

CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING & RESOLUTION FOR MALNUTRITION AWARENESS WEEK

Featuring :: Meredith Whitmire, JD & Bob Blancato, MPA

TRANSCRIPT

Maura: Hi, I'm Maura Bowen, podcasting for the Abbott Nutrition Health Institute. Let me start by welcoming you to the last episode in our five-episode Malnutrition Awareness Week series, which has focused not just on what malnutrition is and why it's such an important global issue, but also on what steps you can take to help combat malnutrition in your own communities.

Maura: There were four other episodes in this series. If you'd like to learn more about the [Malnutrition Quality Improvement Initiative](#), as well as some malnutrition programs happening at the state level (namely in [Massachusetts](#), [Florida](#) and [Ohio](#)), you can find links to those recordings by logging on to [anhi.org](#), clicking COMMUNITY on our homepage, then clicking EXPERT VOICES at the top of the COMMUNITY homepage. Now. Let's get rolling with Episode 5. Because, let's face it—you already know malnutrition is ravaging our communities. You've seen it yourself and probably have many, many patients you're desperate to help in this regard. But when a problem is this big, and the only thing you personally can do is chip away at it one patient at a time, progress can feel slow—maybe even overwhelming. And that can be discouraging.

Maura: So, let's talk about changing the game at the highest levels, then. Today, our guests will do just that by sharing how they're working to influence health policy nationally to help make a bigger, faster impact on solving the burden of malnutrition.

Maura: There you go, Bob and Meredith. How's that for an intro? You're here to represent those who change the game—are you ready to talk about that?

Meredith: Yes, absolutely.

Bob: Yes, we are.

Maura: Great. First, let's do some introductions. Can you each tell us a little bit about your backgrounds? Let's be official about it. State your name, title, and how you came to do what you do.

Meredith: Alright! Hi, I'm Meredith Whitmire (JD), I'm the policy director for Defeat Malnutrition Today, and I've been working in senior nutrition generally speaking for about seven years now.

Bob: And I'm Bob Blancato (MPA), I'm the national coordinator of the Defeat Malnutrition Today Coalition, and I've been working in the space of aging policy and nutrition policy for more than 30 years, both on Capitol Hill and in the private sector. We have a commitment, if you will, to ensuring that we treat the issues of health and nutrition much more closely together as we go forward, and that's why we're happy to be involved in the Defeat Malnutrition coalition.

Maura: Can you tell us about the overall mission of the group called Defeat Malnutrition Today or DMT?

Bob: Sure. First of all, it's historically when an issue reaches the level of attention malnutrition is finally getting, particularly older adult malnutrition, one of the things that is done in Washington is the formation of a coalition, so that you have a collection of groups and individuals with a louder, unified voice addressing the issues involving malnutrition, and so on. So, our goal and our mission is to achieve the recognition of malnutrition as a key indicator and a vital sign of older adult health risk. And we're working to create policy change toward a greater emphasis on screening, detecting, treating and preventing malnutrition. And, in the course of that, the work that we do through this coalition, which is bipartisan and is now approaching 100 members, is to put our pressure on the relevant branches of the Executive Branch, that deal with issues around malnutrition and also work with Congress to get the legislative opportunities available.

Bob: We see ourselves in a unique spot. We're the only coalition of our kind. And I think we were able to raise the issue in a way that gets people interested and active.

Maura: There's a wide range of groups involved with DMT, correct?

Meredith: Yes.

Maura: Can you tell us why is it important to have such a diverse alliance to gain traction on the malnutrition issue? What are they working together to accomplish, and what progress are you starting to see from these efforts?

Meredith: So, I think it's important to have a diverse alliance because malnutrition is something that impacts a lot of different sectors. You have healthcare professionals who are screening for and treating malnutrition, you have policy makers whose job it is to make sure the proper policy to defeat malnutrition is followed. And so, a lot of our members are advocates in either the health or the nutrition space, and so it's something that is very dear to a lot of people's hearts.

Bob: I think I would add that we look at our membership and we know the usual suspects, as we call them, who would be involved in our activities, like the Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics and ASPEN and Meals on Wheels America, and the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Service Programs, but, you know, we were fascinated to be contacted by three health systems that are now in our coalition. We are very interested that the National Parks & Recreation Association and the YMCA of the United States, decided they wanted to be involved in our coalition. So, by virtue of who you have as members sends a signal out that you are doing the work of raising awareness to engage a wider sector of people in there, and when you make your communications to the Executive Branch of congress and you show your list of who you're speaking on behalf of in the coalition, that sends its own important signal.

