costs, and contributions from private food charities.

The chief barrier to food access is affordability. While the cost of food is relatively low in the United States, it consumes a painful chunk of the annual incomes of low-income families—more than a third for the poorest 20 percent of households. The wealthiest 20 percent spend only a tenth of their incomes on food, according to the USDA Economic Research Service.

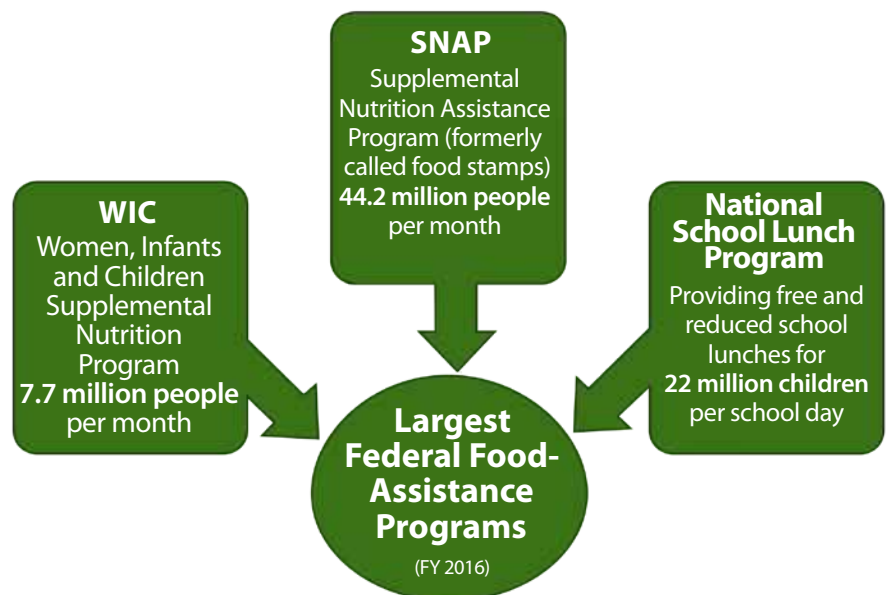
Food-assistance programs range from local food pantries and kitchens to national programs for people who are income-eligible. Like the Dowe family, most households receiving federal food assistance include employed adults, but they don’t earn enough money to make ends meet.

The largest federal food-assistance programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),

the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program, and child nutrition programs. SNAP (formerly called Food Stamps) helps low-income people afford a nutritionally adequate diet. WIC provides nutritious foods, nutritional counseling, breastfeeding support, and health-care referrals to low-income women, infants, and children. Child nutrition programs include free and reduced school lunches and other food programs in schools, child-care centers, and after-school programs.

The availability of grocery stores and the transportation needed to reach them are additional obstacles, particularly in rural and low-income communities. The USDA estimated that 2.1 million US households are more than a mile from a supermarket and do not have a vehicle.

Despite the challenges, Dowe does what it takes to feed her family with the resources available to them. “We’re a bit more health conscious than most people are. Eating well means making concessions in other areas. It may not always be what we want to eat, but it’s there.”



Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service Programs (RNS) data tables, 2016





## What We Could Do

### Strengthen Federal Food Safety-Net Programs

SNAP, the largest federal food program, serves households with incomes that are less than 130 percent of the federal poverty level. Two-thirds of all SNAP benefits are paid to households with children. The vast majority of SNAP recipients are individuals who are working, are looking for work, are unable to work (due to disability or dependent-care responsibilities) or are not expected to work (because they are children or seniors).

In a 2015 report, the White House Council of Economic Advisors cited a growing body of research on the effectiveness of SNAP in reducing food insecurity. The advisors also expressed concerns that “the current level of benefits often cannot sustain families through the end of the month. Recent research suggests that modestly higher benefit levels would lead to further reductions in food insecurity, and to a wide range of additional short-run and long-run health, educational, and economic benefits.”

