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Discrimination Is Limiting TGNC People's Access To Good Nutritional Health

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Executive Summary

Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming (TGNC) individuals are disproportionately subject to discrimination relative to their cisgender counterparts. Several reports by advocacy organizations have documented the high rates of poverty, harassment, violence, poor health, limited job opportunities, homelessness, and isolation that TGNC people face from society.² Systemic discrimination then creates a barrier to socioeconomic success that in turn limits access to good nutritional health. Remov-

ing obstacles to good nutrition for TGNC people requires equity among social welfare programs and targeted Trans or LGBT grants. Recognizing the role of solutions like local food hubs that expand food availability and advocating for SNAP participation are critical steps for not only TGNC beneficiaries, but also for all in need of these services. More importantly, the lack of data on sexual orientation and gender identity puts policymakers and local government at odds when determining budget allocations for pro-

gramming and services, since there is no accurate data collection.³

Background

Good nutrition is categorized by the United Nations as the "foundation of human health and wellbeing and encompasses many rights...including the right to food, health and care as well as survival and development".⁴ Because of discrimination, 26% of Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming (TGNC) individuals in the United States are living below the poverty line and do not

Important Terms:¹

- **TGNC:** Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming. Transgender is a word commonly used to describe people who live in a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth. Gender-nonconforming refers to individuals whose external manifestation of their gender identity does not conform to society's expectations of gender roles.
- **LGBT:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. LGBT, the acronym (specifically the LGB) encompasses the direction of

one's sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction. It is on a continuum and not a set of absolute categories. Sexual orientation evolves through a multistage developmental process, and may change over time. Gender is a socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. Gender characteristics can change over time and are different between cultures.

- **Gender Binary:** The idea that there are only two genders (M/man and F/woman) and is based on physical anatomy at birth.

Along with this comes the idea that people must strictly adhere to culturally acceptable behavior for men/boys and women/girls. For example men/boys are to exhibit masculine gender presentation, behaviors, and social roles and women/girls are to exhibit feminine gender presentation, behaviors, and social roles.

- **Cisgender:** A person whose gender identity is aligned to what gender/sex they were assigned at birth; 2) A non-trans person.

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achieve overall economic and social prosperity.⁵ In the case of TGNC individuals, poverty doubles that of the general U.S. population at 12.7%,⁶ therefore creating a gap in the nutritional health of this population and their access to nutrient-rich food.

The reports available show that approximately 2.4 million LGBTQ people⁷ do not have enough money to feed themselves, making them dependent on food assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).⁸ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 3.6%⁹ of the country is jobless, compared to transgender households who are four times as likely to have an income under \$10,000.¹⁰ In the past, the main requirements to qualify as a beneficiary of SNAP was a household gross income 130% less than the federal poverty level with a net income equal or less than the poverty level, and assets lower than \$2,250.¹¹ In 2014, LGBT adults were an average of 1.62 times more likely to report not having enough food for their families at some point in the prior year.¹² Recent changes to SNAP rules make it more difficult for this population to continue feeding themselves. At the end of 2018, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that it would institute a series of rule changes to the SNAP program; one rule regarding the Requirements for Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents would eliminate a waiver program that grants work requirement

exceptions. Instead, SNAP recipients would otherwise be obligated to participate in a work program for at least 20 hours each week.¹³

Proposals to cut SNAP benefits based on unemployment or underemployment do not consider the real economic implications of systemic barriers TGNC individuals face in the job market. Restrictions like work requirements, time limits, or immigration status can increase barriers. In states without protections, TGNC people may be reluctant to attempt registering for social welfare programs like SNAP when they do not have identity documents that match their name and gender. Respondents from community surveys have reported only 11%¹⁴ of the transgender respondents have changed identity documents, with 32% indicating an inability to afford the change.¹⁵ Lack of documentation that affirms the person's gender is an impediment to services, as 32% of respondents without this documentation who have attempted to request social welfare services are denied. For individuals who fall out of the gender binary or nonbinary individuals, changing documents is not always possible. In the US, only 15 states, zero territories and D.C.¹⁶ have a third or "other" option as a gender marker.¹⁷

Overall, when illnesses incur due to poor nutrition, the lack of these documents can propel long-term health impacts. Nutrition becomes more important to prioritize for those who are using hormone

therapy to masculinize or feminize a person's body to better align that person's physical characteristics with their gender identity. Additionally, TGNC individuals are more likely to have chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes mellitus, HIV, cancer, obesity, depression, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and chronic kidney disease.¹⁸ Many TGNC individuals recognize that they are not consuming enough nutritional foods.

"I could get 'em for \$0.99. You can get a sucker at the store for \$0.25 or whatever. Those kinda things don't sustain you. They're not giving me the right protein and vitamins. I feel like for a while, I felt nauseous a lot. All the time. I was sick all the time."¹⁹

The nutrition of TGNC individuals is not as prioritized compared to their non-LGB/TGNC counterparts who also experience high food insecurity. Societal biases also prevent access to food; people or institutions can become a barrier to nutrition due to unknowingly or deliberately making a judgment on TGNC individuals based on preconceived notions instilled through culture and environment. In one study, a transgender couple mentioned:

"We had a couple food banks near us, but we were iffy about going to them. Pretty much all of the things in our area are run out of conservative churches, so my wife would have to wear

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a binder and put her hair up. I would also have to dress more feminine than I was comfortable with at that time and just keep our heads down, hope nobody noticed anything off.”²⁰

In the absence of federal protections and no explicit anti-discrimination state laws based on sexual orientation or gender identity in 26 states, TGNC people can experience obstacles in employment, housing, credit, education, jury service, federally-funded programs, healthcare, businesses that serve the public, and even denied food assistance.²¹

Currently, there is limited research about how TGNC individuals thrive throughout the world; data on access to food and nutrition is no exception.²² Only a few government surveys ask respondents to record data on their sexuality or gender identity, a discrepancy that makes it almost impossible to advocate for the LGB and TGNC population. Research depends more on grassroots and nonprofit organizations who have collectively collected data to advocate for the TGNC rights. At the governmental level, some surveys such as the CDC’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System and the US Department of Labor’ Family and Medical Leave collect have begun to incorporate these questions.²³ Analyzing the intersection of this data when sexual orientation and gender identity is included provides a unique insight. In addition, sexual and gender minority questions at the federal level will provide answers to help

create effective and responsive policies to nutritional issues.

