



**WIG Webinar**  
**Recorded 2/24/2022**  
**“Resilient Communities: Food Systems”**

**Featuring:**

Illinois State Representative Sonya Harper, WIG State Director (moderator)  
New York State Senator Roxanne Persaud  
Georgia State Representative Kim Schofield

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

Welcome to Resilient Communities, a content series presented by Women In Government, a nonpartisan nonprofit foundation that convenes state legislators and stakeholder experts with broad perspectives and experiences to amplify the work of female lawmakers.

I’m Illinois State Representative Sonya Harper, and I am an Illinois State Director for Women In Government, as well as the Chair of the Illinois House Agriculture & Conservation Committee.

Resilient Communities will include five episodes in 2022, marking heritage and history months throughout the year. The series features conversations among women legislators on timely policy topics around different aspects of community resiliency.

Today, in celebration of Black History Month, I’m excited to host this discussion about important issues surrounding Food Systems. “Food Systems” encompasses a variety of topics – agriculture, supply chains, nutrition, and food insecurity, just to name a few.

I’m so pleased to be joined today by a couple of legislators who bring a variety of experiences and policy leadership to this conversation. I’d like to invite each legislator to introduce herself at this time.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

Good afternoon, everyone. I am Senator Roxanne Persaud, representing Senate District 19 in Brooklyn, New York, USA – the city of Brooklyn. I am the Chair of the Senate Social Services Committee, and I am happy today to discuss all things food resiliency.

So, I represent an area that has food deserts, it has food insecure populations, it has health disparities – you name it, I have it. In sections of my district, you can go from very wealthy to not wealthy at all, and so there’s many, many things that we need to address to ensure that all constituents across district 19 are receiving the very best. When we’re talking about food insecurity, there’s desperate need for us to change that narrative, so I’m happy we’re here today to have that conversation and to make sure we brainstorm.

I can learn from you also some of the things that we need to do, some of the things that we can do to ensure that we’re not continuing to have the conversations about disparities in our districts. So, thank you very much for having me.

**Representative Kim Schofield:**

Good afternoon, everyone. I am State Representative Kim Schofield from the great District 60 in Georgia. I am in a mostly urban area. I serve on Health and Human Services for the state committee, so



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everything is health. When I talk agriculture, when I talk food security, when I talk food insecurity, when I talk health disparities, I come from a context of health – why food systems are important.

I also serve on Small Business Development, so when I look at what’s going on in the business area as it pertains to agriculture, there are opportunities that we can do and should be doing to increase the food production, the food manufacturing, to address some of the disparities – the grocery chain, the food supply in Georgia.

We do a good job, but there’s always ways to do a better job. I am Kim Schofield – Kim stands for Keep It Moving – so, I’ll toss it back over to my friend Representative Harper.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

Thank you so much. I am so excited to talk with both of you today.

Freedom from hunger is a basic right. In the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the United Nations states that, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care as well as necessary social services.”

In the United States, our food systems are complex and must support a variety of populations – urban, suburban and rural, from infants to senior citizens. Resilient food systems are critical to our constituents’ health and our nation’s economic success. Let’s kick off this conversation by discussing our growers and producers.

In Illinois, I have introduced the Black Farmer Restoration Act, as well as several states across the nation. Representative Schofield, I know you’ve introduced similar legislation in Georgia. Can you tell me why is it important to create policies around who is growing and producing our food?

**Representative Kim Schofield:**

Yes, thank you. That legislation came out of a conversation with you where I really understood the importance that all people be included at the table when we want to address disparities and economic dissention – and I use the word dissention because we have to look at why everyone is not at the table.

In Georgia, we have a strong rural area. Georgia is known for being a strong agricultural state, but what we don’t do well is bring all people to the table. So, this bill is really opening opportunities that have disenfranchised Black farmers and limited the resources and the access to resources, and it’s important now that we look at generational farmers that have been African American that we bring back the historical context and contextualize why it’s a part of our history.

