

Values-Aligned Food Purchasing and Service

Promising Examples from US Federal Agencies and Programs

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FEDERAL
GOOD FOOD PURCHASING
COALITION

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"The magnitude of the federal government's purchasing power presents an opportunity to advance public health, racial equity, local economies, and climate resilience."

Introduction

The federal government purchases over \$8 billion worth of food annually.¹ Federal facilities serve food to millions of federal employees including military and civilian personnel; people who are incarcerated; people receiving healthcare services at Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals and Indian Health Services facilities; and visitors to national parks, museums, and other attractions. It also purchases commodity foods for disaster relief, school nutrition programs, Native American households on Indian reservations, food banks, refugee support, and foreign aid, although the funding and implementation of these programs differ substantially from those providing food service in federal facilities. The magnitude of this reach and purchasing power presents an opportunity for the federal government to advance public health, racial equity, local economies, and climate resilience.

Many federal food purchasing and service programs have nutrition requirements, and some employ policies and practices to purchase local or organic foods, offer climate-friendly choices, and create culturally relevant menus. But there is no coordinated effort to ensure federal food purchases advance the public interest.² This report describes several promising examples of federal agencies, as well as one commodity food program, that are working to align their food service operations or purchasing programs with their values. These examples demonstrate what is possible through federal food procurement and underscore the need for policies that make these practices the norm.

The Movement for Values-Aligned Food Purchasing

For more than a decade, public institutions from coast to coast have embraced values-aligned food purchasing, which directs food spending in a way that advances a set of values beyond price. As of May 2023, 66 public institutions (which encompass thousands of individual cafeteria sites, food service operations, and venues) in 25 cities and counties across the country are enrolled in the Good Food Purchasing Program.³ These institutions direct over \$161 million annually to purchase foods that are local and environmentally sustainable, promote worker well-being, or support animal welfare.³ An additional \$119 million is spent on whole or minimally processed foods, a proxy for foods meeting nutrition standards.³

The Anchors in Action Alliance recently developed an Aligned Framework to harness the collective purchasing power of institutions across multiple sectors, including government, healthcare, and higher education.⁴ The Framework outlines rigorous and achievable standards for values-aligned food procurement. It informs the values that guide the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition: local and community based economies, environmental sustainability, community health and nutrition, racial equity, valued workforce, animal welfare, and public accountability through transparency. Descriptions of each value are described in the appendix.

1 This statistic comes from a forthcoming analysis to be published by the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition. This figure only covers direct purchases by the federal government through contracts available on the Award Data Archive available at www.usaspending.gov. It excludes purchases made by food service contractors selling food in government facilities and programs for which the federal government makes reimbursements for federal meals. Data is available upon request.

2 Federal food service operations differ substantially across agencies and locations. Facilities where food is sold to employees and visitors generally operate with more flexibility in what they can offer than operations where the food is served at no cost or subsidized rates such as in the armed services, federal hospitals, and correctional facilities.

3 Data from personal communication with staff from the Center for Good Food Purchasing on May 31, 2023.

4 Anchors in Action Standards Alignment Project (n.d.). <https://sites.google.com/view/aia-standards-alignment>.

Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities

One mechanism for leveraging the power of federal food procurement is the *Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities (FSG)*, first released in 2011 and last updated in 2017.⁵ These voluntary guidelines for concessions and vending services in federal facilities were intended to help increase healthy food and beverage choices for federal employees, minimize environmental impacts of food service operations, and support local economies.⁶ The 2017 updates added food safety standards and behavioral design strategies. The guidelines are intended to support a wide range of people involved in designing, implementing, and monitoring food service operations including staff developing requests for proposals for food service, vendors and concessioners, worksite wellness staff, and contracting officers.⁸ Although the FSG are designed to be implemented in concessions and vending services in federal facilities, they can also be applied in other settings including private worksites; community venues; and local, state, and tribal government facilities.⁸ They are not intended for use in schools and child care facilities that participate in federal child nutrition programs.⁸

A workgroup of representatives from nine federal departments and agencies established these best practices in alignment with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and relevant scientific literature.⁸ The food and nutrition standards emphasize whole grains, low-fat dairy, a variety of proteins including plant-based proteins, and a variety of fruits and non-fried vegetables, as well as nutrients to limit (e.g., sodium, sugar).⁸ The FSG also include standards on energy efficiency; food waste reduction and diversion; reduced packaging and reusable dining ware; and minimum purchasing goals and labeling for products from local, organic, or other certified sources.⁸

As of spring 2023, few operations are implementing the guidelines entirely. There were some notable early adopters, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Hubert H. Humphrey Building Cafeteria.⁶ However, progress has stalled due to a combination of factors including the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent occupancy reductions in federal office buildings. In September 2022, President Biden included a commitment to update and implement the FSG across federal facilities in the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health.⁷ As of this writing, the administration has not issued or implemented any formal policies to act on this commitment, despite data that suggests doing so would improve health outcomes and reduce health care costs for federal employees.⁸

⁵ Food Service Guidelines Federal Workgroup (2017). *Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/guidelines_for_federal_concessions_and_vending_operations.pdf

⁶ Bayne, A.I., Hair, E., Harris Brewer, K., & Garg, A. (2012). *The HHS Hubert H. Humphrey Building Cafeteria Experience: Incorporation of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010 into Federal Food Service Guidelines*. Prepared by NORC at the University of Chicago. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

⁷ The White House (2022, September). Biden-Harris Administration National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/White-House-National-Strategy-on-Hunger-Nutrition-and-Health-FINAL.pdf>

⁸ Abrahams-Gessel, S., Wilde, P., Zhang, F. F., Lizewski, L., Sy, S., Liu, J., Ruan, M., Lee, Y., Mozaffarian, D., Micha, R., and Gaziano, T. (2022). Implementing federal food service guidelines in federal and private worksite cafeterias in the United States leads to improved health outcomes and is cost saving. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 43(2), 266-280.