Only three-quarters of people eligible for SNAP are enrolled. Community organizations are using a variety of strategies to reach out and enroll eligible families and help SNAP recipients stretch their food budgets. One such effort is a program started by Michigan-based Fair Food Network in 2009. The Double Up Food Bucks program doubles the value of SNAP benefits spent at

participating farmers’ markets and grocery stores, helping families bring home more fruits and vegetables while supporting local farmers.



*Community Supported Agriculture members pick up their weekly share of vegetables in the Chelsea section of New York.*

The program has since grown to more than 200 sites in Michigan and is being implemented by partners in dozens of states across the country.

### Bring More Fresh Food into Low-Income Communities that Lack Grocery Stores

People across the country are experimenting with ways to provide fresh food to communities that lack access to grocery stores. Examples include:

- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), where a community of individuals pledges support to a farm operation in advance and, in return, receives shares in the farm’s bounty throughout the growing year.
- Local gleaning initiatives, where groups collect excess fresh foods from farms, gardens, farmers



COURTESY OF GROW APPALACHIA

*Teen gardeners in Greene County, Tennessee, supported by Grow Appalachia and partner organization Rural Resources.*

markets, grocery stores, restaurants, and other sources to give to food pantries, soup kitchens, and other distribution points in low-income communities.

- Mobile vending, which includes selling food out of trucks, carts, trailers, and roadside stands.
- School lunch programs that offer salad bars and other fresh produce on a daily basis, and elementary school programs that participate in the USDA's Fresh Food and Vegetable Program.

### **Help People Grow Their Own Food**

Grow Appalachia helps people produce no-cost, fresh, healthy food in one of the nation's poorest regions. During its first six years, it provided funding and technical

assistance to support thousands of gardens that, together, produced nearly 1.8 million pounds of healthy, organic food. Gardens have been raised by nonprofit organizations, farmers' market entrepreneurs, senior citizens, Girl Scouts, inmates, people with disabilities, and other community members. Some participants garden to save money. Others garden to make money.

Grow Appalachia is hosted by Berea College and works through local organizations in Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, Ohio, and North Carolina. Its primary funder is entrepreneur and philanthropist John Paul DeJoria.

In Brooklyn, New York, the Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger (BSCAH) grows produce to distribute through their community

food pantries. BSCAH started its Urban Agro-Educational program in 2008 with one 3,000 square foot garden. Today the program operates two farms and two gardens, producing more than 30,000 pounds of produce annually with the help of community volunteers. The program also offers intensive summer internships in agriculture and environmental sciences to local at-risk students, who study under master gardeners and composters and a professional engineer.

### **Discourage People from Buying Unhealthy Foods**

Providing access to affordable, nutritious foods doesn't guarantee that people will choose them. Some local governments are working to discourage unhealthy choices, as well as raise revenues, by taxing drinks with added sugar. To date, seven city and county governments in four states have passed measures for sales taxes on sugary drinks: Oakland, Albany, San Francisco, Berkeley (CA), Boulder (CO), Cook County (IL), and Philadelphia (PA).

The first to pass the tax was Berkeley, California. The penny-per-ounce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages was approved by three-quarters of the voters in 2014 and took effect in January 2015. In August 2016, University of California-Berkeley researchers studied the impact of the tax in low-income neighborhoods of the city and found a 21 percent drop in the drinking of soda and sugary beverages.



## Possible Trade-Offs and Downsides

- Food-assistance programs alleviate immediate needs, but don't address the root problem of people not making enough money to buy their own food.
- To have a significant impact, local food growers need a sufficient population size, enough tillable land, and a suitable climate.
- Taxing certain foods undermines people's freedom to choose what they eat, and disproportionately affects people with low incomes.



## Questions for Deliberation

- What is the responsibility of society and communities to ensure that people have the food they need?  
What is the responsibility of individuals and households to secure their own food?
- What does it take for people to become more self-sufficient and food secure?
- What opportunities exist in our own communities to make nutritious food more available for everyone?







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## Pay More Attention to the Multiple Benefits of Food

For the past ten years, teachers at Sharon Elementary School in Sharon, Vermont, have worked to instill a deeper appreciation of food among students. Lessons and hands-on activities are woven throughout the curriculum. The students design and plant gardens. They use math to measure ingredients for a recipe and calculate caloric intake. In science, they study the chemical

makeup of certain foods and their effects on the body. In social studies, students learn about the history of foods and their impact on culture.

