

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

“The Capital Area Food Bank 2026 Hunger Report Launch”

DATE

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FEATURING

Radha Muthiah

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Hilary Salmon

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Caitlin Welsh: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to CSIS for the launch of the Capital Area Food Bank's 2026 Hunger Report.

For those of you who are visiting CSIS for the first time, welcome. To those of you who have joined us here before, welcome back. I'm Caitlin Welsh, director of the CSIS Global Food and Water Security Program.

Today, we're launching a report – THE report – quantifying food insecurity in the Greater Washington, D.C. region and offering solutions to hunger in the DMV. But CSIS is a national security think tank, so some of you may be wondering: Why are we launching this report here? Part of the reason is, I will admit, our beautiful event space. (Laughter.) But on a more serious note, there are important similarities between the approach that my program takes to food security around the world and the essential work that the Capital Area Food Bank does in our region.

At CSIS, we consider food insecurity to be a matter of national security. We assess the complex causes of and we put forward practical solutions to food insecurity. And we recognize the importance of data to monitoring hunger and finding out which tools are best to fight it.

On national security, many of you may be aware that after World War II it was military leaders who helped propel passage of the 1946 School Lunch Act, reporting undernourishment as a top reason for rejecting recruits for the military effort. And just last year at CSIS, I heard a retired major general say the ability of our country to succeed in the economic and military realms depends on having a population that is healthy and well-nourished. Access to adequate nutrition is foundational to physical and cognitive development, which is necessary for educational advancement and economic growth everywhere. And, of course, food security is not only a matter of national security and economic growth. It is also a matter of moral leadership, which is a topic we'll hear more about later today.

The causes of food insecurity are complex, and solutions lie in many sectors. In our region and around the world numerous overlapping factors – economic factors, environmental factors, political factors, so many others – contribute to food insecurity. And so the solutions to food insecurity must take all of these factors into account. And we'll hear more today – in today's program about the factors that contribute to food insecurity in the DMV, and the Capital Area Food Bank's proposals to support food security for our region's population in the long term.

Finally, all of us gathered here know that quantifying food insecurity is essential to helping us design tools to reduce hunger. Many of you also know that the federal government recently terminated longstanding surveys and

reports on food insecurity across the United States. In the absence of such efforts, reports like the Capital Area Food Bank's Hunger Report are even more important to help us understand food insecurity in our region and in our country. For our part, the CSIS Global Food and Water Security Program is taking steps to measure and estimate food insecurity nationwide following the termination of these national surveys and reports. And we'll have more news to share about this work in the coming months.

For all of these reasons and more, we are delighted to host the launch of the Capital Area Food Bank's 2026 Hunger Report. Earlier, I mentioned CSIS's event space. And we have Dr. John Hamre, CSIS's CEO emeritus, to thank for a beautiful building, and much more. Dr. Hamre has been a champion of CSIS's work on food security and is a longtime supporter, with his wife, Julie, of the Capital Area Food Bank. And he recently joined the Capital Area Food Bank CEO Advisory Committee. It's my pleasure – it will be my pleasure to welcome Dr. Hamre to the stage for remarks at the end of our event today.

And between now and then, we have an excellent program. First, we'll start off with a presentation from Capital Area Food Bank to give you an overview of the findings of the 2026 Hunger Report. Then I'll welcome an expert panel to the stage for a wide-ranging discussion. We will then hear closing remarks from Dr. Hamre. And after that, we'll welcome all of you to join us for a post-event reception in our foyer right behind you.

Before we get started, one last announcement about emergency exits, which are behind me and to the right, and in the corner of the foyer behind you and to the right. Should the need arise, which we do not expect, we will ask you to follow us and head toward these exits. I've heard Dr. Hamre make a promise sometimes that if we actually have to do that, he'll buy everyone ice cream. Maybe he will, if that has to – if that happens. (Laughter.)

And one final-final announcement – I usually save this for the end – but I do want to thank my entire team up front – Emma Curtis, Joely Virzi, and Zane Swanson. Thank you so much for your excellent work for this event, and always. So I want to acknowledge my team, who's around the perimeter. Thanks so much. (Applause.) And with that, I'm really happy to start today's event with a short video.

(Video presentation begins.)

Video:

In May of 2025, after working for the government for twenty-plus years, my job ended because of government cuts. I knew I wanted to get back to the government. One of the top things that I had to do was maintain my security clearance. And maintaining my security clearance means that I needed to make sure that I stayed on top of paying my bills so that my credit score did not decrease. So in order to make ends meet, I just had to do just about

anything. I started off with applying for unemployment, withdrawing a portion of my 401(k), working Uber, and Empower. I have four mouths to feed. So in that case, that's what I did in the interim. And then I had to seek food and additional assistance elsewhere afterwards.

I volunteered at the food bank. And with volunteering at the food bank, I don't know if I ever seen myself having to receive food from the food bank, which is not a problem. You know, but I found myself in that place of saying, OK, we need to put food on our table. So in that case, I became a recipient of the food bank. I lost my job in May. So it took six months from May for me to find a job. I am grateful that I found my job. However, the salary that I was paid was significantly lower than what I was getting paid previously. So I still needed help. I had to get caught up on my bills, but I was grateful for what I had.

Since then I've been able to secure another job. I'm in a more comfortable situation. I can do a little more for my family. However, I am still paying back bills. I am still paying back my 401(k). I'm trying to build a savings. My daughter is going into the 11th grade. I'm trying to figure everything out. I'm just taking everything one day at a time, but I know it's going to be OK.