Methods

The content of this report was compiled through document review and 14 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from different federal agencies and food service programs that occurred between February and May 2023. Key stakeholders were selected purposefully through a combination of strategies. An initial scan of information available on federal agency and individual facility⁹ websites (e.g., menus and descriptions of mission, goals, or overarching policies regarding agency food service operations) was conducted to identify possible values-aligned federal food purchasing and service initiatives to feature and to gather contact information for requesting an interview. Stakeholders identified by Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition members as promising leads were also contacted. Virtual interviews were conducted with five government staff members, four employees of a food service management company that contracts with the Smithsonian Institution, three non-profit partners with insights on federal food service programs, and six recently returned citizens who offered their insights on the food served in federal prisons.

The objective of the interviews was to gather information about agency policies or practices that have advanced values-aligned food purchasing and service. Interview questions focused on the origin of the policies or practices, how the policies or practices are implemented, successes and challenges the agency has encountered in implementation, and advice for other federal operations considering similar initiatives. Additional information about the Veterans Health Administration example came from a presentation by four government staff members at Health Care Without Harm and Practice Greenhealth's CleanMed conference,¹⁰ follow-up questions to the panelists, and results from an academic study (peer-reviewed article forthcoming).¹¹ Information that is not otherwise cited was derived from one of the stakeholder interviews. Interviewees reviewed excerpts of relevant material to verify their accuracy.

Examples

The report first reviews findings for each federal facility or program individually. Based on these findings, common attributes or strategies shared by the programs that may inform future efforts to institute values-aligned food purchasing are identified.

National Park Service

There are approximately 150 food service operations across the more than 400 national parks, monuments, historic sites, and other properties owned by the National Park Service (NPS). These food service operations range from fine dining and family casual restaurants to fast casual and quick service outlets.¹²

Building on momentum from both agency leadership and Obama administration priorities to advance healthier eating and more sustainable food production, the NPS issued a Call to Action in 2011 to: "encourage park visitors to make healthy lifestyle choices and position parks to support local economies by ensuring that all current and future concession contracts require multiple healthy, sustainably produced, and reasonably priced food options at national park food service concessions."¹³ As part of implementing this priority, the NPS established a set of Healthy Food Choice Standards and Sustainable Food Choice Guidelines in 2012, which were later updated in 2017.¹⁴ The Healthy

⁹ Individual facilities were identified using a spreadsheet of federal food service facilities created and shared by the Environmental Working Group.

¹⁰ This information was shared at CleanMed on May 24, 2023 during the session titled "Food service innovations at federal hospitals: Purchasing, menu design & food waste." <https://cleanmed.org/agenda/>.

¹¹ Williams, B., Jilcott Pitts, S., Onufrak, S. & Sirois, E. (2023). Promoting Sustainability in Food Service: A Qualitative Exploration of Barriers, Facilitators, and Best Practices in Veterans Affairs Hospitals. NOPREN Food Service Guidelines Workgroup. <https://nopren.ucsf.edu/sites/g/files/thsra5936/f/wysiwyg/VA%20Food%20Service%20Sustainability%20-%20Lay%20Summary%20Packaged%20Final%20Updated%20%281%29.pdf>

¹² National Park Service (n.d). Food and Beverage Service Classifications. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/concessions/upload/FB-Classifications2.pdf>

¹³ National Park Service (2011). A Call to Action Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement. Goal #8 Eat Well and Prosper. https://www.nps.gov/calltoaction/PDF/Directors_Call_to_Action_Report_2012.pdf

¹⁴ National Park Service (2017). National Park Service Healthy Food Choice Standards and Sustainable Food Choice Guidelines for Front Country Operations. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/concessions/upload/Frontcountry_Healthy_Foods.pdf

Food Choice Standards apply to new contracts and require concessioners to meet minimum requirements for **healthy** menu options; food preparation practices (e.g., healthy portion sizes, offering non-fried options); and education and labeling.¹⁴ Specifically, the menu must offer a fruit or vegetable with all entrées, low-fat dairy options, and beverages without added sugar.¹⁴ The NPS also requires concessioners operating these facilities to provide two core meals (one vegetarian and one non-vegetarian) that meet additional health standards for calories, fat, sodium content, and (when relevant) whole grains.¹⁴ The remainder of the menu is at the discretion of the concessioner. NPS park personnel monitor concessioner compliance with these standards as part of an annual evaluation.



National Park Service concession contracts require multiple healthy, sustainably produced, and reasonably priced food options at national park food service operations. Pictured: Skyland Dining Room in Shenandoah National Park in Virginia (image retrieved from nps.gov).

The voluntary Sustainable Food Choice Guidelines inform the procurement and labeling of more sustainable food choices, including **sustainable seafood**; **fair trade coffee**; **organic** foods; **seasonal, locally or regionally produced** foods, and **animal products raised without added hormones or antibiotics**.¹⁴ The NPS offers a self-assessment tool to support concessioners in evaluating their progress toward implementing the standards and guidelines.¹⁵ The Food for the Parks report details case studies and implementation strategies from several early adopters of sustainable food purchasing efforts within the NPS system.¹⁶

These aforementioned standards and guidelines apply to food service operations in the relatively accessible, more frequently visited areas of national parks (i.e., front country). The NPS also established a separate set of guidelines for consideration for backcountry operations.¹⁷ These voluntary guidelines echo many of the front country standards and guidelines but offer more flexibility to concessioners with the understanding that remote backcountry operations have limited food distribution options and storage and preparation facilities, and are serving patrons who may have unique nutritional needs due to participating in outdoor activities of varying intensity, such as mountaineering and white water rafting.

Department of Defense

Across all four Department of Defense (DoD) service branches, approximately 205 million meals were served in 585 dining facilities and 28 satellite locations worldwide in fiscal year 2019.¹⁸ The cost for food and beverage purchases alone totaled \$1.1 billion in that same fiscal year.¹⁸ The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense establishes standard and discounted meal rates at DoD dining facilities, ranging from \$4.30 for breakfast to \$6.85 for lunch at standard rates.¹⁹ The DoD has made strides towards serving **healthier** foods at these facilities through several mechanisms.

