



**Watts College
of Public Service
and Community
Solutions**

**Arizona State
University**



Feeding Families Forum: Policies and Programs in Arizona

Nutrition and Food Insecurity

One in every six Arizonans are food insecure, according to the Association of Arizona Food Banks. People who are food insecure often have less access to healthy food in their neighborhoods, restrictions on what food they can buy and may struggle to keep healthy food in their home.

SIRC Prompts the Discussion

Arizona State University's Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center ([SIRC](#)) and its Community Advisory Board are committed to promoting health and nutrition, which is why it organized an issue forum with five experts to discuss nutrition research, food insecurity, public policy and community efforts to build capacity.

The Importance of Family

[Sonia Vega-López](#), associate professor in nutrition at ASU, researches nutrition and health disparities. "It's crucial to understand what motivates people to change their eating habits, and education alone is not enough," she said. Her work with families has motivated them to prepare traditional foods that include a lot of healthy ingredients.

"People don't need to invent new meals for dishes – they just need to go back to their roots and continue using those foods they already know," Vega-López said. Her research also promotes involving the entire family in mealtime by encouraging meal planning, shopping for food together and celebrating the social connections that often happen with food.

The Importance of Schools

Linda Rider, director of nutrition services in the Tempe Elementary School District, said that school feeding programs are teaching youngsters about nutrition. Schools have also worked hard to promote healthier meals by including foods rich in whole grains and with less sugar and salt. She cautioned that pending federal nutrition regulations could be a "step back" if more refined grains, sugar, and flavored milk are served in schools.

John Wann-Ángeles, founding director of the Orchard Community Learning Center in South Phoenix, discussed the importance of including food as a subject in school curricula so that young people are educated early about what foods are healthy. He also stressed the need to reduce food waste and the positive health impact of eating a plant-rich diet.

Sound Public Policy

Angie Rodgers, president and CEO of the Association of Arizona Food Banks, reported her agency serves an average of 450,000 people each month and that 600,000 free or reduced-cost meals are provided to school children every day. She noted how difficult it is for SNAP (food stamp) participants to buy food because of restrictions on what types and sizes of foods can be purchased under [present](#) and [changing](#) federal regulations.

She praised the Arizona Legislature for enacting the Double Up Food Bucks program because it doubles the amount families can spend on locally grown fruits and vegetables so "families have the ability to stretch their dollars further and use it in communities."

The Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC) is a research unit within the School of Social Work at ASU's Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions. SIRC's goal is to generate use-inspired knowledge and interventions to prevent, reduce and eliminate health disparities. Nutrition plays an important role in preventing obesity, heart-related disease, diabetes and some cancers.



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task to take one ingredient and go home and talk to their families about it. By the end of the project, they learned not only how to grow and cook and consume that ingredient, but how it related to their families,” Robinson said. Food deserts can occur in areas that were formerly food plentiful, he said. “It’s often the policies of development, zoning or land use that wipe out the healthy, safe, nutritious neighborhood and culture,” he said. It is important to convince policy makers and community leaders that investing in food-related businesses can be profitable and provide employment and revenue, resulting in improvements for the entire community, Robinson said.

Community Recommendations

Forum panelists recommended increased connectivity and meetings between the research community, elected officials, food policy experts and community members so that action plans can be developed.

Additional community recommendations included developing a school-based curriculum highlighting the impact of growing food and its effect on the environment as well as developing school materials promoting good nutrition.

SIRC’s goal is to disseminate the results of this forum and Vega-López’s research to promote healthy nutrition and reduce health disparities for food insecure neighborhoods.

Hunger may be caused by unemployment, poor healthcare and other social determinants of health. “Legislators pause when they hear from constituents that they need childcare and food and more gardens,” Rodger said. She recommended people contact their local elected representative because she believes good food policy is also good social policy.

Lawrence Robinson, president of the Roosevelt School District governing board, noted that food brings people together and can reinforce culture. “We shouldn’t talk about food without saying it’s delicious and people enjoy it, with food comes culture,” he said. “At Lassen Elementary School, we gave the students a

Research in Action

To promote health, SIRC is carrying out research targeting Latino adolescents aged 12-14 and their parents in a school-based parenting intervention that combines family nutrition and substance abuse prevention. Studies show Latino youth may be at high risk for poor nutrition due to high consumption of added sugars and limited availability of fruits and vegetables, which can result in obesity and other health-related problems.

Adolescence is a time of transition when future behaviors may be set and it is a good time to teach young people about healthy behaviors. SIRC includes parents in the intervention because of the importance of family in Latino culture and also because parents are responsible for food purchases and preparing meals.

Professor [Sonia Vega-López](#), who earned a PhD in nutritional sciences, is leading SIRC’s study of nutrition, which includes parents of 6th-8th graders who learn about nutrition and substance abuse in a group setting over a 10-week period. They also complete a questionnaire about their diet, participate in a home food inventory and give their physical measurements.

Kids in the program said:

“If I had vegetables at home, I would make better choices. I like vegetables and would eat them if they were more convenient.”

“Our parents don’t offer choices: school does.”

“People my own age mostly eat junk food ... then it’s like I have to eat it.”

“I am concerned about my weight because I am scared of diabetes.”

“Kids (can be) bullied if we are not skinny enough or ... have no muscle.”