We’ve been farming for decades, and when we start to introduce this new generation of farmers, it’s important that not only we integrate the technology but that we prepare them to understand what the food system looks like, why it’s important, why it’s not just about going into areas and supporting big



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box businesses – which we don’t have a problem with that - but when we talk about local, local has a sense of community, local has a sense of ownership.

Black farmers have invested enough in the state of Georgia where now we don’t just need to be at the table. We need to create a space that brings other people to our tables and to make sure that we are recognized and respected for the value that we bring to everyone across the state.

Again, it’s not a have and a have not. It is that everybody thrives when we talk about this piece of legislation that historically has shaped Georgia.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

You know, it’s interesting that you’re saying that because we’re now having the conversations about bringing BIPOC farmers to the table. You know, we’ve had meetings, and they’re telling us that they’ve been excluded from everything. “How do we have a seat at the table? There’s so many of us wanting to farm, so many of us with small farms who want to expand our farming, but we’re not given the opportunity.”

And so, we’re starting to have those conversations. We’re going to be having a roundtable discussion with a number of BIPOC farmers to ensure that they have a seat at the table, so it is a timely conversation. Too often they’ve been left out.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

You’re absolutely right, and here in the state of Illinois – I want to say about two or three weeks ago – I actually was able to bring together Black farmers and farmers of color from across the state of Illinois for a listening session, and they really, really appreciated it because, as you both were saying, many times these farmers have not been brought to the table when policies or programs or grants and assistance decisions were being made. So, I love the way we are now engaging our socially disadvantaged farmers, specifically our Black farmers, and let’s continue it.

Sustaining the economic viability of agriculture systems and protecting the environment and natural resources of farmland are necessary so that farmers and even ranchers can meet the needs of society. In the state of Illinois, I’ve introduced the Healthy Soil Act to promote and support farmers and ranchers in improving the health, yield, and profitability of their land.

So very simply, this bill creates a healthy soil and education assessment program which provides technical assistance to encourage farmers to take voluntary soil health measurements, raise awareness about soil health, and create and facilitate workshops and training sessions.

The bill also creates a program to provide training for soil health stewardship, and more importantly, it provides a healthy soils grant program which also ensures that those grants are distributed equitably, giving priority to entities like young producers, veterans, small farms, and of course our socially disadvantaged farmers and communities.



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So, we know that agriculture, as you stated, Representative Schofield, is such an important part of Georgia’s economy. Can you tell me how your state encourages sustainable farm practices?

**Representative Kim Schofield:**

Yes, and to your point, both of you, I think we’re at a critical juncture. There were a lot of things that happened during COVID that showed us and continue to show us the disruption in the food supply and that we need to have another plan B.

So, one of the things Georgia has done is they’re really starting to have and be open to having the conversation around urban agriculture. You know, it was all about the rural farmers, but here lately there’s been robust conversations around urban agriculture.

I’ve introduced one bill, House Bill 576, that really does support the encouragement of urban farming by local governments. It’s for the purposes of making sure that we are hitting everything: the local markets, the gas stations, the pop-up stores. What we’re doing to address this area is to begin to have the conversation. For a long time, there was no conversation held about urban farming, but now when we look at the food systems and how it’s attached to your health and your quality of health, we’re now asking people to become more engaged in the nutritional process and the health process.

We’re looking for ownership on understanding education on nutrition and where does it go. Everyone can grow something, and so, we’ve started programs such as Georgia Grown. We’ve had some grants, and we’re working with the Young Farmers associations, but that’s just the beginning. You are not complete until all voices are heard, and so urban farming and leading to a bigger expansion of urban agriculture is where Georgia right now has a lot of interest and bipartisan support.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

I am going to take a look at both of your pieces of legislation. I’m going to take a look at them because it’s very interesting what you’re saying. We are actually looking to do more urban farming. We’re looking at schools and all available spaces that we have so that kids can understand the farm to table concept in a healthy manner.

I’m going to really be looking at your legislation to see how we partner and what we can do in New York state, so thanks for bringing up those two points.