School principal Barrett Williams says this approach has helped all students feel successful. In an interview published by the National Farm to School Network, he said, “Students develop a sense of ownership of the work they have completed. Ultimate-

ly, this format and structure allows educators to address perhaps the most important lesson we teach, which is social responsibility and citizenship.”

Sharon Elementary participates in the Vermont Farm to School Network, which is affiliated with the USDA’s National Farm to School Program. “Farm to school” refers to efforts that bring locally or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias and integrate food-related education and activities into the curriculum. Nationally, there are more than 42,000 schools and 23 million students participating in farm to school initiatives.

According to Option 2, people of all ages need to be better informed about the foods we choose, their nutritional value, and how they’re produced and processed. Rather than allowing food advertisements to determine our choices, we need to pay closer attention to what we value about our food, traditions, and well-being.

Our choices often involve more than the food itself. As young children, we tend to choose the foods eaten by adults we admire. As teenagers, our choices are strongly influenced by peers. As adults, we may choose foods that align with our image of who we are or aspire to be. Many of us have favorite “comfort foods” that provide consolation, pleasant memories, or a sense of well-being.

Gina Almerico, a University of Tampa education professor, has studied the relationship of food and culture, noting the emotional connections, sense of belonging, and ethnic pride found in food, which was true of her own Italian upbringing. “As a child, every Sunday morning my father and sometimes my mother made spaghetti,” Almerico wrote in the *Journal of International Business and Cultural Studies*. “Dear old Aunt Julia would come by precisely at dinner time with a hot

loaf of bread (another Italian tradition is to bring bread as a gift when invited for dinner) and the family ate and laughed and shared stories with one another. The warm buttered bread and a big salad were always served with the spaghetti. The memory as well as the spaghetti was delicious.”

But what happens when the “cultural” choice conflicts with the “healthy” choice? For example, the considerable amounts of fat, salt, and sugar often found in traditional Southern cooking have become a target for health advocates. But others are concerned that such campaigns undermine a central element of Southern culture shared by both blacks and whites.

John Edge is director of Southern Foodways Alliance in Oxford, Mississippi, a group working to preserve food traditions of the South. He told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “If

you look at the aspects of Southern culture that we can celebrate as a joint creation, they are music and food. These are byproducts of a multiracial culture, something in which we can take pride, not something we should be ashamed of.”

Toni Tipton-Martin, a founding member of Southern Foodways Alliance, is a culinary journalist and author of *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks*. “There was a time when the image of Aunt Jemima, which you can see on Quaker Oats packages, was so negative that it was used as propaganda to keep black women in their place, which was in the kitchen—usually someone else’s kitchen,” she told *The Daily Texan*. “My goal is to make sure that African Americans—women in particular and cooks in general—take their rightful place among the role models in the culinary industry.”



©AP PHOTO/BILL HABER

*Chef Leah Chase, owner of Dooky Chase Restaurant, prepares a meal in the kitchen of her restaurant in New Orleans. Dooky Chase Restaurant is one of the few civil rights landmarks remaining in New Orleans. “I feel like in this restaurant, we changed the course of the world over bowls of gumbo.”*





## What We Could Do

### Provide Accessible and Trustworthy Information

Although information abounds about food, many people struggle to make sense of it all and know which sources to trust. While no source is perfect, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is one good place to start. In May 2016, the FDA announced a new food labeling design to be phased in by July 2018. The changes include a larger font for serving size and calories and additional nutritional information, such as the amount of added sugars.

Another action by the FDA is the new rule to include calorie information on menus of chain restaurants, take-out and delivery food places, salad and hot-food bars, and movie theaters that are part of a chain with 20 or more locations. Some eating establishments have already started posting calories, and all covered businesses must comply by May 5, 2017.

In addition to the FDA, there are numerous other government and nonprofit websites geared to various aspects of food. However, many health experts warn that information alone usually doesn't change behavior. People are most likely to improve their eating habits when they feel motivated to change and have family and community support for those changes.