Policy Recommendations:

Food Hubs Programs at LGB/TGNC Non-Profits

Food hubs respond to community food needs and can assume various roles in your local food system. A food hub is a “business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of course-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.”²⁴ Of the 107 food hubs surveyed in the 2013 National Food Hub Survey, 47% of food hubs are structured as for profit, 34% as non-profit, 13% as cooperative, 4% as publicly owned, and 2% as other.²⁵ For non-profit organizations already serving the LGB/TGNC community, establishing a food hub that serves the community can increase access to nutritious and affordable food. Choosing this type of organization over nutrition - or hunger-centered nonprofits allow safety and inclusiveness. Specifically LGB and/or TGN spaces, offers a liberating space to socialize without worrying about being abused, misunderstood or ridiculed.²⁶ Organizations with established access and relationships with the TGNC community can play a key role to increase access to good nutrition, as they already provide so many other resources to this community.²⁷ Regardless of how accepted the

LGB and TGNC community becomes it is still important to have these spaces for them.

The USDA offers grant funds to support the development and expansion of local and regional food business enterprises to increase consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural products, and to develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets through their Local Food Promotion Program (LLFP).²⁸ This program includes two grants, one that could be used to create a food hub (implementation grant), and the second to expand the activities in relation to the food hub. This grant is open to non-profits, such as those who serve the LGB/TGNC community. The downside of this solution is the longevity of this food hub needs support with other funding besides grants. Eventually the city in which the nonprofit is located will also need to provide secure funding for this solution.

To understand the critical role food hubs can play in TGNC food systems is simple, up to 2.2 million LGBT Americans may face food insecurity.²⁹ Although many LGBT Americans are able to access the SNAP, those who receive food assistance through pantries across the countries can be denied service, even if it receives federal funds through the Emergency Food Assistance Program.³⁰ Proposed “religious freedoms” laws at the federal and state levels that could encourage this denial of

service even further, jeopardizing access to food for a population that is already extremely vulnerable.

Employment Support to Counteract New SNAP Work Requirements

Employment discrimination can often make it difficult for TGNC people to find and maintain jobs, and this new rule could affect the roughly one third of Trans individuals who live in poverty.³² This will cause TGNC individuals who are on SNAP to lose their benefits for not having stable employment. With rule changes, a plan to provide stability for the groups excluded is imperative. Support can look like transgender- and non-binary-inclusive career fairs, mentorship, networking opportunities and career coaching for transgender and non-binary workers and raise awareness about their rights as employees. Job readiness programs can create pathways to long-term employment. In many cases, LGBTQ centers have taken on the responsibility to not only create these types of programs for TGNC individuals but also outreach with employers to educate staff. With the wide range of options available, working collaboratively through local public and private partnerships is key to develop programs in new cities. With relevant and on-going training and education, an employee is able to do their job more efficiently and effectively. In addition, encouraging employers to establish internal non-discrimination policies that fully protect transgender and non-binary colleagues are initial steps that can also be implemented outside of the program. Lastly, investment in professional development can save the city time and money in the long run.

These three things can have a huge impact on a company's bottom line. Being able to target specific areas of training and development that matches the needs of the local job market means that TGNC employees learn company-specific skills needed to grow the business and overall state economy.

Inclusive Federal Data Collection on Sexual and Gender Minorities

Currently, there is little official data to reflect what it is like to be a TGNC person in the United States today. Lack of sexual orientation and gender identity data is particularly troubling in light of the extensive history of the LGBT community's invisibility to government and society. Currently, no state or the federal government has a comprehensive law that requires all government and government-funded data collection endeavors to include sexual orientation and gender identity data alongside other demographic data like race, ethnicity, and sex. Although we have basic statistics, such as the number of people who identify as LGBT, there has been little effort to record data on gender identity.³³ Without an accurate count, social welfare programs like the SNAP would not be able to appropriately fund to reflect the needs of the entire public. Food assistance programs such as SNAP, and many others at the state level, depend on data to allocate and request funding. Presidential and state executive action is necessary, as is requiring recipients of federal funds to include LGBTQ populations in publicly funded data collection efforts. As the TGNC community is one of the largest growing populations in the United States, data collection must catch up to

include all identities and experiences.³⁴

Conclusion

Nutritional health access ultimately depends on protections from discrimination on all levels. By exploring the impact on nutrition and its effect on the TGNC population, we can determine that advancing nondiscrimination protections is a start. One example is the Equality Act, which would amend existing civil rights laws to include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected characteristics, and to prohibit discrimination in public spaces and services and federally funded programs based on sex.³⁵ However, until concrete steps exist for legislation of this nature to pass, the government must work with TGNC leaders to accurately collect sexual orientation and gender identity data on the TGNC population, as well as identifying solutions that provide nutrient rich foods for this population.

Endnotes

¹ See more general definitions of the LGBTQAI+ Community here: UCSF Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Resource Center. "UCSF LGBTQAI+ General Definitions." General Definitions, n.d. <https://lgbt.ucsf.edu/glossary-terms>.

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