**Representative Kim Schofield:**

One of the things we did is that I started putting up legislation to form a Farm to Table Caucus because you’d be surprised as to – there’s disconnects on some levels – but really it is a way to bridge the gap between all aspects of agriculture and farming and urban farming and local farming and bring them to the table so that everybody’s voice is heard.



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**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

Yes, we also – our students in schools have no concept of how the food gets to them, and so we want to make sure we educate them so they in turn can have an interest in urban farming. I’m going to take a look at your pieces of legislation.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

We want you to take them! That’s the way that we can spread awareness and even help to further educate our colleagues about our needs as they relate to farming, as they relate to improving our local healthy food systems and our health outcomes because of that. A lot of the bills that I have gotten or run, especially the Black Farmers Restoration, I got from my other colleagues in other states, and so we’re part of this big farming family and food access family, and what we want is for you to introduce bills that you see happening on other states. Please introduce them in your state because that’s how we build power and that’s how we build awareness.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

And you know what? We also need to sustain our farmers, and by us doing that – amplifying the needs of the farmers – it goes a long way for them because farmers are struggling right now.

**Representative Kim Schofield:**

I just want to speak to one more point about the personal connection. I am from New York, so I didn’t grow up on a farm. I didn’t grow up understanding anything about the food system - but I can tell you when I met Representative Harper and her passion and her education – I remember the first meeting we were at together, and she started saying all the work that she was doing in agriculture and farming and the food systems, it was amazing. I immediately started educating myself. I became a gardener, I have a raised bed, I grow food all year round, and it is amazing when you start to understand.

And so, all of my schools now have an agriculture program or have raised beds in there, and we’re doing a couple of other things that are good to create young farmers. So, you take the information, you disseminate it, and everybody gets on board. I’m a part of a group with Black women in agriculture, so we’ve got a lot of things that we can do. This is coming from a city girl.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

And I’m a city girl too. That’s why when we link up at different conferences, especially with Women In Government as we’re doing today, it just adds to the work that we’re doing and lets us know that we have support. So, you have support out there in us, Senator!

Let’s turn to the topics of food security and nutrition. Senator Persaud, you have worked tirelessly in New York to ensure that the state focuses adequately on reducing food insecurity. What are some of the most effective legislative tools to combat hunger in vulnerable populations?

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

Well, thanks for that. You know, food insecurity – it breaks your heart when you see what is happening. We walk around saying, “We’re the greatest,” but we have people who are hungry.



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It’s ensuring vulnerable populations are involved in the decision-making - that’s how we start. Too often we’re bringing things to the table, to the markets and all of that, and it’s not what the communities need.

So, I, as part of the legislation that I authored and chaptered in 2021 compelling New York state to seek approval from USDA for SNAP benefits for restaurant meals and things of that nature, it goes a long way - that bill is about allowing people who are transient to be able to access food, and not just any food, food that’s nutritious, hot meals, and all of those things.

We’re looking to work with farmers and ensuring that they can bring their foods to our urban settings. We’ve chaptered legislation on that. Too often we’ve found that we have lines of people here in need of food, and if you just travel upstate to farms, the farmers are saying, “Well, we have all this food. How can we get it to those communities that you are serving?” The communities are not buying from the farmers, and there are all these arcane rules on the books that prevented this.

When you talk about – for example, just think of milk. A farmer can’t just sell the milk and send it to the city. There are all these rules, and some of it is from what the federal government is saying. So, we’re looking to bring legislation so that the farmers can work with the communities in the cities to sell their food directly to them instead of going through all this crazy paperwork that USDA says they have to go through before they can get the products that they’re selling to the inner city.

We’re looking at how we can get the food pantries not just to only be a food pantry but to have some kind of urban farm that’s adjacent to their pantry so that they are growing and then they are also distributing – and so, you know exactly where that food is coming from. When you know where the food is coming from, you’re more inclined to purchase it or want to participate in that process.

So, those are the things that we’re working on. We’re looking at providing flexible systems for supermarkets. In our inner city communities, you have a corner store, but it’s not healthy food. You see the kids going in or the seniors are going in, and they’re buying these frozen meals. We’re looking to do legislation so that we’re doing away with that so they have more access to fresh produce. If we have more access to fresh produce, it goes a long way because we’re changing the health disparities also.