(Video presentation ends.)

Ms. Welsh: And now for a presentation on top-line findings and recommendations from the 2026 Hunger Report from the Capital Area Food Bank, pleased to welcome to the stage Sabrina Tadele, deputy chief of strategic initiatives, and Hilary Salmon, deputy chief of external affairs with the Capital Area Food Bank. (Applause.)

Sabrina Tadele: Hello, everyone. Before jumping into the findings, I'd like to share a brief background about the Hunger Report and how it's developed. The Capital Area Food Bank has produced a Hunger Report every year since 2020. And we do so to offer insights on the landscape of food insecurity across the DMV that are as urgently needed as ever.

The data in the Hunger Report is informed by a general population survey that captures the experiences of thousands of randomly sampled households across the DMV. We conduct this research with NORC at the University of Chicago, with whom we've proudly partnered for the last several years. And our other key partners in the production of this report are our clients. We engage our food insecure neighbors directly in the production of the report, from research design, to narrative formation, to personal storytelling, as you just heard. And it is a great privilege to be able to elevate their voices through this project.

Additionally, we have the incredible privilege of working with a fantastic editorial board who reviewed our research and our writing. And I know several of you are here today. So thank you very much for your contributions to this project. And lastly, before we jump into the findings, I would like to thank Capital One, whose support enabled this research. We are extremely grateful for your commitment to the Food Bank and our work in the community.

The topline finding from the 2026 Hunger Report is that food insecurity in the DMV has reached a five-year high, 38 percent, the highest level since we started the general population study back in 2022. Now every year the survey asks respondents about their experiences over the last 12 months. So that first data point captured the height of the pandemic. And as we move farther away from that economic crisis, you might expect to see food insecurity falling. But that is not what we're seeing. Instead, we're seeing that food insecurity is definitively on the rise.

The second key finding in the report is that, for the first time in the study's history, just under half of DMV households are highly food secure. The definition of high food security, according to the USDA, is having no problems or anxiety about accessing adequate food. And in last year's report, we highlighted that very low food security, the darkest teal stack there, had been consistently rising year over year. But this year, we crossed a new threshold on the other end of the spectrum, with only 49 percent of households in the region reporting no signs of hardship.

Now, dialing into the county level, we intentionally capture a representative sample not just of the DMV region but also of every county that we serve, because we know that we have stakeholders in this room and across the region who want and need this data at the local level. And, as you can see from this chart, many counties saw their all-time high prevalence rate in 2026. But I want to highlight that the two geographies where we saw statistically significant increases compared to 2022 were the DMV writ large, and Prince William County. But I would be remiss if I did not highlight that Prince George's County hit a new high at 56 percent, over half the population.

On the other end of the spectrum, Montgomery County was the only county that saw a notable decrease in food insecurity this past year, going from 35 percent to 31 percent. And while this is technically still within the margin of error, we think that this is noteworthy given the extraordinary levels of investment that that county has made in food security.

The next key finding in the report is that 34 percent of children across the DMV are living in food insecure households. That equates to about 350,000 children. We know that the food security rate for children is typically a little

bit lower than the adult rate, as parents will often sacrifice their own intake to ensure children are eating enough. But nonetheless, 34 percent of children is staggeringly high. And food security is especially important for children because their nutrition affects not just their current health but also their physical, mental, and social development, and thus their future health and wellbeing.

And with that summary of the key trends, I'd like to hand it over to my coauthor, Hilary, to highlight the key drivers of food insecurity in the DMV.

Hillary Salmon: Thanks, Sabrina. Now that we've shared the top lines about what's happening, we'll also address the why and explore the key drivers behind these trends. Bottom line, more people in our area are seeing their financial positions deteriorate. In the last year, 44 percent of households reported that their financial situation had gotten worse. This is up from 40 percent in 2025, and nine percentage points up from 2024 when it was 35 percent. It's also worth noting that, compared to the rest of the country, the DMV is fully 10 percentage points higher when it comes to people reporting that their finances are worsening.

When asked why this was the case, respondents spoke largely to economic factors. Thirty-five percent said that negative experiences of the economy were driving the decline in their finances. Other responses related to employment, or lack of it, and increasing costs. You can see several of those here in these bubbles. Double clicking here into employment, we saw that there was a major theme related to employment in this year's survey. As some of you may know, the DMV led the country this year in job losses. In particular, the impacts of federal workers and contractors who were either laid off, fired, or quit, continue to linger.

Thirty-five percent are still without work. Twenty percent said it took six months or longer to find a new job. And the folks who did find work find that they're often earning less; 44 percent said they're making less than they were before. We heard that story so clearly in Quinnae's video at the top of the program. These challenges with employment are also coming at a time when many things are simply more expensive. Anyone in this room who has gone to a grocery store or filled up their tank in the last year, and beyond, certainly has experienced this.

Since 2019, the year prior to the disruptions of the pandemic, the consumer price index, which reflects changes in the cost of goods and services, has risen 28 percent. But there's a gap between the increase in that amount of money and the increase in what people are earning. Average weekly earnings have only gone up by 18 percent over the same time period, meaning that while many people are seeing increases in their pay, their purchasing power is still continuing to erode.