On the procurement side, each service branch specifies nutrition and quality criteria for foods, determining which vendors can compete to secure a contract with the DoD and serve in dining facilities (also known as DFACs). For example, the Army released the 15th version of its Food Buyer's Guide in 2022, describing these criteria for foods available to purchase through the Defense Logistics Agency's Subsistence Prime Vendor Program; it excludes

¹⁵ National Park Service (n.d.) Healthy and Sustainable Food Self Assessment. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/concessions/upload/Healthy_Foods_Self-Assessment.docx

¹⁶ Mills, S. (n.d.). Food for the Parks: Case Studies of Sustainable Food in America's Most Treasured Places. San Francisco, CA: Institute at the Golden Gate. <https://www.parksconservancy.org/external/food-parks-case-studies>

¹⁷ National Park Service (2017). National Park Service Healthy and Sustainable Food Choice Guidelines for Backcountry Operations. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/concessions/upload/Backcountry-Healthy-Foods.pdf>

¹⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022). FOOD PROGRAM: DoD Should Formalize Its Process for Revising Food Ingredients and Better Track Dining Facility Use and Costs. Report to Congressional Committees (GAO-22-103949). <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-103949.pdf>

¹⁹ Food Service Charges at Appropriated Fund Dining Facilities and the Military Academies, Effective January 1, 2023. https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/rates/fy2023/2023_g.pdf

pre-packaged field foods (e.g., Meals, Ready-to-Eat or MREs) and foods available to purchase in the commissary.²⁰ Other service branches followed the Army's lead, publishing separate Food Buyer's Guides.²¹ In 2021, the Marine Corps developed and published its first Marine Corps Buyer's Guide (now in its second version) to provide industry the specifications for quality and nutritional guidelines to best feed the Marines.²²

Prime Vendors

Most food procurement by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs occurs through prime vendor programs in which a single private vendor manages the process of ordering foods and other supplies from processors, storing the inventory, and then delivering the products to all facilities within a state or region.²³ Individual facilities, which may be operated by a food service management company or self-operated, then purchase the foods from a catalog of items offered by the prime vendor.

Along with ensuring fiscal responsibility with taxpayer dollars, the Food Buyer's Guides ensure that the DoD service branches receive the quality items they want to purchase and provide the opportunity to set nutrition standards for products through subtle and sustainable changes (e.g., limiting fat and sodium content, limiting the proportion of certain ingredients such as saline solution and batter/breading for meats). They also emphasize "clean labels," or "having a transparent food label in terms of wholesomeness of ingredients, a lack of artificial ingredients and often also a lack of common allergens."²⁰ These specifications were informed by the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program standards, Food and Drug Administration (FDA) food labeling requirements, and other government agency standards. Furthermore, the Marine Corps acknowledges that the effort to create a Buyer's Guide aligns with and supports federal child and youth feeding programs as this population will ultimately be the next generation of Marines. While many of the standards are the same across service branches — allowing them to benefit from shared buying power — some criteria differ based on the unique needs of a particular branch, such as the need for minimal packaging for Navy submarines.

Due to growing demand among service members, recent guides included new nutrition criteria for **plant-based** meat analogs, including minimum protein, fiber, and iron fortification requirements and limits on sodium, total fat, and saturated fat content.²⁰ With respect to dairy and eggs, the guides include **organic** versions of these products as acceptable choices; organic foods in other categories are not yet explicitly identified.²⁰ Members of a working group convened by the Defense Logistics Agency continue to meet and discuss modifications or waivers needed due to supply chain shortages and how to address new products coming to market (e.g., milk alternatives, plant-animal product blends such as beef/mushroom burgers). By leveraging its collective buying power with vendors across service branches, the DoD has paved the way for other federal food service facilities to establish similar standards for nutrition and quality.

The DoD Menu Standards also inform which menu items are offered on daily or weekly master menus.²⁴ Created by the DoD Nutrition Committee, these standards outline an extensive list of requirements to provide nutritionally sound meals at appropriations-funded dining facilities. Each food group has a list of specific serving size, variety, cooking preparation, and nutrient requirements. For example, fish must be served at least three times per week as a main entrée, including at least one fish that is high in omega-3 fatty acids (e.g., salmon, tuna, pollock) once per week.²⁴

20 United States Army (2022). Army Food Buyer's Guide. Version XV, pg. 2. https://www.dla.mil/Portals/104/Documents/TroopSupport/Subsistence/DoingBusiness/BuyersGuide/ABG_16JUN2022.pdf

21 Defense Logistics Agency (n.d.). Working with Subsistence: Services' Buyer's Guides. Accessed June 16, 2023 at <https://www.dla.mil/Troop-Support/Subsistence/Working-with-Subsistence/#services-buyers-guides>

22 United States Marine Corps (2022). Buyers Guide Version 2. https://www.dla.mil/Portals/104/Documents/TroopSupport/Subsistence/DoingBusiness/BuyersGuide/MCBG_01Oct2022.pdf

23 MacDonald, J., Handy, C. & Plato, G. (1998). "An Overview of Federal Food Procurement Programs" in Food Procurement by USDA's Farm Service Agency. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Economic Report No. (AER-766). https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/40862/54239_aer766b.pdf?v=0

24 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment. (2022). DoD Manual 1338.10, "DoD Food Service Program," DoD Menu Standards. pp. 32-33 <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/133810m.pdf>

Legumes or beans must be offered as a hot entrée or side dish every day.²⁴ In addition to ensuring a variety of healthy options that support military performance are offered to diners, the standards support the use of a traffic light menu labeling system such as the Go for Green® or Fueled to Fight® programs that highlights the nutrition of the food through categorization where applicable (not all foods can be categorized).²⁵