We have great health disparities in our community, so when we get people access to healthy foods, fresh produce and all of that, it changes a lot of things and the outcomes of the person’s health.

I’m so fortunate to have a partner in the Chair of the Agriculture Committee who also comes from a family of farmers, who has a farm, who is willing to listen to suggestions and move them forward in the Agriculture Committee. We want to make sure that the communities are better off in terms of the kind of food that they are accessing and make sure to improve their health overall. Again, when we change the diet, we change the entire life.



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**Representative Kim Schofield:**

Can I say a few words about what we’re doing here in Georgia to address that issue? One of the things that I’ve been working on with a couple of partners is addressing the data behind the food insecurity. We’ve done a heat map to identify the ZIP codes where these food deserts and food insecurities are, and now we are working with that data and starting to meet with everyone from food distribution to agribusiness to local to find out ways that we can strengthen the pipeline, create a workforce, look at education, look at youth initiatives in community development.

There’s a huge economic piece in here, and we’re using the data that we’re collecting to say, “Ok, we see where the problem is. You know where the problem is, and you’re not going to keep using the fact that these distressed and under-resourced or limited resourced community can’t afford this type of grocery store, so we’re not going to put that in.” No, we’re to ask what’s the opportunity and what’s the option because guess what? The common denominator here is that everybody eats.

And I think to Representative Harper’s point, I love the statement that talks about this as a human right. Freedom from hunger is a human right. We have a high number of seniors here that are going hungry. Just two weeks ago, I was heading to the office, and I stopped, and this little kid was crying, and I asked, “Are you ok?” And he said, “I missed breakfast.” So, I took him to the closest corner store, and I walked around that store three times trying to find something that I could give this little boy for breakfast. And there was nothing in there but high fructose and sugar-laced food. They didn’t even have a fresh banana in there.

So, I know that Georgia has to do better, and again, our conversations around the data and looking at ways that we can start to identify and address – really address – and put in some legs and getting some corporations involved and taking some corporate responsibility for this issue because when you have healthy food, you have healthy work places, you have healthy schools, you have healthy people.

And so, we’ve got to look at a number of systems, and then we are tying legislation to that, so I love some of the legislation you are doing, Senator, and we’ll talk offline on that. But right now, we’ve got to sound the alarm that we know that based on data that this is historically racism at its best for isolating and blocking out ZIP codes giving them access to healthy foods. We can change the game on that.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

We also did the Nourish New York program based on that, and we also have some of our food pantries and distributors who have decided that instead of someone coming every week and you just give them whatever is there that you sign them up and you know what kind of diet that they are required to have. So, all of the food that you’re providing to them is based off of what they are supposed to have. Instead of someone coming and you say, “Ok, here’s some flour and some milk and some sugar,” and that person cannot have that. So instead, you say, “Here. You’re supposed to have 2% milk. You’re supposed to have some eggs.”

These are the kinds of things that we’re working on, all of those partners, to ensure that we’re collecting that data. Collecting data is important because then you target what the person is receiving, and then it



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goes a long way, primarily for the seniors. Seniors, if they don't have food, whatever you give them, they will just take it. And it's not healthy for them or in their best interests. We still have a lot of work to do.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

Thank you so much for that. One of the most important places to combat hunger is in the school cafeteria. Senator Persaud, in addition to your role as Chair of the Social Services Committee, you also serve on the Children & Families Committee in New York. How can state legislators help ensure students have access to the meals they need to be successful in the classroom?

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

That is interesting because we were having this conversation not too long ago. First, we have to have the conversations with the students. What kind of meals are you interested in? And making sure – you know, students will say, “I just want pizza.” Well yeah, but how do we make the pizza healthy and make sure they are hitting everything on the pyramid. And so, we first have to have – when we're building the meal plan, the students have to be involved and the teachers have involved because they see how the students eat and what they're not eating. We put everything on their plate, and then they're not eating it. The parents have to be involved.