Finally, the federal government shutdown had a major effect on this area during the last year. Forty-three days without a paycheck was a big blow to many federal workers and contractors, particularly those at the lower end of the pay scale. A prolonged disruption of cash flow had an impact on everyone. Even 32 percent of higher income earners said that they were somewhat or much worse off due to the shutdown. In the middle – in the case of middle-income earners that number rose to 40 percent. And in the lowest income bracket, over half, 51 percent, said that the shutdown made their finances worse. Notably, the percentage of low-income earners who said the shutdown made their – made them much worse off was equal to that of high and middle income earners combined.

All of this is forcing our neighbors to make ends meet with a variety of financial coping strategies that can have profoundly negative consequences. We see that nearly 60 percent of households reported using savings to pay for everyday costs of living. Forty-six percent are making minimum payments on debt. And 39 percent stopped saving for the future completely, things like college and retirement. And people are taking on debt through mechanisms like “buy now pay later” to buy essential items like groceries. Not luxury goods, basic necessities that they simply don’t have the cash for today. And those impacts go beyond the present moment. They can have long-term and even generational repercussions on household finances and economic stability in the longer term.

Ms. Tadele:

: Thank you. In this next section we’re going to review a few of the major factors that will be influencing the landscape of food insecurity over the coming months and years. Naturally, the most significant factor in this category is H.R. 1, which was passed last summer but the provisions of which still have not fully taken effect. H.R. 1 cut a historic \$187 billion out of SNAP over the next decade. Now, some of the policy changes in there technically went into effect in 2025, but we know that the full force of these shifts has not yet translated into the landscape of benefits access.

In D.C., for example, June 2026, just a few months ago, was the first month in which SNAP recipients who do not meet work requirements will be restricted in the amount of time they can remain on the program. Looking farther ahead, we can see that in 2026 the federal government will be reducing its support for the administrative costs of operating the program and shifting these to states. And next year, for the first time, a portion of the costs of the actual benefits will begin to be borne by the states.

Now, we know from our survey that if and when SNAP recipients lose their benefits, their first line of defense will be many of the organizations in this room, the charitable food system. In our survey, we asked a hypothetical question about what people would do if they lost half of their benefits. And

the top response was, “seek out new or additional food pantries.” It’s also worth noting that the second-most popular response was to shift to less expensive or less healthy groceries. And we’ll be talking about the intersection of food security and health later this afternoon.

Now, the second trend that we highlight in the report that may impact food security in the coming years is the increased strain being placed on the charitable food system. In 2026, 28 percent of DMV residents reported accessing charitable food at least once in the past year. And within the food bank’s own network of partners, whom we survey regularly, three quarters reported an increase in their attendance last fall. And while the demand for these services is increasing, many nonprofits are seeing a decrease in their funding.

In a recent survey by the Urban Institute, almost half of nonprofits headquartered in the DMV reported experiencing disruptions to their government funding during the past year. And many of those organizations reported pulling back from their core missions by reducing services, eliminating programs, or slowing hiring. This is important because the charitable food system is buffering thousands of families from experiencing food insecurity. Among that 28 percent who reported accessing charitable food, 8 (percent) of the 28 (percent) are food secure. This means that the food they’re receiving from food pantries is essential to their food security and without it we can assume they would be facing food insecurity too.

We asked respondents who accessed charitable food to estimate how much money they save in groceries by visiting their food pantries. And the average estimate was just over \$200 a month. So this system is holding up an incredible weight across the region, keeping food insecurity rates from being even higher and, as you’ll hear momentarily, is essential to sustain. Now I’ll hand it back over to Hilary to outline the recommendations that we put forward in the report.

Ms. Salmon:

So finally, as with every Hunger Report that we issue, we don’t want to offer only problems. We also want to offer possible solutions, ways for all sectors to help address the challenges that we’ve just outlined. This year we’ve made recommendations that are framed about around both the short and the longer term.

So in the immediate term much of the opportunity to mitigate increased hardship rests with state and local governments as well as with the charitable food sector. At the state and county level there are four key areas. The first is to protect and strengthen local investments in food security. While we know and we are well aware that states and localities have new financial burdens from H.R. 1, as well as other fiscal constraints caused by shifting tax bases, the costs associated with not continuing to support food

security would ultimately be much higher. So we're encouraging states and localities to protect and, should need intensify, to ramp up investments in anti-hunger programs and initiatives.

We're also encouraging states to continue reducing administrative barriers and improving access to benefits wherever possible, through things like streamlining forms, providing mobile-friendly verification options, et cetera. Partnering with community organizations, our third recommendation, can also support individuals with getting help from a trusted local resource to sign up for or renew benefits. And finally, ensuring that children's nutrition programs remain intact is essential. We saw earlier in the findings, children are highly vulnerable to food insecurity and are poised to become even more so. Investing in programs that serve children must remain a top priority.

In the charitable sector, there are also things we know we can do, including helping households access or keep available benefits, including resources for understanding and navigating eligibility requirements, building a more coordinated support system that makes accessing resources easier, and, finally, increasing awareness of available resources. One of the biggest barriers to getting help is simply knowing that help exists. Doing more to promote services in partnership with our network can help bridge the information barrier for more people.

Now, while short-term interventions are critical, we know that we must also advance approaches that support our community in the longer term by engaging in systemic ways that enable greater wellbeing and financial stability. This can include things like economic mobility initiatives. The food bank itself operates several such programs, in partnership with many of our region's institutions of higher learning. By providing food support to students who need assistance these programs remove a barrier that could otherwise be an impediment to staying in school. That in turn makes it easier for participants to earn a degree or a professional credential that can enable them to earn more over time, while also contributing to the development of the talent pipeline that fuels our region's growth.

