

**Women In Government Healthcare & Technology Summit**

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# **Nutrition Policy Actions to Support Vulnerable Older Adults**

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**#WIGDistrict2District**



# Nutrition Policy Actions to Support Vulnerable Older Adults

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Bob Blancato

National Coordinator, Defeat Malnutrition Today

October 1, 2021

# Introduction

- Honor to be invited back
- Thank Meredith Martino, new WIG Executive Director
- Also thank Laura Blake, Maura LaGue
- Since my last opportunity to present with WIG, a podcast in Sept 2020, a lot has happened
- Highest-ranking woman in government—Kamala Harris
- New York state has its first woman governor
- House and Senate numbers up from 126 to 143 total in just two years
- Total number of women in state legislatures: 2,286 – up 141 since last year!

# Malnutrition: An Ongoing Concern

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- Come to you today as National Coordinator of the Defeat Malnutrition Today coalition
- On the eve of Malnutrition Awareness Week
- Discussion today on a real and growing threat to health of older adults – malnutrition
- And policy efforts that could have a significant impact on lowering the rates of malnutrition

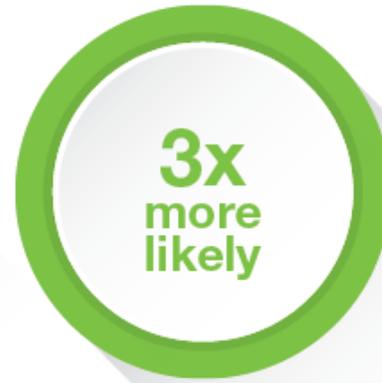
## Malnutrition Is a Critical Public Health and Patient Safety Issue



Up to **1 out of 2** older adults is either at risk of becoming or is malnourished<sup>3</sup>



Disease-associated malnutrition in older adults is estimated to cost **\$51.3 billion annually**<sup>4</sup>



Protein-calorie malnutrition related hospital stays are **3x more likely** to result in death<sup>5</sup>



Protein-calorie malnutrition related hospital stays are **2x longer**<sup>5</sup>

### Malnutrition is Highest in Older Adults<sup>5</sup>

Protein-Calorie Malnutrition Related Hospital Stays per 100,000 Population



# Ongoing Pandemic and Response

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- The relentless nature of this pandemic is exhausting to us as individuals, as communities, and as a nation
- Unfathomable death toll to date
- Is delta variant the first or the last of the variants?
- We focus on vulnerable older adults today
- Pandemic has made many of them more vulnerable in different ways

# The Statistics

- Over 675,000 people have died – equaling the 1918 flu pandemic
- Black, Latino and American Indian populations more than 2 times as likely to die as white population
- Over 135,000 nursing home residents have died

# The Response

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- Response from the 116<sup>th</sup> and 117<sup>th</sup> Congress and two Administrations has been strong and decisive
- 4 emergency pandemic bills passed between March 2020 and March 2021
- Commitment of over \$6 trillion total
- Was ARP the last?

# Nutrition Focus

- Food insecurity rates doubled for some populations during the early part of the pandemic
- But a review of key nutrition programs for older adults shows that they all received important and significant funding boosts
- SNAP received over \$30 billion in additional funding for expanded benefits and new enrollees
- And today marks the effective date of President Biden's executive order to permanently increase the monthly SNAP benefit by almost 25 percent above pre-pandemic levels
  - First re-evaluation of TFP since program began
  - Average benefit increases of \$36/month for individuals and \$193 for a family of 4

# Nutrition Focus

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- Older Americans Act nutrition programs received over \$2.6 billion in additional funding during the pandemic
- Commodity Supplemental Food Program: 15 percent increase totaling \$50 million
- Ultimately, in part because of these pandemic benefit increases, many more people remained food secure than had been originally projected

# Increased Pandemic Flexibilities

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- Also important to older adults were flexibilities and modifications to policies that ensured nutrition services were facilitated
- OAA flexibility, including expanded transfer authority between all Title III programs
  - Specific nutrition flexibility included unlimited transfer between congregate and home-delivered meal funding and waiver of dietary requirements for meals
  - Perhaps the biggest impact was redefining a “homebound” person to include those who were socially distancing
- SNAP also has received important flexibilities:
  - 15 percent increase in SNAP benefits passed in 2020 bills and extended in the 2021 American Rescue Plan
  - Online purchasing of groceries
  - Operations waivers to make it easier to certify, recertify, and enroll participants

# Increased Pandemic Flexibilities

- Telehealth expansion: telehealth was favored by older adults even before the pandemic
  - Trump Administration approved about 150 different forms of telehealth and telemedicine to be reimbursed by Medicare, such as physical and occupational therapy and home health check-ins
- New programs and services created to help close the digital divide, enabling older adults and other populations to access telehealth and virtual nutrition site/senior center programming