We also have to make sure that we are not creating legislation that's restricting what schools can do. Schools are asking us right now – we have this policy where they have to have 1% milk in the school. They can't have whole milk. But the kids are not drinking the 1% milk. They're taking it because you're giving it to them, and then they are tossing it. Well, why not say that the parents know their kids can choose 1% or 2% or whole milk. Why not make it available? Well, Johnny, your mom says that you can only take 1% milk – and Johnny will only take 1%. And Susie? Her mom says that she can only drink whole milk, so she'll take whole milk. We have to do that.

And then we have to look at the snacks that we are giving them. We can't just tell them that we're going to take away all the snacks that they usually have. We want to make sure we balance it, making sure you emphasize what is a healthy snack to have. Also, sometimes you give them a treat and say on maybe Friday afternoon, in addition to the carrot sticks you're going to have, maybe we'll give you a half a slice of cake.

So, we have to make sure that everyone is involved in that conversation and then look at what our states are growing – making sure that that's getting to the table – because too often, you go to some of the farms and you go to some of the supermarkets and the food distributors and you see some of the fresh food that they are dumping because it's not getting to the schools, and the schools would like to have it. They would like to have the opportunity to create menus based on their populations, but we've tied their hands, so we have to look at that.

We're all for making sure we can eat what we want whenever we want, but we also have to make sure that we're not limiting what the schools can do.



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**Representative Kim Schofield:**

The only thing I'd add is looking at home food boxes and delivery services. We've got to start training others to embrace new things. I know that when we started looking at something like a Hello Fresh, when we tried that for a minute, my daughter and I, it was so – first of all, the portion sizes were great, the food was fresh, it was convenient. We did it for I think a month, and when we stopped it, and that was because she moved to New York at that time and it was just too much for one person, the joke was, “Oh no, now we have to go back to peasant food.” So, it was retraining our minds to accept that this was healthy, it was nutritious, the portions were controlled.

When we think about what we are doing in schools, the issue is bringing the students to the table, letting them decide, and then offering outside of that – even when we're giving these knapsacks and backpacks, we're sending them home with processed food for the weekends. We know we're trying to solve an issue, but what other ways can we start incorporating school nutrition and corporate responsibility?

That's where I think we have opportunities. People like Amazon should be able to step up and start opening and doing more to address these in the communities. You know, Walmart does these Fresh Hubs, but is that enough? When looking at new ways of food systems in the schools, we really have to start developing stronger plans that are sustainable, that are going to bring in everyone to the table.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

But also, where we are talking about that, that is why it's important that every school starts to think of a garden adjacent to their school because I have had a couple of schools that have done it so that at the end of the week, the kids are taking the fresh produce home so their parents can cook that. It's not just giving them what food is coming from the cafeteria or the processed food. It's giving them the fresh produce so that their parents can cook that, and they can have a healthy, nutritious meal the weekend. And then when they come back on Monday, we go back to whatever we're giving them.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

Historic inflation has put significant financial obstacles in the way of many Americans trying to feed their families healthy foods. As we know, many inexpensive foods are convenient and calorie-dense but nutrient poor. How can states help make healthy foods more affordable and accessible? Representative Schofield, do you want to respond first?

**Representative Kim Schofield:**

Yeah, because I just told somebody the other day that I had to take a loan out just to go to the grocery store. We're at a critical juncture with the cost of food. When I think about seniors who here in Georgia before COVID were getting \$15 a month for their SNAP benefits, they were increased to \$100 during COVID, but now they're going back down. Where are you going, and how can you even afford to eat? A family of four today is taking anywhere between \$350 and \$450 dollars a week to feed a family, and we're just not there yet.



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I think one of the things that legislatively we should be doing is looking at ways to empower our convenient stores, our gas station stores, our local corner stores, bodegas, and offering some other types of incentives. We’ve got to incentivize them to do better and offer better qualities of food. And if they say, “Well, the people are not going to use it,” then we have to come to the table and find solutions. We are the smartest people in the room, and so you can’t tell me that this isn’t your area, and you can’t come up with a solution on how we can do better.