And finally, we advocate for the development of sustainable funding mechanisms and infrastructure needed to scale food as medicine initiatives. These programs – oops. I forgot to switch the slide. Now I have. (Laughter.) These programs pair nutritious food with medical care, which can help individuals significantly improve their health and enable them to manage some of the diet-related illnesses that impact their daily lives. And with that, we conclude our overview of this year's Hunger Report. And we hand it back to Caitlin, with our thanks. (Applause.)

Ms. Welsh: Thank you very much, Sabrina and Hilary. Now for a second short video from the Capital Area Food Bank, as I will also ask the panelists to take the stage. So the second video right now.

(Video presentation begins.)

Video: Over the past year, we've seen a huge increase in the number of folks needing to access our food pantry. Starting in October, our numbers really started to rise. And since January we've seen 30 percent more guests than we did back in July of last year. I think the reason that more people are needing to access our food pantry is because the cost of living keeps rising. Even for folks who have a full-time job, if they're making minimum wage that's less than \$30,000 a year. And that's hardly enough for paying rent, much less utility, health insurance, child care, and, of course, food. So more people are needing to access our food pantry than ever before.

All the folks we serve need more support from us. That includes people who are active military – we're near Fort Belvoir – veterans, seniors who we deliver to their homes, families with kids. All facets of the population we serve are growing. And I think that's just a reflection of cost of living getting more expensive. So it's taking a lot of creativity to figure out how to increase capacity in a way that feels sustainable and manageable for the long term.

We've increased the number of distribution hours that folks can come into our pantry. We've increased the number of volunteer slots so that we have more people helping those who are shopping. We've increased the number of grocery store partnerships and of volunteer drivers, both to grocery stores and also to homebound clients, so that we can serve more people without necessarily increasing our costs.

(Video presentation ends.)

Ms. Welsh: Wonderful. It's now my pleasure to welcome our expert panel, including Radha Muthiah, president and CEO of the Capital Area Food Bank, Matthew Rabbitt, principal research associate with the Urban Institute, Kofi Essel, inaugural food as medicine program director with Elevance Health, and Jack McDougle, president and CEO of the Greater Washington Board of Trade. Welcome to all of you. And thank you all for making time to join us.

Jack McDougle: Thank you.

Ms. Welsh: Radha, welcome back to CSIS. And congratulations on the launch of this important report. And thank you for the lifesaving work that you and your team do every day. You've been releasing this report for five years now. What strikes you most? What surprises you most about this year's findings?

Radha Muthiah: Well, Caitlin, thank you for inviting us to have this launch here at CSIS. And thank you for making the connection earlier between food security and national security. I don't think it's one that naturally people make all the time. You're right. We've been publishing this report for five years with NORC, and seven years if we start from, you know, the very beginning. And there are a few things that really struck me as I saw the results from this year's report.

First is the direction of the trend lines. One would expect something quite different after – many years after an economic shock. And when one looks back historically, for example, pre-pandemic, you look back to the 2008 Great Recession, and when we look at the USDA data at that point you would see a few years of elevated levels of food insecurity, but then it starts to come down. And that's not what we're seeing now, a good five, six years even since the height of the pandemic. So that is certainly one thing that struck me, the number of families that are still struggling to really address basic needs including how to put food on their tables.

The second thing that really struck me was who is food insecure. I know many of us would expect that those who are living at the poverty line to be food insecure, and indeed they are – many of them are. But what also struck me, as I've looked at these trends over the years, is that there are families that are, you know, making a household income that is at 200 percent, 300 percent of the poverty line. These are families where one person in the family might be a schoolteacher, another person might be a health aide, yet, you know, and someone else might be a child caregiver for one of us. And these are the types of families who are working one or more jobs but still struggling to be able to make ends meet. And that is what is, I think, particularly painful, looking at the trends in these reports.

But I do want to say something really critical, that these trends are not inevitable. We have seen that we can make a big difference. Policies, positive policies, public investment does make a big difference. We saw this during the pandemic when there was an increase in public support. With the expansion of the child tax credit we were able to reduce child poverty by almost a half in one year. So we know the power of positive policies. But the reverse is also true. And that's what we need to be mindful of. Sabrina talked about we're at the precipice of H.R. 1 and its implications. We'll have to look really carefully, and with concern, at what happens to families over the next few years.

So I don't want us to take trend lines and just accept it. There's some very real people underneath these numbers. And we're also very clear that policy can make a difference. And we should attempt to collectively ensure that we have more positive policies.

Ms. Welsh: Thank you for making that incredibly important point. As the report shows, the need in our region is high, and it's in fact increasing. Can you talk a little bit more about what the food bank is doing to address needs in the short term and the long term, and maybe about the plan you have to meet this moment with the urgency that it requires?

Ms. Muthiah: Yes. I mean, as you just saw earlier, you know, when people – the question was asked of individuals, if your SNAP benefits are cut in half what are you going to do? You know, the majority of people said they will turn to the charitable food system. So we know that when household budgets are stretched, people will turn to us. And we are expecting that demand. And so as a result there are a few things that we're doing.

One is just scaling up the level of food that we are purchasing to be able to distribute into our communities. Last year, our target was 50 million meals' worth of groceries. We closed the year with 65 million meals that we distributed. And that's really last year, before the real effects of H.R. 1 are taking effect. And this year, our goal is about 70 million. And unfortunately, we will – you know, we have plans to go to 75 or 80 million in the next year or two, to meet this growing need that is likely in our community.