### Build Nutrition Education Into Community Food Programs

Access to nutritious food is of limited value unless people know

how to prepare it. That's why many community food programs are adding nutrition education to their activities. In California, Food for People operates Humboldt County's food bank and a variety of community food programs for children, families, senior citizens, and others who meet income guidelines. Their nutrition educator provides cooking classes and demos, taste tests, recipes, and tips for cooking healthy meals on a tight budget. To promote cooking healthy foods from scratch, they provide "recipe kits" that include a recipe and the fresh produce needed to make it.

The USDA provides nutrition-education resources through its Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed)

program. SNAP-Ed teaches people about good nutrition and how to make their food dollars stretch further. The program works by building partnerships with a variety of community organizations, which conduct social marketing campaigns, hold nutrition education classes, and improve local food policies and systems.

### Emphasize and Preserve the Social and Cultural Aspects of Food

Pat Gwin and Mark Dunham of the Cherokee Nation started a seed bank in 2005 to preserve plant varieties like corn, gourds, squash, and beans that were historically linked to the Cherokee people. A few years later, with a surplus of seeds, they



*The Cherokee Language Immersion School uses traditional seed gardens for language instruction.*

launched a seed-exchange program, offering free seeds to Cherokee Indians who wanted to help establish heirloom plants and contribute to the seed bank. What they expected would be a few dozen local requests turned into thousands of requests from Cherokees living around the world.

Over the years, the seed exchange program has done more than preserve heirloom plants. “We quickly realized in working with the elders that it was a huge bonus for the language program,” Gwin told the *Cherokee Phoenix*. “Some of the ecology-related Cherokee words were either forgotten or were being forgotten. This is a way to keep the Cherokee language as preserved and as up to date as possible.”

The seed exchange program has attracted people of all ages. “I think it’s a good way to teach kids responsibility,” said Gwin. “There’s a good youth component here and a huge educational component. I think the cultural aspect is through the roof.”

## Recognize the Healing Qualities of Food

Community Servings, a Boston-based nonprofit, was founded in 1999 by a coalition of activists, faith groups, and community organizations to provide home-delivered meals to people living with HIV/AIDS. They were concerned about people dying from malnutrition while trying to fight the illness. Food, they found, was medicine.

Today, the organization prepares and delivers 9,600 meals each week

PHOTOS ©DINA RUDJICK/BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES



*Rachel Zhao, a student at Indiana University, portioned cucumbers into containers at Community Servings in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood, which prepares meals for hundreds of clients with chronic diseases or recovering from treatments.*



*Volunteers inspect and package thousands of pies as part of the Community Servings’ “Pie in the Sky” fundraiser. Each donated pie sells for \$25, and the money goes to provide a week’s worth of meals to families in need in Greater Boston.*

to people who are homebound and living with critical and chronic illnesses. The meals are made from scratch and tailored to meet each person’s nutritional and medical needs. In a recent study of health-care workers who referred their patients to Community Servings, 96 percent reported that the medically tailored meals improved client health, and 65 percent reported that the program led to decreased hospitalizations.

Because most of their clients live in poverty, Community Servings provides the meals for free through funding from grants, donations, and government contracts. Community Servings CEO David Waters believes the health-care system should factor in and pay for the substantial benefits of good nutrition for seriously ill

people. “Many social service programs add value by helping patients manage health conditions, adhere to treatment plans, and follow clinician instructions,” Waters told *CommonWealth* magazine. “Over time, particularly for those with chronic conditions, this will result in better health, fewer hospitalizations, and decreased reliance on emergency care.”



## Possible Trade-Offs and Downsides

- Tailoring the food system to individual needs, preferences, and customs may be a luxury we can't afford when faced with an ever-growing world population to feed coupled with environmental problems that threaten food production.
- Our food preferences and traditions are not always healthy ones, and society shares in the consequences of higher health-care costs due to diet-related problems.
- Integrating nutrition into health-care systems could lead to added bureaucracy and costs.