The other thing is to – in Georgia, having a lot of corner stores, why is it that we don’t have farm stands attached to those corner stores? Or making sure that if you have events in your neighborhood, you have a food truck that is selling healthy food next to a corner store? There are just so many ways that we can legislate and advocate. The price of food – we know that if we look at the growers and the amount of food, the sustainable food, that was grown the last couple of years, there’s a big gap and there’s a gaping hole into what was produced and grown, so why don’t we come local? Stay local. That’s my hashtag, #StayLocal. We can do this. It’s expensive, but there are other ways now that we can be creative.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

I agree with you. We have to incentivize the corner stores, and if we don’t do that, they’ll continue to be bad actors. In some communities, they’re the only sources for people to go into to get some food, and because they know that, they don’t care because despite whatever you say, people must come to them to buy those pre-packaged meals. So, that’s why we looked at asking the federal government to allow us to have certain populations receiving SNAP benefits to be able to go into these stores and purchase hot meals. If you allow them to do that, now they no longer have to go in and say, I’m going to buy cold pizza and go home. They can buy that meal and say, “I want a side of carrots, I want a piece of chicken.”

It’s up to us to continue to push not only our state government but our federal government because remember, if we want to change our SNAP rules, we have to ask our big brothers in Washington, D.C. to give us the permission to do it. So, again, it’s changing how we allow people to purchase food, and it will go a long way.

**Representative Kim Schofield:**

And look at this – you have businesses in your own area, small businesses. What would it look like to create opportunities for them to sell their hot food? Because now you’re closing some gaps. You’re promoting economic growth in your area, supporting small businesses, and then you’re delivering healthy food in a localized place where people who don’t have cars or access want to grab something on their way home or to work.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

They know the owners of the establishments. It’s a place they’re passing every day, and some of these establishments are an integral part of the community, so what better way to grow your local economy?



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**Representative Kim Schofield:**

That’s what I love about WIG! It brings people like this together so that we can create something, and I can almost sense – I see her wheels turning – in another two weeks, Representative Harper will have those bills out somewhere.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

You know we’re always working! Kudos to you too because we’re working on the same issues, and we’re working on some of the same solutions as well. We also recently passed the SNAP Restaurant Meals allowing people who are disabled or elderly to purchase hot meals with their SNAP, so that’s now going in the state of Illinois. The thing now is getting enough businesses to sign up so that people can have these outlets to use. The corner stores, oh my goodness, they’re such an issue in my community, even where I live as well.

On a city level, on a non-profit level, there have been corner store campaigns to help to get the corner stores the equipment that they may need whether it may be refrigeration and cooling and lighting to even stock healthy foods, fruits, and vegetables. That’s been an issue for some of ours, even as it relates to increasing the amount of farmers markets in the community. We have extended our SNAP benefits at farmers markets where people who are shopping at farmers markets on their SNAP card get to double their purchases for free. We need to keep the funding flowing into those types of programs. They definitely do help to mitigate that cost of healthy and affordable foods.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

How long did it take you, Representative Harper, for the federal government to give the approval for the SNAP benefits to be used for the hot meals program?

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

Well, it happened right in the middle of the pandemic, and it ended up being an urgent item, and so I think it too maybe six to eight months.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

Yeah, we’re still waiting for ours, but it’s something that could go a long way to changing the communities, and I think it’s something that every state should push for because it goes a long way.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

Exactly. I don’t know if you have this issue in your communities or districts as well, but being that we’ve had such limited access to fresh and healthy food, it has kind of decreased I would say the demand for it. And even when we’re having our farmers markets or trying to grow the number of farms in the community and trying to get people to eat fresh and healthy, there seems to be a challenge there sometimes, especially in my community, because people don’t know what to do with the food. They don’t know how to cook, and so, having that affordability but also pairing that with training and cooking demos so that we can engage the community around healthy eating and improving their overall health I found is also helpful as well.



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**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

Even at our senior centers as well they’re teaching them how to prepare the meals, so everywhere you have to start doing that because people don’t really know. They’ll just think like what’s the quickest way to get a meal prepared, and that’s what they do, and it’s not usually the healthiest way to do it. And so now we have all of these places who are saying, “We’ll show you how to prepare the meals in a healthy way and also in a short amount of time.”

