Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Health Care as a Partner in Federal Nutrition Programs: Call for Advocacy

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Food insecurity (FI), already common in the United States, was further exacerbated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic through individual and structural-level pathways. Childhood FI is associated with adverse health outcomes, including increased rates of hospitalization, anxiety and aggression, and poorer overall health. By taking an active role in addressing FI, children's hospitals can be a key partner in meeting the needs of their communities and promoting health equity. There is growing evidence supporting the feasibility and acceptability of health care-based programs to address FI by integrating within clinical care, particularly for children and families. Simultaneously, there are systemic barriers that may prevent or limit the ability of the health care sector to engage in this space. This is the case for federal nutrition programs, many of which are intended to improve the food security of children but are not specifically designed for implementation within the health care setting. In addition to leveraging federal nutrition programs to directly assist patients experiencing FI, health care systems can have an even more broad and sustainable impact by fostering a policy environment that enables or incentivizes cross-sector collaboration. We use the exemplar of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to demonstrate that (1) it is feasible for health care systems to leverage federal nutrition programs; (2) patients and families benefit when health care systems participate in these programs; and (3) advocacy for more inclusive and flexible policies regulating these programs is essential to facilitating health care's participation.

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