

## OPENING STATEMENT

I want to start off by stating a fact that all of our witnesses agree upon: today in America we are facing a nutrition crisis; a crisis where diet related diseases pose a serious threat to the health and well-being of our country.

Nearly one out of every three dollars in the federal budget now goes to healthcare spending, with 80% of this money paying for the treatment of preventable diseases. And these costs are rising.

Currently in the United States, half of our population is pre-diabetic or has type-2 diabetes.

In 1960, approximately 3% of the US population was obese. Today, more than 40% of Americans are obese, and more than 70% of Americans are either obese or overweight.

Even more shocking, one quarter of our teenagers today are pre-diabetic or have type-2 diabetes, and obesity is the leading medical reason that 71 percent of young Americans are disqualified from military service.

And the numbers get even worse in Black and brown communities.

The risk of diabetes is 77 percent higher for Black people in America and we are twice as likely to die from diabetes.

And as we will hear in today's testimony, the statistics are equally grim in our indigenous communities.

The deadly nature of our nutrition crisis has been tragically magnified by the COVID 19 pandemic, where we have seen much higher hospitalization rates and death rates for people with diet related diseases.

Now let's be clear about something: the majority of our food system is controlled by a handful of big multinational companies.

These big food companies carefully formulate and market nutrient-poor, addictive, ultra-processed foods -- ultra-processed foods which now comprise 2/3 of the calories in children and teen diets in the U.S -- and then these companies want us to believe that diet related diseases such as obesity and diabetes are somehow a moral failing, that they represent a lack of willpower or a failure to exercise enough.

That is a lie.

It is not a moral failing, it is a policy failure.

It is a policy failure because the federal government is currently subsidizing easy access to the foods that are high in calories but have minimal nutritional value -- while at the same time too many communities – rural and urban alike -- lack access to the healthy foods they need to thrive.

It is a policy failure because while the federal government tells us that our plates should consist largely of fruits and vegetables, currently less than 2 percent of our federal Agriculture subsidies in the United States go to these healthy foods.

It is a policy failure because while other countries have begun to take on the big food companies and ban the marketing of junk foods to children, in the United States we continue to allow big food companies to spend billions of dollars every year to advertise the least nutritious products such as fast-food, candy, and sugary drinks to our children.

In August, the Government Accountability Office released a report that analyzed efforts by the federal government to address diet-related chronic health conditions.

GAO concluded that the federal government lacks a coordinated, overarching strategy aimed at reducing Americans' risk of diet-related chronic diseases.

So how do we now align our federal policy with our goal of addressing the nutrition crisis?

We can start by looking to history as a guide.

In 1969, President Nixon convened the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health to address the urgent national concern of widespread hunger in America.

What resulted was an unprecedented expansion and creation of vital programs, including WIC, to tackle the hunger crisis.

Fast forward 50 years: while we have made progress addressing hunger in America, we are still grappling with food insecurity and we now face a second food crisis--one of nutrition insecurity--where too many Americans are overfed but undernourished.

Despite being the wealthiest nation in the world, we have created a food system that relentlessly encourages the overeating of empty calories, literally making us sick and causing us to spend an ever-increasing amount of taxpayer dollars --trillions of dollars -- on healthcare costs to treat diet-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, certain types of cancer, and chronic kidney disease that are among the leading causes of preventable, premature death in our country.

And so I believe we need to rethink the way we approach food and nutrition policy, and that is why last week Senator Braun and I, along with Congressman McGovern and others, introduced legislation to convene a second White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger and Health that convenes public and private stakeholders to reimagine federal food and nutrition policy.

This second White House Conference needs to hear perspectives from a diverse set of stakeholders and communities, such as we have represented here today on our panel.

Let me close with this: the nutrition crisis we face is a threat to our communities, a threat to our health, a threat to our economic security and to our national security.

We must act now.