

The “Accelerating Policies & Research on Food Access, Diet, and Obesity Prevention” Symposium and Its Public Health Significance

On April 28th, 2017 the [University of Pennsylvania Prevention Research Center](#) (UPenn PRC) hosted a Symposium called “Accelerating Policies and Research on Food Access, Diet, and Obesity Prevention.” The UPenn PRC is one of 26 Prevention Research Centers across the nation, funded by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through a school of public health or a medical school that study how people and their communities can avoid or counter the risks for chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, obesity, and cancer.¹ Each PRC has a specific prevention research focus. In Philadelphia, the UPenn PRC’s research focus is a randomized control trial for incentives and environmental strategies for weight loss.²

The symposium featured a wide range of national, regional, and local distinguished scholars and leaders to bridge the gap between research and practice. After a welcoming address by Dr. Karen Glanz, UPenn PRC’s Director, Dr. Margo Wooten was introduced as the first keynote speaker. As Director of Nutrition Policy at the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), Dr. Wooten is a national expert in public health policy and advocacy initiatives, and has been instrumental in policy efforts to: require calorie labeling at fast-food and other chain restaurants; require labeling on packaged foods; improve the nutrition of school breakfast and lunch programs; reduce junk food marketing towards children; and expand the nutritional and physical activity programs at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). She explained how many of people believe that they are in control of their food choices, but that external forces have a big influence (through food industry marketing) over everyday decisions. For example, the placement of food in supermarkets is strategically decided and paid

for by manufacturers to help convince people to buy certain foods; the food industry typically pays for ideal spots, right at the consumer’s eye level in food markets. It is possible to find soda in multiple places along the supermarket route, but moving beyond the vegetable aisle it is unlikely that fresh vegetables will be found again in other sections.³ For a description of the strategic layout of supermarkets, click on this link: www.cspinet.org/rigged.³ Dr. Wooten also addressed how policies like soda taxes are a great way to help change behavior and fund important programs, such as education and parks and recreation to enhance physical activity. She emphasized that nutrition education alone is not enough to improve the way people eat, but through policy and advocacy supported by public education, we can improve food quality and access.⁴

The second keynote speaker was Dr. Mariana Chilton from the Dornsife School of Public Health at Drexel University, the Director of the [Center for Hunger-Free Communities](#) and the Co-Principal Investigator of [Children’s Health Watch](#), a national research network that investigates the impact of public assistance programs through data obtained from surveys given to caregivers. Dr. Chilton founded the [Witnesses to Hunger](#) initiative, a participatory action study to increase engagement among women in poverty in the national dialogue on hunger and poverty.⁵ Dr. Chilton’s presentation and the videos and photos she shared, of women and children living in poverty, was nothing short of inspiring and motivational. She expressed the importance of dialogue that addresses how to improve the systems we have in place for those in poverty. Through Witnesses to Hunger, mothers are able to tell their own stories of hunger and advocate for their own families and communities. While

many of the speakers at the symposium expressed their concern about the impact of the current federal administration’s policies on the future of food access and programs like the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP), Dr. Chilton shared data that showed the relationship between food insecurity and poor cognitive, social, emotional development in children and how SNAP benefits improve the health of most needy populations.⁶ In addition, those who have experienced very low food security have also experienced short-term violence. In light of this data, it is imperative that we advocate to our government representatives, on behalf of our communities, in order to ensure the security of essential programs like SNAP. The most powerful image presented was a picture one mother had taken of a broken phone. It represented that most people who are food insecure want to get help, but without methods of access, are unable to get the help they need. Dr. Chilton expressed how welfare and other government programs often keeps families in the chains of poverty due to that fact that earning a meager income in order to get out of poverty, can put them at risk of losing food stamps. She also emphasized that if we want to end hunger, we need to address racism as well. One can also support the Center for Hungry Free Communities by eating at EAT (Everyday at the Table) Cafe, Philadelphia’s first pay-what-you-can restaurant where, regardless of your ability to pay, you can enjoy a three-course meal.⁷

In addition to the two plenary presentations, there were a wealth of panel presentations and breakout sessions on a wide range of health and nutrition, food policy and research topics. Several directors from other CDC Prevention Research Centers presented their community-based research initiatives as did

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key national nutrition and health leaders such as Tracy Fox, MPH, RD, [Food, Nutrition & Policy Consultants](#); Jennifer Pomeranz, JD, MPH, [NYU College of Global Public Health](#); Amy Lazarus Yaroch, PhD, [Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition](#); Cheryl Bettigole, MD, MPH, [Philadelphia Department of Public Health](#); Allison Karpyn, PhD, [University of Delaware](#); Yael Lehmann, [The Food Trust](#); and Carolyn Cannuscio, ScD, ScM, University of Pennsylvania. They all discussed innovative and successful policies and strategies in the context of the uncertainty of funding support

under the new administration to help our most needy populations.

Speakers at the symposium offered a plethora of information that can be used to continue to make a difference and improve communities across our nation. The main take-away was that it is extremely important that research, policy, and advocacy must be included as part of the agenda in order to see successful, sustained, community and environmental change to reduce poverty and increase food access and healthy nutrition.

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