Individual food service operations may also pair these health-focused menu labels with consumer-facing information about other values-aligned options. For example, at 12 Air Force bases with facilities managed by the food service management company Aramark, menus feature badges indicating *climate-friendly* and *plant-forward* meals alongside Go for Green® labels.²⁶ These menus support Aramark's company-wide commitment to implementing the Cool Food Pledge.²⁷ Specific facilities have also received recognition for their diverse *plant-based* offerings, such as the U.S. Army Fort Sill.²⁸

Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

Another mechanism for advancing values-aligned food procurement is the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh), which allows school districts and tribal organizations to use entitlement funding to purchase *local* fruits and vegetables (defined as those produced within the state or neighboring state) through DoD supply channels and infrastructure.²⁹ Operated by the Defense Logistics Agency in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the DoD Fresh Program is utilized by approximately 26,000 schools in all 50 states.³⁰ Participating schools buy produce using entitlement dollars they receive from the USDA Foods program to purchase commodities in support of programs such as the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. In fiscal year 2022, schools purchased over \$588 million in produce through DoD Fresh.³⁰ The program also facilitates the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables for food packages offered to income-eligible households through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). In fiscal year 2022, approximately 130 Indian Tribal Organizations purchased \$6.2 million of produce through the program.³⁰

In addition to local procurement, California schools have been able to procure *organic* produce via DoD Fresh through a partnership between the California Department of Education and Friends of the Earth launched in 2021. Through strategic outreach to school districts and the two prime vendors that serve the DoD Fresh Program in California, Friends of the Earth's Climate-Friendly School Food Program helped increase the number of organic foods offered to school districts in the prime vendor catalogs from no organic items in 2020 to more than a dozen during the harvest season

GREEN, YELLOW, & RED FOOD CODES			
PROCESSING	LEAST-PROCESSED	SOME PROCESSING	MOST-PROCESSED FOODS
NUTRIENTS	WHOLE FOODS, NUTRIENT PACKED	SOME HEALTHFUL NUTRIENTS	LOWEST-QUALITY INGREDIENTS
FIBER	HIGH IN FIBER	LOWER IN FIBER	MINIMAL FIBER
SUGAR	LOW IN ADDED SUGAR	ADDED SUGAR OR ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS	ADDED SUGAR OR ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS
FAT	HEALTHY FATS	POOR-QUALITY FATS	EXCESS FATS AND/OR TRANS FAT FRIED FOODS

The DoD's Go for Green® program guides diners toward healthier food options that support military performance. Labels highlight the most nutritious foods (green), to be consumed daily; less nutritious (yellow), to be consumed less frequently; and least nutritious (red), to be consumed on special occasions. Image shared with permission by Uniformed Services University and Consortium for Health and Military Performance.

25 Human Performance Resource Center (HPRC). Go for Green® 2.0 Program Requirements. https://www.hprc-online.org/sites/default/files/document/G4G_GR_Revise%2520Program%2520Requirement%2520links_011018.pdf

26 Aramark (2023). U.S. Air Force Dining Services. <https://usairforce.aramarkcafe.com/en/>

27 Aramark (2022). Aramark commits to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the food it serves by 25 percent by 2030. <https://www.aramark.com/newsroom/news/aramark-reducing-greenhouse-gas-emissions-cool-food-meals>

28 Bolinger, J. (2019). Fort Sill's dining facility is the first to offer troops a 100 percent plant-based entrée at every meal. Stars and Stripes (February 11). <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/fort-sill-s-dining-facility-is-the-first-to-offer-troops-a-100-percent-plant-based-entree-e-at-every-meal-1.568203>

29 U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (2023). USDA DoD FRESH PROGRAM: A Source for Locally Grown Produce. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/DoDFresh508.pdf>

30 Data from personal communication with the Defense Logistics Agency Public Affairs Office on June 15, 2023.

in 2022-2023.³¹ This increased availability, coupled with outreach to school districts to increase awareness about the DoD Fresh program enabled over 250 California school districts to purchase organic items by the 2022-2023 school year.³¹ From the start of the DoD Fresh organic advocacy efforts in October 2021 to April 2023, \$1,692,755 was spent on 1,070,000 lbs (nearly 50,000 cases) of organic produce.³¹ Lessons learned from partnering with California's prime vendors through this initiative may help partner organizations expand the success of organic purchasing to other states.

Smithsonian Institution

As the world's largest museum, education, and research complex, the iconic Smithsonian Institution is a non-profit trust that Congress created in 1846. In 2022, the Institution's museums and other locations attracted nearly 15 million visitors.³² Across these locations, Smithsonian Enterprises' Retail Group manages 12 restaurants of various types, including cafés serving sandwiches and salads, cafeterias with both traditional and specialty foods, and coffee and pastry shops.^{33,34} Smithsonian Enterprises contracts with one food service management company (currently Restaurant Associates, a subsidiary of Compass Group USA) to operate its facilities at seven Smithsonian museums in the Washington, D.C. area and one museum in New York, NY.



The Smithsonian Institution uses the restaurants on its premises to implement and educate about mission-aligned food procurement and service practices. Pictured here: wild rice at the Mitsitam Native Foods Café in the Museum of the American Indian. Photo shared with permission by Raya Sfeir/Restaurant Associates.

In the 2014 Request for Proposals (RFP) for this contract, the Institution prioritized selecting a firm that had “[a]bility to support the sustainability goals of the Museums” and “[w]illingness to serve predominantly fresh food with an eye towards healthy choices.”³⁵ The RFP outlined additional criteria specific to the unique mission of each museum. For example, the RFP described the Museum of Natural History as being interested in “us[ing] its eateries to showcase trends in the American diet towards organic, sustainable food products sourced locally and fresh, not frozen.”³⁵ In practice, the Museum's cafés work to procure **local** and **sustainable** foods wherever feasible, in alignment with both the Museum's goals and those of Compass Group USA. For example, the Ocean Terrace Café at the Museum of Natural History, was specifically designed with a **plant-forward** menu, finding success through offering a customizable greens and grains bowl bar.