# Elder Justice Funding



- On our September 2020 podcast for WIG, we also discussed the linkages between elder abuse and poor nutrition in the older adult population
- Pleased to note that Congress has provided \$376 million in new funding for elder justice programs since the podcast was recorded

# Lessons from the Pandemic

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- Several clear takeaways from pandemic which will carry forward
- In relation to nutrition, it is about the linkages
- Malnutrition links to self neglect—a terrible form of elder abuse
- It also links to falls, isolation, depression, and other chronic diseases
- Food insecurity links to poor nutrition and ultimately poor health
- Critical future direction—to work to combat poor nutrition and work toward nutrition security
  - Consistent access, affordability, availability of foods/beverages that promote well-being and prevent/treat disease

# Moving On...

- The challenges of the ongoing pandemic are also providing opportunities for new investments in key nutrition and related programs.
- As you are all aware, DC in the throes of debate on 4 simultaneous issues
  - Avoiding a government shutdown
  - Avoiding a default
  - Passing an infrastructure bill
  - Passing a \$3.5 trillion package by reconciliation

# Upcoming Legislation

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- The outcome of the infrastructure and budget reconciliation bills have important bearing on nutrition policy actions to support older adults
- In the Senate infrastructure passage, broadband is key to support telehealth and social connectedness efforts
- The budget reconciliation package in the House includes:
  - \$1.3 billion in funding for Older Americans Act programs – over \$800 million specifically for nutrition and senior center infrastructure
  - The new Medicare dental benefit (connected to nutrition!)
  - Medicaid HCBS funding, which would include nutrition programs

# Where Does This Go?

- Wish the crystal ball was clearer on where we end up at the end of the day
- Feel it is safe to say the final number will not be \$3.5 trillion
- Likely only as big as the “pay fors” that are also approved
- Scenarios:
  - Both could pass
  - Or, neither could pass
- That is what rest of year about

# Need for Data

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- We are keeping data on food insecurity during the pandemic
- But we have not seen such data yet on malnutrition, despite its seriousness
- More screening can help
- Opportunity to gather more data through new provision in the Older Americans Act
- Awaiting more on implementation

# Our Agenda

- In the meantime, our federal agenda continues to focus on:
  - Funding
  - Quality measures
  - Medical nutrition therapy

# Ultimately...

- It is about responding in a coordinated way to malnutrition at the local and state level as well as federal
- To further this work at the state level, Defeat Malnutrition Today worked in conjunction with Women In Government to issue updated state toolkits – one for legislators and one for constituents
- The legislator toolkit includes:

# Updated State Toolkits

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## Advancing Policies for Quality Malnutrition Care in Older Adults:

A Toolkit for  
State Legislators



- Information on malnutrition
- Examples of best practices from across the country
- Resources for older adults
- State statistics on the cost of disease-associated malnutrition
- Sample legislation, press release, statements, resolution, social media, graphics and more!