It’s about us pushing more of that, and I think everywhere we do our food pantries, we also should be bringing that as part of the conversation. It’s not just that you’re coming and receiving a bag of groceries. You’ll get the groceries, and I will also teach you and give you a couple of recipes on how to prepare the meals.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

That’s right. Nutrition education. I’m not going to go into it, but I got my start in this world of urban agriculture and healthy food access by actually hosting cooking demos at an urban farm in my community. It was that people were not coming to my farm stand. They were not buying that food because they didn’t know what to do with it. I’m like, “This is the best, fresh locally grown food – USDA organic,” and I really had to meet people where they were and do cooking demos and do healthy soul food cooking and do even gardening classes with kids but really finding out those ways to connect people back to the land and back to healthy eating.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

You know what, it’s interesting. We have to do those demos. We were just agreeing with you that we have to do those demos. It’s important to all of us because our communities are the ones that are suffering the most, and so if all of us start doing that, it will go a long way.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

That’s right. We kind of got into it a little bit, but I want to talk a little bit more about seniors. Older adult malnutrition is a growing crisis, and we know nutrition can impact seniors’ ability to age in good health, as well as their healthcare costs. Addressing senior malnutrition requires attention to screening, monitoring, acute and long-term care facilities, and community support. I’d love to know from you what measures have been successful in your communities and states at addressing this serious public health issue.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

You know, in my district, we have an above-average concentration of older adults. I have a number of residences where older adults are living, and they are aging in place. We want to ensure they are aging in place with all of the support services that are available to them.

We were doing a lot of investment in community centers where they can go down, where they are teaching them how to prepare the foods, where they can also go have the food prepared if they are unable to prepare the food. When they go, they are receiving healthy, nutritious meals that they can have then and one to take home with them.



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Also, when you go to the health centers, ask for them to give healthy cooking information as well when they're giving them food because a number of our health centers now are also giving our seniors food. The COVID pandemic really showed us what we were lacking, and so these health centers started encouraging the seniors that when you're coming for your appointment, we will give you the food also. And it's not just any kind of food - it's nutritious food. We will show you how to prepare the food, and if you are unable to prepare it, we will ask your caregiver to come so we'll teach the caregiver how to prepare it. We also started having hot meals delivered to seniors so that they can have a healthy, nutritious meal.

Those are some of the things that we are doing because, again, our seniors will – first of all, their financial situation is not the best. Many of them are dependent on the pension that they're receiving which is not a lot. They're dependent on the food subsidies that they're receiving from the government which is not a lot. Some of them, in addition to providing for themselves, are assisting with their children and their grandchildren, and so they're taking away from what they have for themselves and passing it on to ensure that their grandchildren or their children have, and they're going without.

We have to ensure that we're continuing to offer them healthy options and not for them to think that we're giving them a handout. That's the thing with the seniors also. They don't want you to think that they're a burden on you, and so, they're not coming to you saying, “I need help.”

We have to be asking the senior centers to be mindful of the seniors when they come in so we can build that database so we have the information so we know what to do to give to the seniors. Again, the health centers are trying. They're working with us and doing that. We're asking all of our community partners that when you see your seniors, create your list and talk with them, and we'll have others call them and ask, “What are your nutritional needs? How can we assist you?”

Many of them are also afraid to open their doors when you go to knock because you are told that they are food insecure, and they need assistance. The times that we are in, seniors are afraid of answering the doorbell because of the things that are being done to them. They prefer to go hungry until somebody says, “Oh, wait a minute. I haven't seen Mrs. Smith coming down to the center for a few days to get some food.”

Basically, we have to make sure that we're offering them the nutritious meals in the spaces that they're in. So, we go to the churches and set up food distribution with the churches, we go to the senior centers and set up distribution in the senior centers, the libraries, all of that, ensuring that we're also assisting them in the preparation.