The museum has also worked to eliminate plastic from its operation wherever possible, including by providing reusable tableware and cups to diners in lieu of offering plastic bottles or utensils. The Mitsitam Native Foods Café in the Museum of the American Indian features **Indigenous** foods of the Native Americans and **seasonal** foods, with a few foods of specific regional provenance. Popular dishes include fry bread, wild rice from Minnesota, and bison burgers. Meanwhile, at the Museum of African American History and Culture, the Sweet Home Café prominently features foods and food preparation techniques of historical and **cultural** significance to African Americans.

31 Data from personal communication with Friends of the Earth staff on June 16, 2023.

32 Smithsonian Institution (n.d.). Visitor Stats. <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/about/stats>.

33 Smithsonian Institution (2023). Request for Proposal No 230325-0000 for Food Service Facility at the National Air and Space Museum.

34 Smithsonian Institution (n.d.). Dining and Shopping. <https://www.si.edu/dining>.

35 Smithsonian Institution (2014). Request for Proposal No. M-14000052-0000 For Food Service Facilities At the Donald W. Reynolds Center, National Air and Space Museum (Staff Café), National Museum of American History, National Museum of the American Indian, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution Building (The Castle), and National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Bureau of Prisons

As of February 2023, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) was responsible for the custody and care of over 158,000 people (92% of whom are in federal facilities) and had over 34,000 employees across 122 institutions.³⁶ It serves about 339,000 meals per day, with an estimated budget of \$3.97 per meal.³⁷ The BOP has worked to incorporate *healthier* options through instituting a national menu across facilities since 2008.^{36,38} The monthly menu includes standardized recipes and product specifications that are intended to meet standard dietary reference intakes.³⁹

Perspectives on Prison Food

While the BOP has made strides to improve the offerings on the national menu, what is listed on national menus does not necessarily translate into high quality offerings in practice. To address this concern, six people who were released from federal correctional facilities within the past 15 months were interviewed to better understand their experiences eating the food. While this is not a comprehensive exploration of the lived experience of people in federal correctional facilities (as has been done for state prisons, for example, by the Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project⁴⁰), any analysis of the national menu should be balanced with on-the-ground reality. These interviews revealed that the national menu is not necessarily implemented by all facilities, and even when it is, it is not always readily accessible to facility residents. Some facilities chose to make their own menu choices, which some interviewees preferred over the national menu. This may indicate that flexibility around menu items and recipes is warranted to accommodate the preferences of each facility's residents, as long as all menus meet consistent nutrition standards.

Of note, the “no flesh” or vegetarian entrées were not always available for all who would like to eat them. While some facilities follow the national menu standards by offering people a choice between a meat and no flesh entrée at every meal, other facilities require a doctor's note to request a vegetarian or no flesh entrée (typically as a permanent change). Several interviewees mentioned that they do not eat much or any red meat and would have preferred the ability to select the vegetarian option at each meal, as recommended by the Correctional Facility Food Service Guidelines Special Project Workgroup convened by the Center for Science in the Public Interest.⁴¹ Interviewees echoed a clear desire for *healthier* and less processed foods, especially more fresh fruits and vegetables. Interviewees also shared myriad other food safety and quality concerns about the foods served in federal correctional facilities, including being served foods labeled “not for human consumption,” insufficiently cooked meats, inadequate portions, and expired or moldy foods. Some of these concerns echoed findings of a Department of Justice investigation about substandard food products and insufficient quality control practices in federal correctional facilities.⁴² However, the interviewees shared that the food quality differed substantially by facility, with some federal facilities offering notably better quality than other federal, state, and local facilities. One facility in particular, the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) in Danbury, CT received relatively positive reviews by three interviewees, including two who had also spent time at other facilities. The positive reviews of the Danbury FCI focused on the relatively pleasant temperatures, taste, and smells of the food; serving of multiple portions; and wide variety of produce options, features which may have been due to the facility's small size and dedicated staff.

36 United States Department of Justice (2023). Federal Prison System FY 2024 Performance Budget Congressional Submission. https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-03/bop_se_fy_2024_pb_narrative_omb_cleared_3.23.2023.pdf

37 Estimated budget per meal calculated based on estimated funding of \$491,929,000 for the food program area (including food and other expenses) and estimated 124 million meals served in FY2023, as reported in: United States Department of Justice (2023). Federal Prison System FY 2024 Performance Budget Congressional Submission. https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-03/bop_se_fy_2024_pb_narrative_omb_cleared_3.23.2023.pdf

38 Federal Bureau of Prisons (2022). National Menu FY 2022. https://www.bop.gov/foia/docs/FY22_National_Menu.pdf

39 United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons (2022). Food Service Manual. https://www.bop.gov/policy/progstat/4700.06_cn.pdf

40 Kathuria, K. (2021). 'I Refuse to Let Them Kill Me': Food, Violence, and the Maryland Correctional Food System. Maryland Food & Prison Abolition Project. <https://foodandabolition.org/report>

41 Center for Science in the Public Interest (2021). Strategies to Optimize Food and Nutrition in Correctional Facilities Findings and Recommendations of an Expert Workgroup. https://www.cspinet.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Strategies_to_Optimize_Food_and_Nutrition_in_Correctional_Facilities.pdf

42 Horowitz, M. (2020). Notification of Concerns Identified with the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Procurement of Food Products. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of the Inspector General. <https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/i20029.pdf>

"Providing healthier and better-quality foods in correctional facilities is only one step to reduce harm while our country works to address the much larger issue of mass incarceration."

choice between meat and vegetarian options at each meal, because people incarcerated in state and local facilities typically have only one main dish option.⁴³

Food service in correctional facilities faces operational limitations including relatively low appropriations and funding available per meal, staffing challenges (including understaffing, insufficient pay, and limited staff knowledge in running a quality food service operation), safety considerations, and in some cases, limited storage and preparation equipment. While some of these challenges can and must be addressed, providing healthier and better-quality foods in correctional facilities is only one step to reduce harm while our country works to address the much larger issue of mass incarceration.

