

APAICS panel on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander food insecurity

Congressman Kaiuli'i Kahele Papers

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3-5 minutes

Aloha Kakou, I'm Congressman Kaiiali'i Kahele of Hawai'i's Second Congressional District, and it's my great pleasure to welcome you all to this APAICS panel on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Food Insecurity and Food Access. Access to healthy, nutritious food is a critical issue in the Hawaiian Islands and across the United States that we must address to improve the wellbeing of our people.

This topic is very personal to me as I reflect on my formative years when as a keiki o ka 'aina (child of the land), I would watch my kūpuna (elders) from Miloli'i, Hawai'i's last remaining fishing village, harvest their offerings from the ocean and land. The ocean was our refrigerator and the fresh fish we caught provided nutritious, healthy food for our families. This taught me early on about the values of mālama honua, mālama i na kānaka, and mālama kino: Caring for mother earth, caring for our community and caring for oneself.

At the turn of the 19th century, Native Hawaiian traditional diets began a transition from fresh fish, taro, fruits, and vegetables to high cholesterol, sugar-laced, nutrient deficient, salt-rich processed foods. This has had a profound impact on the physical, mental, and spiritual health of Native Hawaiians, an effect that may also have traversed to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. For Native Hawaiians, the disenfranchisement from ancestral lands and the ocean led to them living in urban settings where canned and packaged foods became primary staples at mealtime. The processed foods hastened the onslaught of premature death from obesity-related diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

These problems have not gone unchallenged. In Hawaii, the growing awareness of connections between a nutritious food diet and physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing has caused a rethinking of our relationship with surrounding ecosystems. In this vein, it has energized an entrepreneurial spirit to re-birth farmer-to-consumer nexuses. While the movement began before the COVID-19 pandemic, the past year's shutdown spotlighted system deficiencies, and human ingenuity took over to solve problems. Today we call it aina aloha.

More, however, must be done, as evidenced by a recent study [March](#) conducted by the University of Hawai'i. Data found that 48% of Hawaiian families with children are experiencing food insecurity, with 15% reporting that they did not have enough food in the past week. More concerning is that about 76% of these families reported inadequate food security, had lost employment income due to COVID-19.

We know that lack of access to high-quality food has been a persistent issue in our community that has been historically overlooked. But amid an unprecedented pandemic - food insecurity and lack of food access have been magnified. The need to provide nutritious food for AA NHPI families has never been more critical.

As national leaders of this country we must come together to expand the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infant, and Children (WIC), Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). These are, but

a few programs narrowly focused within the USDA and the tip of the iceberg in solving critical problems.

My hope is that this panel will generate ideas and potential solutions to addressing food insecurity and food access for AA NHPI families.

Mahalo nui loa for your work to improve the wellbeing of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.