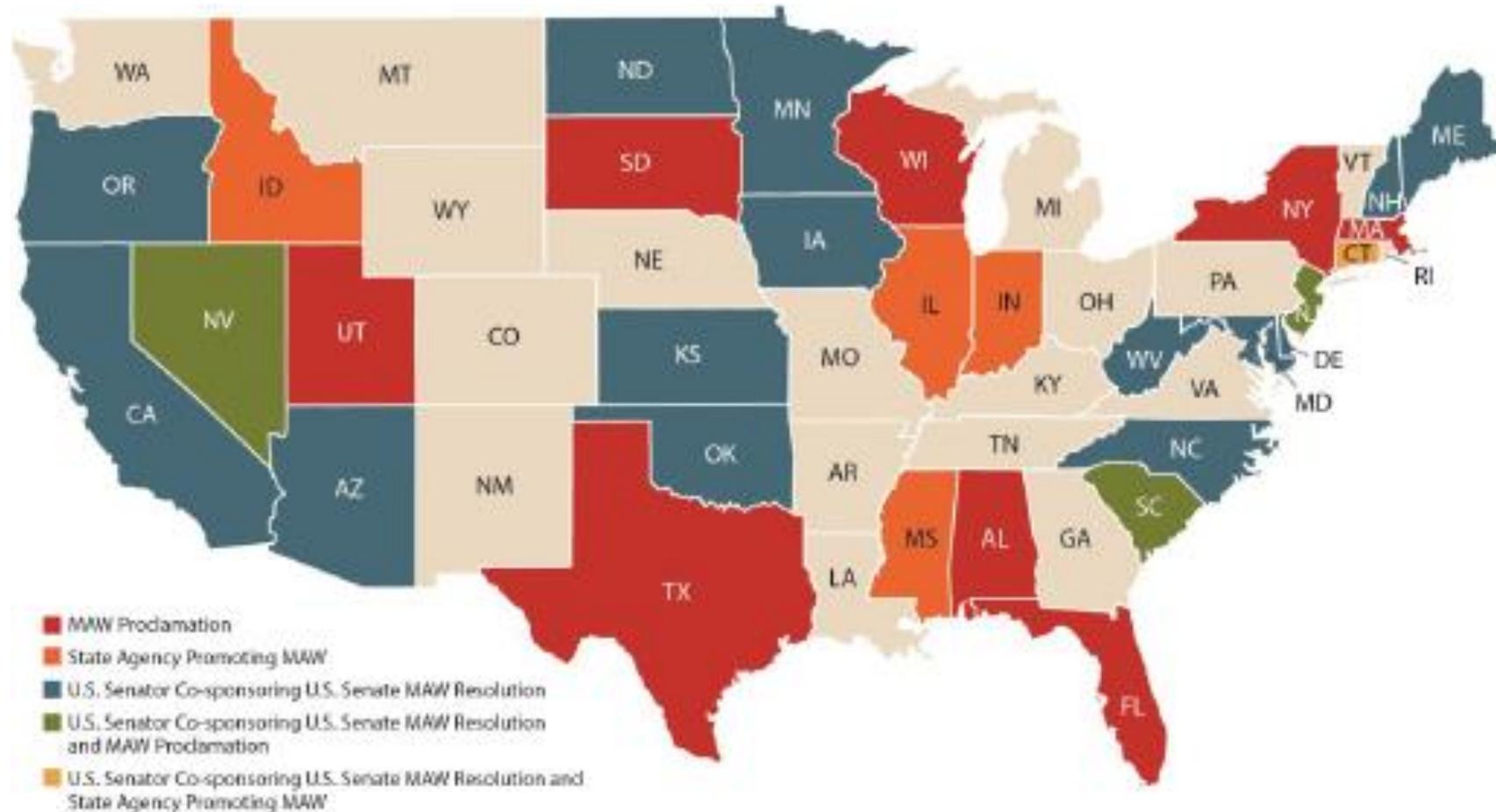
# What Is the Ask?

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- What is my ask today? After all, you are all elected officials...
- One: urge your Congressional delegations to continue to support any additional pandemic-related funding which may be required, especially for nutrition
- Consider sponsoring a measure in your legislature related to addressing malnutrition
- Can be anything from forming a state commission, to having existing state agencies involved in nutrition develop plans on malnutrition prevention, or a resolution recognizing any/all of the following in 2022: Malnutrition Awareness Week, National Nutrition Month, or the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the OAA nutrition program



# State Observances of MAW: 2020



# What Else?

- Call and/or ask for hearings with appropriate state agencies to ascertain what they are doing to address older adult malnutrition
- Once they reopen, visit congregate nutrition site in a senior center or wherever they meet and spend some time talking with staff on the nutrition education they provide and what kind of malnutrition screening they are doing. Also consider going safely on a home-delivered meals route
- Consider forming your own advisory group on nutrition policy for vulnerable populations, including older adults

#ASPENMAW21

The logo for Malnutrition Awareness Week is a white circle with a thick orange border. Inside the circle, the text "MALNUTRITION AWARENESS WEEK™" is written in orange. Below the text is the ASPEN logo, which consists of a stylized orange leaf and the word "aspen" in lowercase. To the right of the ASPEN logo is the text "American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition".

**MALNUTRITION  
AWARENESS  
WEEK™**

aspen | American Society  
for Parenteral and  
Enteral Nutrition

**OCTOBER 4-8, 2021**

**NUTRITION  
IS A HUMAN RIGHT**

#NutritionHumanRight // #ASPENMAW21

**HELP STOP MALNUTRITION**

# Conclusions

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- Topic today was Nutrition Policy Actions to Support Vulnerable Older Adults
- In reality, we have a whole new understanding of the word “vulnerable” over the past 19 months with the pandemic
- Having no playbook for any of this made it more of a challenge for those on the front lines providing services, nutrition or otherwise, and we owe them a continuing debt of gratitude
- The fact is that pandemics make more of us than ever before vulnerable
- It also makes us commit deeper to help those most vulnerable
- We know that we are all in this together and together we can emerge from this, but we also need to be always reminded never to take anything for granted

# Links to Resources

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- Interested in nutrition? Sign up for our policy mailing list! Info is on the Defeat Malnutrition Today website:  
<http://defeatmalnutrition.today>
- New state toolkits:  
<https://www.defeatmalnutrition.today/advocacy-toolkits>
- Resources for professionals:  
<https://www.defeatmalnutrition.today/resources>
- Resources for older adults:  
<https://www.defeatmalnutrition.today/pt-resources>
- Updated National Blueprint:  
<https://defeatmalnutrition.today/blueprint>
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