## Questions for Deliberation

- What do we each value about our food, health, and traditions? What do we have in common? Where do we differ?
- What could we do to learn about and enjoy each other's cultural traditions?
- What opportunities exist in our own communities to become better informed about the foods we choose, their nutritional value, and how they are produced?







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## Be Good Stewards of the Food System

Like a canary in a coalmine, the decline of plant and animal species often signals trouble in their environment. This is what happened in 2006, when beehives began to fail after the majority of worker bees disappeared—a condition called Colony Collapse Disorder.

“When honeybee colonies were reported to be dying en masse, it was clear that there was something really, really wrong,” said Marla Spivak, an agriculture professor at the University of Minnesota, in a 2013 TED Talk. She and other researchers found that the bees were dying from a combination

of factors, including the loss of flowering plants, the increase in pesticides and their potency, and deadly parasites and diseases.

“Since World War II, we have been systematically eliminating many of the flowering plants that bees need for their survival,” said Spivak. “The very farms that used to sustain bees are now agricultural food deserts, dominated by one or two plant species like corn and soybeans.”

Spivak remains hopeful that bees and other pollinators can be saved through concerted efforts to restore their habitats. These include using less



*This eco-wheel shows the natural resources that provide ecosystem goods and services, the benefits of those services to human life, and the drivers of change that influence them. (Source: US Environmental Protection Agency)*

pesticide, growing more flowering plants in our gardens and parks and along roadsides, and restoring natural habitat areas on large farms. Spivak urges us to recognize that “each of our individual actions can contribute to a grand solution, an emergent property, that’s much greater than the mere sum of our individual actions.”

Bee restoration is an example of the stewardship needed to create a food system that works for all of us over the long run, according to Option 3. Such efforts are needed at every link in the food-supply chain, from the seeds we plant to the reduction of food waste.

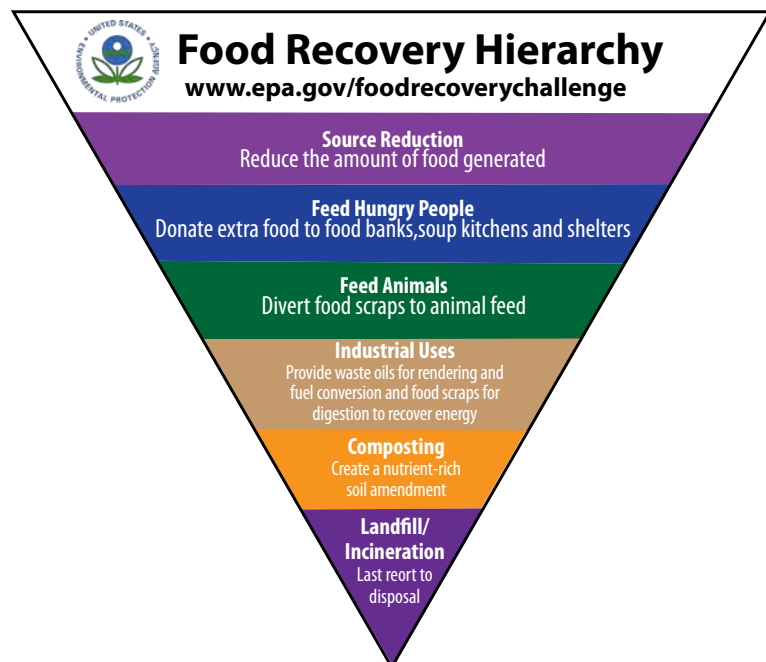
“Ecosystem goods and services” is one way of thinking about stewardship. The eco-wheel diagram illustrates how our health, well-being, and economy are intertwined with the quality of our environment. Healthy

ecosystems provide us with clean air and water and help protect us from severe weather like hurricanes and

floods. They provide habitats for plants and wildlife and materials to produce food, clothing, and shelter. They provide places for people to garden, fish, hunt, hike, and enjoy nature. Our policies and decisions related to land use, pollution, and climate have a direct bearing on the ecosystem goods and services available to us.