The other thing that we are looking at is H.R. 1 has an impact not only on SNAP, but also on Medicaid, in terms of really curtailing the eligibility of individuals for that important safety net program. And we know there's a significant overlap between those who benefit from SNAP and those who benefit from Medicaid. There is a powerful intervention, a food intervention, that can have one investment that results in two outcomes. And that is the food as medicine programming that we're engaging in, and so many others are as well. And we are looking to really scale those efforts up over the next few years. It's really a cost-effective intervention. And I suspect Kofi will speak a little bit to that, given his experience as well.

Lastly, I don't want us to really be thinking – well, I guess there's two more things that I would say. One is we don't want to just address people's food needs today. We do want to do that, but we want to help them get out of those circumstances of vulnerability. And so we are engaging in our – we're partnering in bundling food with workplace and college programs so that we can help people not just get through this week and address their food needs, but really get to a place of financial stability with a living wage, where they will no longer need the food bank.

And that really gets us to this longer-term view of what we're doing, in parallel, which is to be able to really rethink how we shape the future safety nets – whether that's SNAP or that's Medicaid. That's critical. Because if we're having this conversation five or 10 years from now, and all I'm saying is we're increasing the amount of food that the charitable system provides, we

haven't really addressed the root causes of what's causing food insecurity. So for us to meet this moment, it's really both scaling up the food that we provide to those in need today, but also thinking about how we reshape the future safety net so that people can get to a place of greater stability.

Ms. Welsh: : Thank you. And that's actually one of the things I appreciate most about the report, is the solutions that you're – that you're suggesting, that lie not just in the food assistance – food provision realm, but holistic solutions that you're offering. So thank you, again, for that. And we'll return to a number of the issues that you mentioned as we continue with our discussion.

But right now I'm pleased to turn to Matt Rabbitt, who is a longtime collaborator of the Capital Area Food Bank, and of my program at CSIS. And this is actually my – we've worked together for many, many years, but it's my first time to meet you in person and welcome you to our stage. (Laughter.) So really, really pleased to have you here. And Matt joined us – he has the longest travel distance. He joined us – he is joining us from Kansas City. So, Matt, thank you so much for making the trip to join us in person.

For four years, I believe, Matt was the lead researcher on USDA's major report on household food security in the United States. Matt is now with Urban Institute. Matt, you're uniquely positioned to talk about why national measures of food security matter so much, and about what we lose – what the risks are when we no longer have this data.

Matthew P. Rabbitt:

Yeah, well, first of all, thank you very much to CSIS, and your team, and to Capital Area Food Bank for inviting me here today, and for everyone attending. I think it's incredibly important that we continue to focus on food insecurity. I spent 12 years at USDA's Economic Research Service trying to find ways to improve how we measure food security in the United States. And in particular in this environment where we do no longer have national statistics, it's troubling in the sense that the national statistics were our benchmark as a country in terms of how we were performing and addressing the food needs of everyone within the United States.

And so now that we no longer have that, the problem is that now we have a situation where multiple organizations will have data varying quality. And so at this point we no longer can have easy consensus on what is the extent and severity of food insecurity in the United States. And losing the national statistics also takes away the ability to have a strong and well-validated benchmark for other organizations, like Capital Area Food Bank, when they collect their data. And so having that insight is really critical, because it allows you to benchmark where you're at in terms of your data collections.

Ms. Welsh:

Yeah. So, in the absence of these national measures of food security – actually, we've chatted and you've described it this way, that we went from 30 years of consistent measurement of food security at the national level to

being in the Wild West. So now we're in the Wild West. And you see – and there are important efforts that are happening. It's not – it's not just the Wild West. But you see important efforts happening at the state level and the regional level, which are incredibly important. As I underscored at the beginning, and as we've heard throughout the day, there are some risks involved there too. So can you explain both?

Dr. Rabbitt: Yeah. So, I mean – (coughs) – excuse me – the challenge being that if you no longer have national measurement of food insecurity that is concentrated within one key expertise area and has a very large and reliable dataset, is that going to states and other regional organizations is that they're going to have different levels of resources, and time, and investment they're willing to make in food insecurity data collection. And so you're going to have varying quality of data because of that. You'll also have varying expertise that's also implementing those data collections as well.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah. Thank you. Having measured food insecurity at the national level among important subgroups, including military families, and veterans, and others, what are some things that you wish people understood better about measurements of food security?

Dr. Rabbitt: So the first thing that's really challenging, and I think it's a natural inclination as human beings, is that we want to naturally describe food insecurity as being hunger. And realistically, the food insecurity measure is assessing economic access to food, so a sufficient amount of food that you can afford for your household to meet your individual needs, as far as you evaluate them. And so, you know, at the more severe ranges of severity of food insecurity, you will experience hunger. But hunger is inherently an individual-level physiological concept. And household food insecurity is a household-level economic access to food.

Ms. Welsh: Well, I think that might be a perfect segue into the conversation that I'll have with Kofi Essel. Thank you very much for that. Thank you. (Laughs.) And we'll return to some of these themes momentarily. But again, this is a perfect segue to a few questions that I have for Dr. Kofi Essel. And thank you very much for the important work that you do, and welcome to CSIS for the first time.

Kofi Essel: Thank you.

Ms. Welsh: To stave off hunger, families often consume food that is of inadequate nutritional value or that contributes to negative health outcomes. When you see a report like the report that was launched today, what stands out to you, from a clinical perspective, or from a public health perspective?