Veterans Health Administration

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA), a subsidiary agency of the VA, provides healthcare services to over 9 million veterans per year.⁴⁴ Across its 171 medical centers, the VHA Nutrition and Food Services (NFS) program serves over 39 million inpatient meals annually using funds appropriated from Congress.⁴⁵ Approximately 190 facilities, including some outpatient clinics, also feature Veteran Canteen Services (VCS) Patriot Cafés which operate on a for-profit basis selling foods to patients, employees, and visitors.⁴⁶ The food service operations range from cafeteria-style service models to room service/select models to some family dining, with an increasing number of facilities shifting towards the room service/select style to improve patient satisfaction and quality and to reduce food waste. Operations are also increasingly moving towards a cook-serve model using fresher ingredients.

Both NFS and VCS programs are guided by the VHA Food Service Management Directive and share a \$1.3 billion (which equates to about \$250 million/year) Subsistence Prime Vendor Contract, which requires operations to purchase specific products for most food and non-food purchases.⁴⁵ Included among its broader series of quality, performance, and food safety standards, the Food Service Management Directive requires that NFS purchases and serves regionally and **culturally appropriate** foods that meet the VA Healthy Diet Guidelines.⁴⁵ These guidelines outline evidence-based **healthy** food standards adapted from Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee recommendations to limit calories, fat, saturated fat, and added sugars, and provide adequate protein, fiber, and water.⁴⁷ The guidelines also encourage **environmentally sustainable** sourcing of seasonal produce; local produce and bread; reusable and recycled content products; and products that reduce exposure to chemicals, hormones and non-therapeutic antibiotics.⁴⁷ Based on these directives, the VHA works with its current prime vendor, US Foods, to identify specific products it wants to purchase more of (e.g., low sodium soups, locally and sustainably sourced items); US Foods then communicates with manufacturers to encourage the production and availability of these products in exchange for reduced/preferred pricing. Local or sustainable purchasing through the Subsistence Prime Vendor contract currently accounts for about 6.8% of all purchases (by retail weight), which has increased about 20% year-over-year.⁴⁸

43 Soble, L., Stroud, K., & Weinstein, M. (2020). Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison. Impact Justice. <http://impactjustice.org/impact/food-in-prison/#report>

44 Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.). Veterans Health Administration. <https://www.va.gov/health/>.

45 Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Health Administration (2019, amended 2022). VHA Directive 1439. Food Service Management. https://www.va.gov/vhapublications/ViewPublication.asp?pub_ID=8557

46 Data from personal communication with VHA staff on June 8, 2023.

47 Department of Veterans Affairs (2021). VHA Healthy Diet Model. Note: The VA Healthy Diet Guidelines are not publicly available.

48 Data from personal communication with VHA staff on June 8, 2023.

The purchase of *meat raised without antibiotics* presents one example of how the VHA has leveraged its purchasing power through its Subsistence Prime Vendor Contract. Following a 2015 Obama administration memorandum requesting that federal agencies begin purchasing meat and poultry produced with “responsible antibiotic use” over the next five years,⁴⁹ the VHA’s National Director of Nutrition and Food Services Dr. Anne Utech released a memo detailing how the agency would increase its sourcing of meat, poultry, and fish raised without antibiotics. The memo described an approach for phasing these products into menus based on their availability, aiming to increase regional demand. Over the past seven years since the procurement policy shift, VHA facilities sharing data with Practice Greenhealth have reported an average of 23% of their meat and poultry purchases annually (by retail weight) being produced without routine antibiotics, and in some cases, more regenerative or sustainable production practices.⁵⁰

One exception to the VHA’s requirement to purchase foods through the prime vendor is that individual facilities can establish contracts with *local* vendors for fresh produce, dairy, and bread. Additionally, 15 medical centers nationwide have onsite gardens that provide fresh produce to facility kitchens and pop-up markets for veterans receiving care.⁵⁰

A subcommittee of the national VHA Green Environmental Management System (GEMS) workgroup composed of dedicated NFS staff members has largely carried out the creation and implementation of sustainable food service strategies at the VHA. In early 2023, the subcommittee launched a four-week *plant-based* recipe pilot to test receptivity to more sustainable menus. In partnership with Health Care Without Harm/Practice Greenhealth and the Humane Society of the United States, 11 VHA medical centers across the country tested up to eight recipes per facility whereby meats were replaced with plant-based proteins over the trial period. Plate waste at participating facilities remained largely unchanged, indicating positive consumer receptivity in most cases.



The VHA tested receptivity to more sustainable menu items through its plant-based recipe pilot. Pictured here is a meal of creamy curried chickpeas next to an educational table card used at the VA San Diego Healthcare System to educate patients about the health and climate benefits of eating plant-based meals. Photo shared with permission by Kim-Ashleigh Mostert-Freiberg.

The VHA NFS program has also advanced a multi-pronged approach to reducing food waste. In addition to shifting towards room service/select style menus to reduce the amount of uneaten food, the GEMS subcommittee created a guide outlining how to donate food to food pantries and other non-profit organizations, prioritizing those that serve veterans.⁵¹ Some facilities also compost (14 sites) and/or have set up digesters or dehydrators (20 sites) to process remaining waste in lieu of sending it to a landfill.⁵¹

Keys to Success

Some important factors that enabled the success of values-aligned food purchasing and service practices across multiple agencies include:

- **Increased menu choices:** Several interviewees emphasized that their efforts are not intended to require people to eat healthier and more sustainable foods but to increase options for people if they choose, such as by offering an additional plant-forward entrée rather than removing meat from the menu. Beyond just

49 The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2015). Presidential Memorandum – Creating a Preference for Meat and Poultry Produced According to Responsible Antibiotic-Use Policies. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/02/presidential-memorandum-creating-preference-meat-and-poultry-produced-ac>

50 Personal communication with Health Care Without Harm/Practice Greenhealth staff on June 27, 2023. 23% represents a weighted average of purchases from 186 VHA Practice Greenhealth award applications received between 2017 and 2023.