A key aspect of stewardship is the wise use of resources. A major challenge in our food system is the tremendous amount of waste generated at every level. The USDA estimates that up to 40 percent of food produced is never eaten. At the retail and consumer levels, an estimated 133 billion pounds of food, worth \$161 billion, was lost in 2010.

In September 2015, the USDA and EPA launched the US Food Waste Challenge, calling for a 50 percent reduction in food waste by 2030. The two agencies are working in partnership with nonprofit organizations, faith groups, the private sector, and government agencies to reduce food waste in order to improve food security and conserve natural resources.







## What We Could Do

### Strengthen Our Commitment to a Healthy Ecosystem

As illustrated in the eco-wheel diagram, our current and future food supply hinges on healthy ecosystems, which are affected in large part by how we use our natural resources. That means we need to better understand how ecosystems work and have reliable data with which to make sound decisions.

One helpful tool is EnviroAtlas, which provides interactive resources for exploring the benefits people receive from nature. Communities are often faced with tough decisions about land use and the balancing of development and preservation. EnviroAtlas helps people better understand the potential benefits and drawbacks of their decisions by providing data, maps, and tools to analyze relationships between nature, health and well-being, and the economy.

EnviroAtlas is a collaborative project of the US Environmental Protection Agency, US Geological Survey, US Forest Service, several universities, and other government and nonprofit agencies. Online users do not need additional GIS software or special expertise to use EnviroAtlas; it may be accessed, along with an introductory video, on the EPA website.

### Keep Food Out of Landfills

According to the EPA, the second-largest single source of garbage in municipal landfills is



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food waste, which quickly generates methane gas, helping to make landfills the country's third largest source of methane.

The USDA Food Recovery diagram illustrates the multiple ways that individuals, organizations, and businesses can prevent, reduce, and divert food waste.

The US Food Waste Challenge website offers information and ideas for consumers, schools, and organizations. For example, schools can reduce "plate waste" by as much as 30 percent by scheduling recess before lunch. Households and communities can compost their organic food and yard waste to produce a natural fertilizer for gardening and landscaping.

The Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic created an online toolkit called *Keeping Food Out of the Landfill: Policy Ideas for States and Localities*. "The involvement of state and local policymakers in finding

appropriate solutions to food waste and food recovery is vital," wrote the authors in the toolkit's introduction. "The methods employed by states and localities vary, but all provide examples of the experimentation necessary to identify local problems and craft local solutions."

### Realign Our Diets and Food Subsidies to Support Nutritious, Sustainable Food

If we want to eat healthy, we need to farm healthy, according to Peter Lehner, director of the Sustainable Food and Agriculture Program at Earthjustice. "The new dietary guidelines issued in 2016 by the federal government highlight the great paradox of food in America," said Lehner in an Earthjustice blog. "We're advised to eat less sugar and more fruits and vegetables in order to stay healthy. But at the same time, our government supports a food

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GLYNN BARBER



*Oasis Aqua Farm is a family owned and operated sustainable farm located in Beavercreek, Ohio. They use a growing method called aquaponics, which allows them to grow and sell pesticide-free, chemical-free vegetables, fruit, fish, and crayfish year-round.*



system that churns out the polar opposite meal plan—one that’s designed to mass produce the foods we’re not supposed to eat, while also generating pollution that harms air quality, water quality, and climate.”

For example, according to the Environmental Working Group, from 1995 to 2014, the federal government paid more than \$94 billion in corn subsidies, supporting corn syrup and animal feed that goes into the processed foods and meat we’re supposed to eat less of. We are eating, on average, less than half of the amount of fruits and vegetables recommended for a healthy diet, but few subsidies are available for those crops.

Consumers, as well as government, can favor healthier and more sustainable food choices. The World Resources Institute points out that beef is responsible for about 20 times more climate pollution per unit of protein than lentils or beans, and 8 times more than pork or poultry. Many studies show that diets high in plant-based foods and lower in red and processed meats have benefits for both our health and the environment.

### **Strengthen the Food-System Workforce**

Despite the importance of the work that millions of people do to bring food to our tables, the

workforce is fraught with challenges, including worker recruitment, retention, compensation, and legal status.

