Strengthening Cross-Sector Collaborations in Hunger-Relief Efforts to Address Structural Racism

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Hunger is a pervasive problem that affects more than 35 million Americans.¹ This public health issue is primarily attributed to poverty and food insecurity, both of which have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.^{1,2} Individuals experiencing hunger are at greater risk for adverse health outcomes (e.g., chronic diseases, depression, nutritional deficiencies).³ Unfortunately, communities of color, particularly Black communities, have disproportionately higher rates of hunger – largely because of structural racism.⁴

Structural racism refers to how societies foster racial discrimination by reinforcing inequitable systems.⁴ Historical (and current) policies and practices shape the inequitable systems that negatively affect communities of color: housing segregation, redlining, employment discrimination, healthcare discrimination, mass incarceration, and over-policing. The racial wealth gap explains, in part, why racial/ethnic minorities have higher rates of hunger than non-minorities. Furthermore, chronic disinvestment in communities of color is a key reason why people of color have lower access to healthy foods and hunger-relief programs.⁴ To alleviate hunger in the United States, community organizations must prioritize innovative and comprehensive efforts

that end structural racism in all settings.

Hunger-relief organizations must strengthen their collaborative efforts across political and economic sectors of society to address the root causes of hunger.

This means working with government officials, policymakers, businesses, and likeminded organizations working outside the space of nutrition to fight for pay equity, anti-racist work practices, and equal access to education, housing, transportation, healthcare, and food.^{4,5} Communities must break up historical silos and focus their collaborative efforts on developing transdisciplinary, collective impact initiatives that work upstream to address these root, systemic causes.⁵ These initiatives must encompass all perspectives and transcend beyond traditional methods used to combat hunger. In addition, these initiatives would benefit greatly from directly involving people of color who experience hunger to apply racial equity to proposed solutions.⁶

Applying a racial equity lens to hunger-relief efforts will enable organizations to increase their understanding of the detrimental effects of structural racism and design targeted approaches that focus on the needs of people of color.⁶ Communities can assess racial/ethnic disparities related to nutritional deficiencies and accessibility to nutrition assistance programs. They can also evaluate structural barriers to the utilization of community resources,

such as social services and food pantries, and ensure that racial/ethnic data be disaggregated to identify the specific needs of cultural groups. By examining these important factors, communities can identify the policies and practices that contribute to nutritional inequities.

In summary, the consequences of racist policies and practices can greatly affect people of color for generations. Nutrition educators and practitioners must acknowledge that structural racism has hindered, and in many cases, completely prohibited access to opportunities for maintaining a healthy, hunger-free life. As organizations work collaboratively across sectors of society to implement equitable upstream approaches to end hunger, they must acknowledge the significance of structural racism and keep it at the forefront of future endeavors.

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