51 NFAC GEMS Subcommittee (2016). Guide to Starting a Food Donation Program for VA NFS. https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2016-01/documents/fgc_food_donation_guide_130228.pdf

satisfying preferences, plant-based meals specifically may align with individuals' religious and ethical dietary needs or food sensitivities, providing important alternatives to traditional menu options. Facilities can enable these selections by designing menus with customizable options, clear labels, variety, and (where applicable) competitive prices.

- **Dedicated champions:** Certain dedicated staff members were highlighted as key facilitators to the success of several programs explored in this report. However, interviewees discussed how progress stalled or even reversed when those individual champions left their positions, demonstrating that additional factors are necessary for sustaining progress, such as adequate resources for implementation and capacity building to achieve desired quality and outcomes.
- **Institutionalized policies:** While individual facilities and their champions may pave an initial path forward, the role of national policies in institutionalizing this progress cannot be overstated. Several examples above began with agency leadership establishing a policy or goal to prioritize healthier, more ethical, and sustainable food service operations through procurement, contract management, and strategic operational shifts. Such policies help ensure that progress is less vulnerable to the shifting winds of political, economic, or personnel changes. Mechanisms to monitor policy implementation are also warranted.
- **Valuable partnerships:** In several examples, external partners including non-profit organizations were instrumental in encouraging the uptake of values-aligned procurement practices and providing technical assistance to navigate the challenges of adopting the practices.
- **Catalog changes:** For facilities that purchase food through prime vendors, a key lever for advancing values-aligned food purchasing entails ensuring that healthier and more ethical or sustainable items are available in prime vendor catalogs. Policies can standardize the purchasing criteria for products from these catalogs and hold vendors accountable to maintaining their availability as a standard practice. The implementation of such policies in several agencies demonstrates the value of ensuring quality assurance across individual facilities and moving the market regarding available products by aligning standards for food purchased across multiple agencies.

Discussion

This report outlines promising examples of federal agencies that are working to embed values into their food service operations or purchasing programs through serving healthy, ethical, and sustainable foods. All of the agencies examined have implemented nutrition standards, most of which seek to align with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Many agencies have also made progress in including more climate-friendly, plant-forward options on their menus, including exclusively plant-based options for people with religious and ethical dietary needs/preferences. Some agencies include policies that prioritize or support the procurement of ingredients that are locally sourced or organic where feasible. Policies to support the procurement of foods certified as fair trade and meats raised without routine use of antibiotics were the least common. Facilities where food is sold to visitors (e.g., NPS, Smithsonian) and served to residents or patients (e.g., BOP, VHA) alike have successfully implemented these strategies. While this progress is laudable, it is insufficient to drive the changes urgently needed in our food system to improve health outcomes, address climate change, advance racial equity, support a valued workforce, and strengthen local economies. The examples described in this report represent exceptions to the norm. Federal food procurement largely supports the status quo industrial food system, which has been denounced for its role in exacerbating climate change and biodiversity loss, preventable diet-related disease and health care costs, and exploitation of frontline workers and animals.^{52,53} Most of these harms are disproportionately borne by Black, Indigenous, and Latine residents of the

52 The Rockefeller Foundation (2021). True Cost of Food: Measuring What Matters to Transform the U.S. Food System. <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/True-Cost-of-Food-Full-Report-Final.pdf>

53 IPES-Food (2017). Too big to feed: Exploring the impacts of mega-mergers, concentration, concentration of power in the agri-food sector. https://ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/Concentration_FullReport.pdf

United States.⁵³ The consolidation present in the industrial food system also concentrates wealth and power at the expense of farmer autonomy and income, worker well-being, rural communities, and public health.^{54,54}

Agencies have designed and implemented policies and practices to advance values-aligned food purchasing and service in a variety of ways, due in part to differences in their types of food service operations, mandates, and budgets. A robust government-wide policy may help align definitions and standards for nutritious, sustainable, and ethical food, providing the federal government an opportunity to leverage its collective buying power across agencies. Furthermore, as many of the accomplishments described in this brief depended on the extraordinary initiative and dedication of an individual or small group of champions within an agency, a formal policy can help institutionalize changes to prevent backsliding if a champion leaves the agency. At the same time, tailoring the implementation strategy to the needs and constraints of each agency is warranted to ensure feasibility.

"While the progress of many US federal agencies is laudable, it is insufficient to drive the changes urgently needed in our food system to improve health outcomes, address climate change, advance racial equity, support a valued workforce, and strengthen local economies."

This report provides a foundational overview of federal values-aligned food purchasing and service. While other research has investigated the creation and implementation of healthy or sustainable purchasing or food service policies and practices in individual agencies,^{55,56,57,58} to our knowledge, this is the first attempt to explore these efforts across federal agencies. This report presents examples of agency achievements to illustrate what is possible; it is not a comprehensive survey of the food purchasing and service policies and practices of all federal agencies.

The examples identified were influenced by the availability of online information and key informants' knowledge about values-aligned food purchasing and service; additional efforts such as the purchasing of foods from small businesses owned by people of color and socially disadvantaged groups may have been underway but not documented in the same way as healthy or sustainable food purchasing. Examples of policies or practices to support the purchase of foods with worker justice or animal welfare certifications were not identified in the development of this report. Future research is also needed to more thoroughly examine the impacts of values-aligned federal food purchasing and service, building on efforts that have modeled the potential health,^{59,60} economic,^{60,61} environmental,⁶¹ worker well-being,⁶¹ and animal welfare⁶¹ impacts from wide-scale implementation of specific policies.