For example, our farms and ranches need a reliable, skilled workforce. The jobs are often physically rigorous, seasonal, and difficult to fill. “Without a legal, stable supply of labor, US farmers are challenged by worker shortages that lead to lost crops, lost income, and lost jobs, and make it more difficult for us to compete with imports,” said Dale Moore, public policy director of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) in a 2017 AFBF podcast.

Immigration reform is a high priority of the AFBF. The group has proposed that Congress approve an uncapped At-Will Agricultural Worker Visa Program and a pathway to permanent legal status for experienced, but unauthorized, workers currently living in the United States.

Similar challenges exist on the other end of the food system regarding the wages, working conditions, and turnover rates of fast-food workers. Beginning with strikes in New York City and Chicago in November 2012, fast-food workers have been advocating for \$15 per hour wages, regulations on scheduling shifts two weeks in advance, and setting a minimum number of hours between shifts. To date, California, New York, and Washington, DC, have approved the phase-in of a \$15 per hour minimum wage. The “Fight for \$15” has become a global effort, and has expanded to include other low-wage workers.



## Possible Trade-Offs and Downsides

- Conservation-oriented agriculture can be more time and labor intensive, resulting in higher prices for consumers.
- More than 20 percent of US gross farm income comes from exports. Reducing current crop subsidies could make the United States less competitive in the global market.
- Raising the minimum wage for fast-food workers could force some owners to close franchises, raise prices, or cut positions.



## Questions for Deliberation

- How much are we willing to invest today, in terms of higher prices, lower profits, and/or personal effort, to ensure a viable food system for future generations?
- What are the most urgent issues that need to be addressed by local, state, and federal policymakers?
- What opportunities exist in our own communities to be good stewards of the food system?



# Land of Plenty

## How Should We Ensure that People Have the Food They Need?

All of us affect, and are affected by, the food system: students who grow and eat carrots and tomatoes from their school garden; farm owners who maintain patches of natural habitat for bees; immigrants who hand-pick our apples, grapes, and oranges; public employees who design food-nutrition labels and monitor food safety; restaurant workers who take our orders and serve our meals; food reporters who write about ethnic cuisine; local groups of gleaners who keep edible food out of the dumpster and put it to good use; food pantries that teach teenagers to garden on vacant lots; parents who work to stretch their food budgets to the next payday; policymakers who determine agricultural subsidies; community members who advocate for policies to ensure that all of us have the food we need.

While we have one of the most productive and efficient food systems in the world, millions of people in the US still fall between the cracks. People who may have enough to eat today worry about the availability and quality of food for future generations.

This guide explores different approaches and actions that are, or could be, taken to create a food system that works for all of us. While the approaches overlap in some respects, they do suggest different priorities and involve different trade-offs. With this in mind, what should we do to ensure that people from all walks of life have the food they need?

### OPTION 1:

#### Improve Access to Nutritious Food

Despite our nation's abundance of food, some people still don't have enough to eat, which undermines their health, productivity, and overall well-being. According to



this option, we need a food system that ensures everyone has a stable source of affordable, nutritious food. We must strengthen our school nutrition programs and food assistance for low-income families, as well as improve access to fresh food in rural and low-income communities.

#### Examples of What Might be Done

- Strengthen food safety-nets, such as SNAP, WIC, and school nutrition programs
- Bring more fresh food into areas that lack grocery stores
- Help people grow their own food
- Discourage people from choosing unhealthy foods

#### Trade-offs and Downsides to Consider

- Food-assistance programs alleviate immediate needs, but don't address the root problem of people not making enough money to buy their own food.
- To have a significant impact, local food producers need a sufficient population size, enough tillable land, and a suitable climate.
- Taxing certain foods undermines people's freedom to choose what they eat, and disproportionately affects poor people.



## OPTION 2:

### Pay More Attention to the Multiple Benefits of Food

We have drifted away from traditions and principles that once helped us enjoy a healthier relationship to food, according to this option. We all need to be better informed about the foods we choose, their nutritional value, and how they're produced and processed. Rather than allowing food advertisements to determine our choices, we need to pay closer attention to what we value about our food, traditions, and well-being.