Dr. Essel: Yeah, great question. Thank you all for inviting me here today.

So I'm at Elevance Health right now. And what is Elevance Health, people say. Elevance Health was previously known as Anthem. It's a large payer. We see over 45 million members around the country, engage with over 100 million lives around the country. It's an opportunity that I've really appreciated and enjoyed to do this national work and engage food insecurity from the national perspective. My background comes in community health. I'm a community pediatrician. I am down the street at Children's National Hospital. And I've been working for many years as a community pediatrician engaging families, populations, working and training providers to engage this topic of food insecurity a little bit closely.

And I will say this, health care recognizes that food insecurity is truly a health issue. It truly is a health issue. When you look at the data and you look at the literature, we see clear associations with food insecurity and high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, increased ER visits, and hospitalizations, the list goes on, and on, and on. On top of that, we, as health care, have been responding to food insecurity in a number of different ways as well. Professional organizations have been putting out policy statements and strategies to better address this and get their providers around the country to engage this as well. American Academy of Pediatrics, Family Physicians, American Medical Association, the list goes on and on as well.

When I think about this report and what really stood out to me, what really stood out to me was this concept of tradeoffs. Tradeoffs mattered a lot, to me. Why so? Well, when I looked at the sort of dataset that was put up earlier, you saw that 44 percent of individuals describe themselves to have worsening finances. Their finances were – they were worse off in the last 12 months than the year before. Forty-four percent of people. We know that food insecurity oftentimes is triggered by a sudden financial hardship, triggers a cascade of coping mechanisms that could really impact a family's health. Changes the quality of food that they're eating, the quantity of food, changes behaviors with the children, increased stress in the home.

Well, these tradeoffs are really significant. They're in our faces. What do we see with these tradeoffs? Number one, people are leaning towards or gravitating towards foods that were considered more unhealthy, describing them as more unhealthy. We've been talking a lot about ultra-processed foods of late, and these kind of foods. There's a reason why individuals gravitate towards those foods with increased stress in their homes. Not only that, what I saw is that 43 percent of individuals describe themselves to delay health-care spending for important health-care expenses for themselves and their families. That's significant. You put these things together, eating different foods that may not support your health, in addition to not accessing the care you need, and it's going to lead to worsening health outcomes. And that's something that really stood out to me.

Ms. Welsh: Thank you so much. What do you think – what would it look like for food and nutrition support to be a routine part of medical care, of whole-person care? You know, you've seen this at the individual, and family level, and community level, and now, you know, from your position with insurance – with Elevance, what would it look like to transform health care in the U.S., such that food insecurity is taken seriously as it should be?

Dr. Essel: Yeah. I think, first and foremost, we as health care haven't done a good job of engaging this topic of food and nutrition enough in medical education. We don't talk about it enough. And we're starting to change that, right? There's been a huge sort of campaign to change how we're engaging this topic, because we realize it's so integral to health. Second thing I would say, from my end as a payor, we've been really leading into this concept of food as medicine. So, Elevance Health, we believe in our bold purpose to improve the health of humanity. We say we do that through a whole health approach, recognizing that what's going on the four walls of clinical settings, and work that I'm doing, is important. But what happens outside of those four walls are also quite critical.

So we lean into this concept of food as medicine. What is food as medicine? Radha mentioned that earlier. Food as medicine. These are strategies or interventions that work alongside health care, that give access to high quality and nutritious foods, focused primarily on three things: How do we prevent, how do we manage, and how do we treat disease? How do we use food as an authentic tool, evidence-based tool, to work alongside health care, integrated into health care, to prevent, manage, and treat disease? You typically will hear about strategies like providing meals, whether medically tailored meals or grocery supports, right, or even produce prescriptions. These are ways that you'll hear about it, and oftentimes superseded or provided alongside the care of nutrition education.

Now, who provides this? A lot of organizations can provide this. Food banks have been a phenomenal partner in this work as well. And we're also recognizing the role of federal nutrition programs in this as well. So if we don't do this –if we try to do this well, we have to recognize that health care can use food as medicine as a tool to improve health outcomes. If we're not doing it, then we're going to worsen the health for patients and families.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Thank you. Radha, I noticed you nodding enthusiastically at a number of things. (Laughter.) I think I'll return to you at the end of the discussion for a few more notes from you.

In the meantime, though, Jack McDougal, president and CEO of the Greater Washington Board of Trade, welcome to CSIS for the first time. And thanks for being with us today.

Mr. McDougle: Yeah, thank you for having me.

Ms. Welsh: So I think it's always been the case, but it's more so now that people are starting to recognize that these issues are part of critical infrastructure. You know, we tend to think of bridges, roads, airports, communication systems, and other things, and we make investments in those components of our infrastructure in order to promote economic growth. I think we're now starting to recognize and becoming to understand that it's much more holistic than that. You were talking about, you know, sort of taking a much more holistic approach to this too. And it's also – it's not just food security. It's all the other issues that you raise as well. And we can't be thinking about them as independent variables to this equation because they all matter.

If you think about our region, we all know the cost of living in our region is pretty high. If you look at MIT's, you know, living wage index, a working family of two – so two incomes with two kids – requires \$145,000 in gross income to just have a living wage in our region. And of that, if you look at it, childcare is the most expensive. It's about \$36,000 a year. That's double what the food requirement is, right? So you're talking about tradeoffs. You have families out there at all these different levels. They're not just, you know, deciding whether or not to have good food or bad food. They're deciding whether or not to put gas in the car to maybe go to two jobs. Or they're worried about, you know, whether or not they can pay their heating bills.

