Parenting Pathways Learning Network Partner-Led Convening

Insights to Support the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice, partnering with the Pennsylvania Department of Health & Human Services on the Parenting Pathways Learning Network (PPLN), was excited to host two roundtable discussion sessions related to the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. The PPLN program strives to center parenting student voices in policy change and institutional planning related to addressing basic needs for parenting students on college campuses. In particular, parenting students, especially parenting students from underrepresented and minoritized backgrounds, [experience high rates](https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/parenting_students_brief.pdf) of basic needs insecurity, including food insecurity and hunger.

Within the PPLN program, the Parenting Student Advisory (PSA) Committee convened two partner-led convenings to discuss the most relevant topics from the White House Toolkit. During the first virtual meeting, which took place on June 14, 2022, members discussed how hunger or diet-related disease has impacted them individually, their family and their community. The second virtual meeting took place on June 21, 2022 and members shared their experiences accessing and maintaining federal programs such as SNAP and WIC.

This report summarizes the findings from the PSA committee meetings. To center student voices, we focus on the quality of their experiences relevant to the pillars. Thus, we focused on the first three pillars in the White House Toolkit: 1. Improving food access and affordability, 2. Integrate nutrition and health, and 3. Empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy food choices.

To understand the perspectives of the PSA members we focused on two questions: 1. *How has hunger or diet-related disease impacted you, your family, or your community?,* and *2. How much or how little have you been able to take advantage of programs (es: SNAP, WIC) that would help food insecurity*? Several main topics surfaced from the discussion: health, engagement in federal food programs, accessing nutritious foods, and education about healthy eating habits. Additionally, the committee discussed accessing healthy food on college campuses as follow up to a letter written to President Biden advocating for a Sixth Pillar to address food insecurity for students in higher education. For each topic discussed, this report also includes student experiences as well as recommendations for improvement.

We hope this report will be included in conversations at the national level to drive improvement for food security policies and systems to support college students basic needs.

**Pillar 1: Improve food access and affordability**

For many members of the PSA committee, access to affordable and nutritious food is imperative for their families and community. All of the members have at one time or another accessed federal programs such as SNAP and WIC. While several expressed the use of these programs as an aid to access food, several concerns surfaced for accessing and maintaining these programs. As one student explained:

*We used SNAP benefits while I was forced to resign from work due to COVID-19 due to lack of childcare. The SNAP benefits truly helped while trying to navigate being on unemployment and having children at home 24/7. SNAP benefits were easy to use. A card came in the mail and funds were automatically added on their own. However, information regarding the funds were not communicated to me and I almost threw away the card when the money ran out. Thankfully a friend had told me that they had more funds added on and I should check mine. I also had more funds added on, but the distribution of the funds was never communicated*.

Similarly, another student mentioned how SNAP and WIC were essential to make ends meet. However, because of their cultural practices, their food choices were limited. This was exacerbated by their child's need for particular milk due to allergies. One particular student noted:

… o*rganic is the only milk that my daughter can have because of a severe reaction to non-organic free of hormone milk that my child can drink. That is usually a lot more expensive than regular milk right now it’s eight dollars.*

While the WIC program was very useful for mothers and parents that could not breastfeed, accessing benefits, especially through COVID, remains difficult. Finding transportation and childcare to replenish were difficult especially when entrance to offices were limited during COVID. Another student mentioned:

*During my child’s infancy it was helpful only because the prescribed formula was able to be covered with a doctor's note. However when she came into toddlerhood they didn’t work with me as much. Most of the barriers are the appointments to get the monthly benefits. Now that it’s a card you still have to report to the office and have them unfreeze your benefits. It’s a hassle especially if these appointments are every month. They don’t have after-hours for those that have work and they assume that because we are receiving the benefit we don’t understand the basic principle of nutrition. I felt treated as a child and I had my daughter close to my 30’s. I remember telling my WIC rep that I know carrots are important and totally disregarding that I mentioned they are my daughters favorite.*

Overcoming the barriers to utilizing federal programs is not the only problem PSA members faced. Participants mentioned relying on food pantries, living in food deserts, and the cost of nutritious food in store and delivery curtails the ability to access healthy, nutritious food. One student shared:

*There are a few organizations that have sponsored free food distribution events for our community. I have done this and have found that this comes with waiting in long lines, and a bit of shame due to the food distribution events being held in large parking lots and visible to many people. Oftentimes, the food being distributed would be expired and that would be discouraging as I would not want to serve my children expired food.*

Another participant shared:

*I’ve experienced that too I lost my driver's license for medical reasons and could not drive. And if you want to have groceries sent to you, you're looking at least 30% more of the cost to have it delivered and it really just makes you frustrated. It's great that the services are available, but there's so many extra fees. We’re not just lazy and don't want to go to the store and don't feel like getting dressed. I mean there is a real need for food deliveries and grocery deliveries to people.*

Similarly, another student mentioned:

*I know, in my case, when I don't have the car available to me and it's a far walk to go to the grocery store. If I can order it to Instacart but then I have a service fee when I use this to card. You can either pick up for a less service fee, or you can do a delivery to your home, but that takes into account mileage and it also takes into account the weight of the food. Overall, it charges you a greater service fee, aside from tipping your driver. Now as we're looking at inflation and we're looking at the cost of transporting foods, especially those who live in food deserts, it is becoming a little overwhelming.*

**Pillar 2: Integrate nutrition and health**

Maintaining good nutrition is essential to maintaining good health. Our PSA members strive to not only maintain their health but as parenting students they are also concerned about the health and nutrition of their families. Some health issues that were discussed included high blood pressure, children’s low weight, family history of diabetes, and food allergies. As one student noted:

*After suffering from diabetes I started to eat healthier, and I made sure that everyone around me knew my diet restrictions. However, I did notice that while I ate better I was spending more money on healthy options. It gave me some setbacks and sometimes I had to “cheat” when food stamps were not available. My diet does suffer. Resources in the community are limited due to cost.*

Another mentioned:

*I have been a picky eater since childhood and that has resulted in me being underweight. I have weighed the same since I was sixteen years old. Sometimes I would go to sleep weighing five pounds more and wake up with it gone. I am yet to see a dietitian but I don't know how to go about getting one and I haven't been able to accommodate one in my schedule.*

**Pillar 3: Empower all consumers to make and have access to health choices**

Our advisory committee agreed that it is important to foster environments that enable all people to easily make informed healthy choices and increase access to healthy food. Many of our parenting students believe there needs to be more education about how to make healthy food choices. As one said:

*The community can always gain more from resources such as food banks, nutritionists, learning/education how to eat healthier, meal prep, making healthy food cheaper vs processed food etc.*

Another mentioned:

*I have suffered from weight and health issues in the greater part of my adulthood. From lack of affordable health to poor dietary choices I’ve struggled to eat the history of obesity and high blood pressure that has plagued my family for generations. The lack of support is also not helpful. My family is not a family that has had much education on healthy food choices. I know that all of my grandparents had health conditions that led to their early death.*

**Promoting Sixth Pillar for addressing hunger for students in higher education**

On June 21, 2022, a diverse group of education, nutrition, and disabilities rights organizations sent a letter to President Biden calling for an added topic to the White House Conference to ensure that students, families, educators, practitioners, and other stakeholders within higher education are present and involved in the Conference itself. In it we respectfully encouraged the administration to include a sixth Pillar emphasizing the critical role that schools play in addressing student hunger and nutrition.

The members of this are parenting student advocates and we believe their opinions about making nutritious food available on college campuses. Parenting students have very involved work and school schedules which isn’t always conducive to eating regularly or even nutritiously. Many times they are eating on the road, in between classe,s or not at all. In addition, campuses that offer dining halls are sometimes expensive for students that cannot afford a meal plan or are on a limited budget. As one student explained:

*I would run through over $50 dollars a week at the dining halls on campus and sometimes I don’t have enough money so I’ll just buy snacks from the vending machine.*

Another student noted:

*If you are off campus, you can use this EBT card to buy groceries but they cannot be hot meals that we could pick up on the way to school. If you spend most of the time on the campus and you don't always have access to eat in between classes, you have to leave campus and there is not always time. If you do leave campus, it is just to pick up fast food which is not healthy to do multiple times a week.*

**Recommendations to Address Hunger and Nutrition Challenges for Parenting Students in Higher Education**

While the participants in the discussion shared their experiences, they also offered recommendations for helping them to access nutritional food and creating a more healthy lifestyle for their families. These include:

* Develop agreements with food vendors on college campuses to accept EBT payments. This will allow students to eat meals on campus at their convenience.
* Provide advocates on college campuses to educate and engage students on healthy food choices. Campuses can provide one-stop-shops where they offer students counseling services for benefits to help students with their social service needs.
* Simplify the process of accessing SNAP and WIC benefits by reducing the amount of visits to replenish funds and having an option for the renewing the application especially if nothing in the household has changed
* Allow for specialty milk or formula to be accessed without a doctors prescription
* Align funding for SNAP and WIC funds to coincide with economic inflation
* Expand SNAP and WIC to be used at farmer’s markets
* Have discounts or reduced costs for food delivery services
* Allow SNAP benefits to be sued with all meal kit delivery services and grocery store delivery services/pickup