#### Examples of What Might be Done

- Provide accessible and trustworthy information about food
- Build nutrition education into school and community food programs
- Emphasize and preserve the social and cultural aspects of food
- Recognize the healing qualities of food

#### Trade-offs and Downsides to Consider

- Tailoring the food system to individual needs and customs may be a luxury we can't afford with a growing world population and problems that threaten food production.
- Our food preferences and traditions are not always healthy ones, and society shares in the consequences of higher health-care costs due to diet-related problems.
- Integrating food programs with health-care systems could add to bureaucracy and costs.

## OPTION 3:

### Be Good Stewards of the Food System

We are not managing our food system as well as we should, according to this option. We must do more to safeguard the quality and availability of food for generations to come. Good stewardship is needed at every link in the food-supply chain, from the seeds we plant to the reduction of food waste. It also includes preserving our natural resources, choosing sustainable methods of production, and strengthening the food-system workforce.



#### Examples of What Might be Done

- Strengthen our commitment to a healthy ecosystem
- Keep food out of landfills
- Realign our diets and food subsidies to support nutritious, sustainable food
- Strengthen the food-system workforce

#### Trade-offs and Downsides to Consider

- Conservation-oriented agriculture can be more time and labor intensive, resulting in higher prices for consumers.
- Exports make up 20 percent of US agricultural production according to the USDA. Reducing current crop subsidies could make the US less competitive in the global market.
- Raising the minimum wage for fast-food franchise workers could force some owners to close stores, raise prices, or cut positions.



# Where Do We Go from Here?

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## Reflections on the Forum

During our conversation, we looked at different ways we could help ensure that people have the food they need. We examined a variety of actions, their potential impact, and the trade-offs involved. What are your thoughts after talking about the issue with others?

- What new information or insights did you gain?
- What actions are you most willing to support, and why?
- What actions are you least willing to support, and why?
- What are the tough choices and trade-offs we need to grapple with as a group?



## Taking Action

Many people who participate in forums want to do more than talk about the problem. They also want to consider what actions they might take, individually and/or with others. What are the opportunities that emerged from this forum?

- What are some possibilities for action in your own life and community?
- What actions would be the most doable in terms of time, resources, and public will?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What should our next steps be?

## Organizational affiliations of people who helped develop this guide:

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West Virginia Center for Civic Life



## The National Issues Forums

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The National Issues Forums (NIF) is a network of organizations that bring together citizens around the nation to talk about pressing social and political issues of the day. Thousands of community organizations, including schools, libraries, churches, civic groups, and others, have sponsored forums designed to give people a public voice in the affairs of their communities and their nation.

Forum participants engage in deliberation, which is simply weighing options for action against things held commonly valuable. This calls upon them to listen respectfully to others, sort out their views in terms of what they most value, consider courses of action and their disadvantages, and seek to identify actionable areas of common ground.

Issue guides like this one are designed to frame and support these deliberations. They present varying perspectives on the issue at hand, suggest actions to address identified problems, and note the trade-offs of taking those actions to remind participants that all solutions have costs as well as benefits.

In this way, forum participants move from holding individual opinions to making collective choices as members of a community—the kinds of choices from which public policy may be forged or public action taken on community, as well as national, levels.

## Feedback

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If you participated in this forum, please fill out a questionnaire, which is included in this issue guide or can be accessed online at [www.nifi.org/questionnaires](http://www.nifi.org/questionnaires). If you are filling out the enclosed questionnaire, please return the completed form to your moderator or to the National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

If you moderated this forum, please fill out a Moderator Response Sheet, which is online at [www.nifi.org/questionnaires](http://www.nifi.org/questionnaires).

Your responses play a vital role in providing information that is used to communicate your views to others, including officeholders, the media, and other citizens.

## Other Topics and Ordering Information

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Recent topics in this series include safety and justice, climate choices, and health care. For more information, please visit [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

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*Land of Plenty: How Should We Ensure that People Have the Food They Need?*

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ISBN: 978-1-946206-06-0

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