So there's a whole host of factors that are influencing how people are making decisions. And why that's economic – and I would agree, both national and economic security for us in a really hyper global competitive environment, we're leaving almost 50 percent of our asset base on the sidelines. If you want to look at it from just a cold clinical perspective, you know? So we're not engaging them in a higher level of economic activity. And so not only does that hurt the individual families, but it hurts us as a region, and it hurts our individual companies, and it hurts our economy, and our ability to compete. So we need to really start to think differently about these things.

And I see Victor's here. And Victor – I'll tease you out for a minute. You know, when Victor was at economic development in Fairfax County, you know, they put a lot of time and effort into workforce development. You know, not just training, but thinking very holistically about what does our workforce need for us to be competitive, for us to attract businesses here, for us to continue to grow businesses here, because that's where the jobs come, that's where the opportunities come, and then that's where we can elevate people to move them beyond that threshold of just living paycheck to paycheck.

And so it really is a cyclical system that we need to look at and think about. But that's not how we do policy. That's not how we allocate our resources. You know, we do that very individually. And Radha mentioned this too, and I was talking to Sabrina about this too, is that, you know, oftentimes, and no offense to policymakers, but we will solve today's problem, pat ourselves on the back, and go home. But we're not really thinking much more holistically and long term about what are the things that we have to do today that are going to pay off long term? I think there's a lot of reasons for that. You know, elected officials are in office for a short amount of time, or whatever it may be.

But I think all of us in this room and people in the business community need to raise our voices and really start to push a lot harder in thinking about long-term solutions. And then, particularly in this region, we need to start thinking about a much more integrated approach against regional – the one thing that holds us back is that we have D.C., Maryland, Virginia, and then the federal government. And that regional fragmentation really does hold us back from thinking much more holistically about these issues.

Ms. Welsh: For our regional economy, we are at an inflection point. How do we get from where we are today to where the Greater Washington Board of Trade, and others, see as our future? And how do we build pathways so that everyone can contribute to the economy that we're that we're envisioning, to a broader-based economy?

Mr. McDougale: Eyes wide open. It's going to be really hard. You know, there's no easy answer or solutions to any of this. You know, our region has had a reliance on the federal government for – you know, since the Second World War. And most of our institutions were built around that. So as the federal government, you know, begins to restructure its footprint, you know, with disruptive technologies coming online, ongoing effects on the workplace from the pandemic, we are living in a very different world and a very different environment. You know, we were struggling during the old order trying to figure out how to deal with a lot of these. Now, with this, you know, hyper – you know, change that we're undertaking, it's only going to become harder. And so I would encourage us to continue, again, to put that pressure, particularly on policymakers, to think very differently about how we can solve for these issues. It won't be easy.

Ms. Welsh: And it sounds like it's – yeah, it sounds like it's policymakers at all levels, not just –

Mr. McDougale: All levels.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah, yeah.

Mr. McDougle: It has to be at all levels.

Ms. Welsh: So, Radha, I'll turn to you. Just want to see if there's anything that sparked your attention in the conversation we've had so far. And then I want to turn to each panelist – and I'll go, I think, in the same order that I – in which I spoke to you. And I want to – I want to ask you to envision us convening again here in a year. There's a 2027 Hunger Report. Let's say the results are better and things – you know, there are important steps that have been taken to reduce food insecurity in our region. In your minds, what would those things be? Like, if you could wave the magic wand and have one thing happen to improve food security in our region, what would it be that we could be highlighting next year in 2027? So, Radha, I'll turn to you for your reactions to the panel, and then I'll turn to everybody else for an answer to that question.

Ms. Muthiah: Sure. Great. Well, thank you. I think you heard me, or saw me, nodding quite a bit when Kofi was speaking, because at a time where there's constraints on budgets, whether that's at the federal level or at the local levels, it's important to look at interventions that are cost effective, that will have a high ROI. And so the food is medicine work, and we've – through partnerships with Children's and University of Maryland Medical Systems and others – we've been able to engage in this intervention and see the returns of that. And with the impacts on SNAP and Medicaid, this is one intervention that really will result in positive benefits. So I think we do need to scale those.

And to Jack's point about workforce, we can't leave 50 percent of the assets, to use your phrase, on the sidelines. And so that's where the partnerships cross sector. Anne Kress is here from Northern Community – Northern Virginia Community College. Partnerships with colleges where we provide the food scholarships, and individuals are able to then take care of those basic needs while they're attaining certifications, to be able to get to jobs that pay a living wage, those are going to become critical. That's how we move to reducing food insecurity. Otherwise, you know, I think, unfortunately, we will be in this circumstance for a little while to come.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, great. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Radha. For answers to my questions, I'll turn to Matt, Kofi, and then Jack. But, Matt, what would it be for you?

Dr. Rabbitt: (Coughs.) Excuse me. So in this region, you know, the benefit is that you have this dataset available to you so you can evaluate how different policies and conditions are affecting food insecurity among the DMV area. And so that's a huge benefit that a lot of other areas can't talk about. So I think right now – I think the thing to do is to reflect on what that report is telling you and identify the top strategies for addressing food insecurity. And, given H.R. 1, I think is really critical that local leadership – (coughs) – excuse me –

works with different – the different SNAP agencies to try to figure out ways to effectively and efficiently administer SNAP benefits.