We have a lot of work to do when it comes to taking care of our seniors. I like to tell people, “Our seniors have done everything that they needed to do, and now is the time for them to just sit back and relax.” But they're not able to do that because they're still worrying about where that next meal is coming from. So, it's up to all of us to make sure that we're working together to help them out in every which way possible.



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**Representative Kim Schofield:**

So, just a few things that Georgia has done. We put together a state plan to address malnutrition and senior hunger in particular. We look at barriers like transportation, location, access to affordability, looking at ways that we can improve the infrastructure. So, part of that is to make sure that I've been looking back and going and seeing where that gaps are or where we're failing to achieve some of the goals and objectives that we laid out.

I was fortunate to attend the last Women In Government convening, and we talked about malnutrition, and it was very, very helpful. I brought a couple of suggestions back to the team, our Department of Aging for the state, that are looking into things in terms of mobile food sources for seniors. I know there's Meals on Wheels, but there are other things and areas creating mini-grants for folks that are trying to do this type of work.

What we learned in COVID is that during that time, seniors were, because of COVID, afraid to go to the grocery store or they didn't have access to broadband or feel comfortable with something like an Instacart or delivery, and so, they were eating whatever they had in their house. Sometimes food was expired, spoiled, or it could be cookies. “What did you eat today, Grandma?” “Oh, I ate just some cheese and crackers.”

So, we were looking at other ways to address these issues in and out of pandemic mode, but to develop sustainable goals that are really strictly addressing the senior and the older adult population. From a healthcare perspective, we make sure that when older adults go to the doctor that we're asking questions about their food and their food security. Because if we're telling people to take medication and you don't have the food to take it or you don't have the transportation to go get the food, you will take medication on an empty stomach.

So, we're looking at it from a healthcare perspective and engaging the medical community to get more data on how many people have access to food to be able to work in compliance with their medical needs.

**Senator Roxanne Persaud:**

That is so true. We also had during the pandemic – and we're still in the pandemic in New York City – hot meals were being delivered, and they've continued that. They've scaled back some, but they've continued that, and that's where it's important that the people who are coming into contact with our seniors are observant of what is happening with our seniors so that they can share that information.

We also had seniors who did not have access to computers or broadband who were able to use the telephone to call a number or they could call our offices, and then we did all of the work for them to have those meals delivered, and that went a long way in assisting the seniors.

But again, seniors don't want to tell you that they're hungry. They don't want to tell you that, “Oh, it's the last set of food in my house. I was trying to take the cat food and eat that.” We've seen that, and



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we’ve heard of seniors doing that, but they don’t want to tell you that because for them it’s like, “Oh my gosh, I shouldn’t have to be going through this. I’ve done everything possible.”

So, every person who comes into contact with a senior – whether it’s a church, whether it’s at the senior center, whether it’s at the library, whether it’s just talking with them in line at the supermarket – you should be observing what is going on with that senior, and it will help us a lot.

**Representative Sonya Harper:**

That’s right. Well, ladies, I think we’ve come to the end of our conversation here, but I’m sure it’s going to continue in many more forms.

I want to thank New York State Senator Roxanne Persaud and Georgia State Representative Kim Schofield for joining me today to kick off Women In Government’s Resilient Communities series. I really enjoyed this discussion, and I hope that it provided some insights and ideas for my fellow legislators across the country.

Please stay engaged with Women In Government online and on social media for the next episode of Resilient Communities, which will celebrate Women’s History Month by discussing cybersecurity, including topics such as data privacy, identity theft, frauds, scams, and consumer rights.

We look forward to that discussion. Thank you.

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**Resources:**

[Georgia House Bill 976 The Black Farmer Restoration Office; establish](#)

[Georgia House Bill 576 Local government; support of urban agriculture; encourage](#)

[Illinois House Bill 5224 The Healthy Soil Act](#)

[Illinois House Bill 3343 SNAP Restaurants Meal Program](#)

[New York Senate Bill 64 Relates to establishing a statewide restaurant meals program as part of the supplemental nutrition assistance program](#)

[Georgia Grown program](#)

[Nourish New York program](#)