54 Hendrickson, M. K., Howard, P. H., Miller, E. M., & Constance, D. H. (2020). The food system: Concentration and its impacts. A Special Report to the Family Farm Action Alliance, 17. https://farmaction.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Hendrickson-et-al.-2020.-Concentration-and-Its-Impacts_FINAL_Addended.pdf

55 Mills, S. (2012). Food for the Parks: Case Studies of Sustainable Food in America's Most Treasured Places. San Francisco, CA: Institute at the Golden Gate. https://www.parksconservancy.org/sites/default/files/documents/FoodforParksCaseStudies_report_1.pdf

56 Bayne, A.I., Hair, E., Harris Brewer, K., & Garg, A. (2012). *The HHS Hubert H. Humphrey Building Cafeteria Experience: Incorporation of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010 into Federal Food Service Guidelines*. Prepared by NORC at the University of Chicago. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

57 Williams, B., Jilcott Pitts, S., Onufrak, S. & Sirois, E. (2023). Promoting Sustainability in Food Service: A Qualitative Exploration of Barriers, Facilitators, and Best Practices in Veterans Affairs Hospitals. NOPREN Food Service Guidelines Workgroup. <https://nopren.ucsf.edu/sites/g/files/tkssra5936/f/wysiwyg/VA%20Food%20Service%20Sustainability%20-%20Lay%20Summary%20Packaged%20Final%20Updated%20%281%29.pdf>

58 Kleinberger, C. A., Bukhari, A. S., Kirkpatrick, K. M., Moylan, E. M., Billington, J. L., Armstrong, N. J., ... & Deuster, P. A. (2023). Go for Green® nutrition program: Translating evidence into practice. *Military Medicine*, 188(5-6), 1046-1053.

59 Abrahams-Gessel, S., Wilde, P., Zhang, F. F., Lizewski, L., Sy, S., Liu, J., ... & Gaziano, T. (2022). Implementing federal food service guidelines in federal and private worksite cafeterias in the United States leads to improved health outcomes and is cost saving. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 43(2), 266-280.

60 A forthcoming analysis to be published by the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition models the health, environmental, worker well-being, economic, and animal welfare impacts that could be achieved by shifting federal food purchasing to values-aligned food purchasing and service. Data is available upon request.

"The Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition is calling on President Biden to issue an Executive Order to update and implement the Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities and establish values-aligned food purchasing standards for federal agencies."

Conclusion

This report has highlighted the feasibility and benefits of implementing various aspects of values-aligned food purchasing and service in a variety of federal facilities. To fully leverage federal purchasing power to transform the food system, a robust, enduring, whole-of-government policy is needed. To that end, the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition is calling on President Biden to issue an Executive Order to update and implement the Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities and establish values-aligned food purchasing standards for federal agencies.



About the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition

The Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition is working to leverage federal food purchasing to spur a just, healthy, and sustainable food system. Led by the Center for Good Food Purchasing, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Farm Action, Friends of the Earth, and Health Care Without Harm, the Coalition fosters collaboration and coordination to advance values-aligned food purchasing and service in federal facilities and programs. The Coalition is guided by the Anchors in Action Aligned Framework and advocates for the following values to be operationalized in federal food purchasing and service: local and community based economies, environmental sustainability, community health and nutrition, racial equity, valued workforce, animal welfare, and public accountability through transparency (see appendix). The Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition is supported by The Rockefeller Foundation. For more information, visit www.fedgoodfoodpurchasing.org.

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We also thank the Environmental Working Group for sharing their research into plant-based options at individual federal food service facilities.



Appendix

Good Food Purchasing Coalition Values

adapted from the Anchors in Action Aligned Framework

Local and Community Based Economies: Vibrant and resilient regional economies are a forum for communities to regain power in decision-making within their local food system and the land that supports it. When buying power focuses within a regional economy, across production, processing, manufacturing and distribution, it creates shorter, more resilient supply chains and the potential for a circular (mutually reinforcing) economy.

Valued Workforce: Farm and food chain workers have the right to freedom of association and to bargain collectively, as well as the right to livable wages and healthy and safe working conditions. Food businesses that uphold and implement principles of workers' rights, cooperative ownership, democratic decision-making, and migrant, racial, and gender justice, help to ensure that food workers can live and work with dignity.

Environmental Sustainability: Environmentally sustainable farms and food businesses build healthy ecosystems by improving soil health, increasing biodiversity, and reducing the carbon and water footprint of food production while advancing public health and worker safety. Environmentally sustainable fishing operations protect habitat, ensure wild sustainable fish stocks, support traditional and local fishing economies while advancing public health and worker safety. The promotion of climate-friendly diets and sustainably produced foods can reduce the environmental impact of our food system and incentivize further adoption of sustainable farming, fishing, ranching, and business practices.

Animal Welfare: Animal welfare encompasses all aspects of animals' wellbeing and high animal welfare is achieved when animals' physical, mental, and behavioral needs are met throughout their lives. This can be understood through the five freedoms where animals are free from hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain, injury, and disease; to express normal behavior; and from fear and distress. Farms and ranches with high animal welfare practices ensure responsible care and stewardship of farmed animals that also create positive impacts for the health of surrounding communities and ecosystems.

Community Health and Nutrition: Supporting communities in shaping their food environment with culturally relevant, nourishing foods improves health and wellbeing, ensures food sovereignty, and builds resilience to withstand and recover from economic and environmental disruptions.

Transparency and Accountability: Communities have full access to food, land, information, and decision-making power. Transparent processes allow communities to engage with institutions in setting food justice goals, hold them accountable to meeting them, and celebrate successes as institutions increasingly use their public dollars to serve the public good.

Racial Equity: Racial equity means acknowledging and rectifying the structural barriers that prevent people of color from the opportunities and resources to thrive. It is an ongoing practice to recognize that the current practices, and required rules and regulations of our existing food system, uphold white supremacy and that this systemic injustice needs to be repaired through redistribution of land and wealth. Leadership is sought out from the communities that have been pushed to the margins when building alternatives. Self-determination for marginalized communities is essential to practice racial equity.