Ms. Welsh: Thank you. Thank you, Matt. Kofi, how would you answer that question?

Dr. Essel: You know, it's a great question. And I think, taking from the health-care standpoint, I think we can play a really powerful role in supporting families who are experiencing food insecurity in a number of different ways, and making sure that we are moving forward and screening, identifying families, getting them connected to meaningful resources. We do think that that's a way to be able to help to curtail these rising rates of food security. We just got to do more of that.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. And, Jack.

Mr. McDougale: So I would say we will have significantly addressed some of our mobility issues in the region, getting people from one place to another so that they can take you know take – you know, take advantage of opportunities, whether it's through community colleges, job training, but also to getting jobs. You know, we have sort of a dysfunction – we have a great transit and transportation system, but at the same time it's somewhat dysfunctional. So we need dedicated capital funding to make investments. We need to optimize all of our bus routes, which hasn't been done in decades. And we need to figure out how it is that we can get people around our region so that they can actually take advantage of opportunities. And so I would hope within the next year that we will have made significant progress on those issues.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah. Thank you. You have all helped illustrate a point that was made at the top that solutions to food insecurity lie in so many different realms. So thank you for great answers to that question. Radha, any final comments from you before we turn to Dr. Hamre?

Ms. Muthiah: I think just – you've mentioned it already. I'll just underscore. It's the partnerships across every government level, social sector organizations, health-care organizations, colleges, workforce institutes. That's what's going to really address this issue, because the underlying causes to food insecurity lie in each of these areas. And so if we can be better integrated, partner with one another, it makes it easier for those individuals who are in a vulnerable place to be able to get to a place of greater stability.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah. Well, it's a perfect place to wrap up our panel conversation. Thanks to each of you for joining us here on stage at CSIS. This has been a really, really important discussion. And it is now my pleasure to turn the microphone to Dr. John Hamre, as I mentioned.

John J. Hamre: You don't have to get up.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah, we can sit here. He is – (applause) – thank you.

Dr. Hamre: Well, thank all of you for coming today. I'm really glad to see this room full, you know? Not so many people would take the time to come out and talk about this. It really warms my heart to see all of you here. Thank you. You know, as Caitlin said, I used to be the CEO here. And when I was retiring, Radha asked if I would be on the advisory board to the Capital Area Food Bank. And so I abused my privilege of power and I said, well, let's us host this. I wanted to – I wanted to do it here for several reasons. And I'll tell you about that in just a minute.

But, first of all, thank you. Can I ask everybody, pick up your brochure, flip it over, and look at the bottom two lines. Because this is the most important part on here. If you're inspired by what you saw, get – you know, scan this and make a contribution. OK? Now, I'll tell you, Julie brought me to the Food Bank. My wife, Julie. She does non she does finance and accounting for about 20 nonprofits. And the reason we were drawn to it is because it's such a well-run organization. It really is a superbly run organization. So, I mean, please don't – you know, if you're inspired by this. I was inspired and rather embarrassed by some of the things I heard from you ladies. Let's do something about it today. You can do it right here, OK?

You know, Caitlin identified why it was important that we have a Food Security Program here at CSIS. It's about national security, you know. You can't have a strong military if you have hungry people, you know? You can't have a strong foundation of national security as the health of your society, really, you know? So we need that. And also there was another reason. And that is, you know, my dear departed friend Joe Nye coined the term "soft power," you know? I never liked that term because the only thing you sell in America that's soft is toilet paper, you know? (Laughter.) And so I thought, that's not a good selling point.

But he was right with the idea. And America has two dimensions of its power. It has its power of intimidation, and it has its power of inspiration. And for the last 20 years, we've just been using our powers of intimidation, right? How many more wars do we want here? You know, we're in one right now. We don't know what we're doing. So if there's some way for American – and, by the way, soft power is far more powerful than hard power. Far more. So if we could have a Food Security Program at CSIS – and Caitlin's doing a fabulous job. She and her team. It is really to rebuild America's reputation in the world. And we need that, OK?

Now, just to wrap up. You've all been here a long time. I'm not an AI kind of guy, but I went to old ChatGPT last night. (Laughter.) And so I typed in a

question, how many Americans go to bed hungry every night? And the answer came back, well, latest estimates we don't know – latest estimates are 15 percent of Americans go to bed hungry every night. So my next question was, how – what percentage of Americans have prescriptions for weight-loss drugs? Fourteen-point-three percent. If we can afford to subsidize weight-loss drugs for overweight guys like me, we sure as hell ought to be able to provide food for everybody. OK, got that out of my system. (Laughter.) Thank you all for being here. (Applause.)

Ms. Welsh:

Thank you. Thank you so much, Dr. Hamre. Thank you for your support for our program and for the Capital Area Food Bank. Our event did talk about issues of critical infrastructure and national security and economic security, so I think it was natural for you to join us for many, many reasons. So thank you so much for your support.

And with that, our program is concluded. But I would like to thank, again, the Capital Area Food Bank for your strong partnership in today's event. And congratulations on the launch of an incredibly important report. (Applause.) Thanks to the CSIS Global Food and Water Security Program, Joely Virzi, Emma Curtis, and Zane Swanson, as I said at the beginning. Thank you so much to the CSIS streaming and broadcasting team, who I think are the best in the business, for your support in the room and online. To our audience, thank you for joining us. And to our catering team, thank you for hosting today's reception, to which I invite you right now. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END.)