Meredith: And, I would we are definitely starting to see some progress from our efforts. Recently, we brought the Veterans Administration (the VA) and the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), together to talk about the issue, because the VA has been addressing malnutrition for years but the Medicare program has not as much.

Meredith: We also have engaged members of Congress on things like a sign-on letter to CMS to tell them to engage more with the issue. We had a couple senators who requested a government accountability office report on malnutrition and nutrition programs generally speaking across the Federal government.

Meredith: We've engaged with the Administration for Community Living and HFS (Healthcare & Family Services) about getting malnutrition a higher prominence in their nutrition programs. And we also have a lot of ongoing work with the Older Americans Act, which houses the congregate and home delivery nutrition programs to get malnutrition more widely used and recognized.

Bob: I'll also add that we're very pleased to work with some of the states that are represented—like the states of Ohio and Massachusetts—that have developed malnutrition commissions and issued reports. We participate in many of their meetings. In the Virginia, they have legislation to give their existing commonwealth council on aging the responsibility to develop malnutrition plans. We see potential in a number of other states as they reconvene their legislative sessions next year for more activity in that space. And we think that when states do this kind of work, it sends its own message to the elected officials in Washington, and that's an important local issue.

Maura: You recently held a congressional briefing on the state of malnutrition in this country, and the Briefing highlighted a Malnutrition Awareness Week resolution with the help of Senator Chris Murphy (CONN), is that right?

Bob: That's correct. The purpose of the congressional briefing, Maura, was to coincide with Malnutrition Awareness Week, which occurs September 23-27, and it is customary when you have those kinds of opportunities to try and spotlight the issue. And doing the briefing and reception as we did was intended to do two things. One is to bring interest to congressional staff, to the briefing to learn more from our panel of experts that we have, that include Meredith, on behalf of the Coalition. That includes the Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics. That includes ASPEN. And also, we expected and had the staffer for Senator Murphy join us about why they took an interest in doing the resolution. I think Senator Murphy took the initiative from a direct request from a constituent who was part of our coalition. He went to visit a senior center. The director of the center was part of our coalition, and said, "Would you be willing to do this during Malnutrition Awareness Week?" In response, the senator to a constituent let to this resolution of being introduced. And Senator Grassley, a great leader in the senate, co-authored the resolution, making it very bipartisan.

Bob: They're important for putting an official stamp on the importance of the issue in the United States Senate. And the briefing just serves to, again, highlight and educate about the issues that are before both the Congress and the Executive branch that people need to know about going forward.

Maura: What specifically did you hope to accomplish through the briefing?

Meredith: Well, ultimately, we're really trying to raise the profile of malnutrition, and we engaged staff and numerous Senate and House offices. We're hoping they'll take that message back to their bosses, that malnutrition is something that needs to be addressed.

Meredith: I also think that, as has been done in issues like older adult hunger, older adult food insecurity, which have gotten proper amounts of attention, malnutrition is the latest in the group, if you will, and needs a little more time and focus to get people's arms around the very fact that one out of two older adults is at risk of malnutrition, which can lead to a 300% increase in healthcare costs for those with poor nutritional status, longer stays in the hospital.

Meredith: We also want to use the occasion to spotlight some very positive comments that the Secretary of Health & Human Services, Alex Azar, made toward the end of last year, singling out malnutrition as an issue of concern, and that its impact on healthcare costs he estimated to be \$42 billion dollars. But he also, in the course of his speech, talked about a care plan involving screening and detecting and assessing and diagnosing, and having a nutrition plan which saved \$3,000 per patient when they employed it. And that's exactly what we we're trying to get one of those agencies in HFS to do, which is to approve these malnutrition quality improvement measures. So that it can be engrained in hospital activities going forward. So, we'll use the occasion of the briefing and Malnutrition Awareness Week to continue to put pressure on CMS to move these things off desks better and to look into the protocols of hospitals.

Maura: One of the main themes we've trumpeted this week relates to getting involved in malnutrition initiatives at the local, state, and national levels. Can you offer our listeners the clearest path to engage with Defeat Malnutrition Today? Why and how should listeners become involved?

Bob: Well, first, let's start with www.defeatmalnutrition.today, our website, our source of information. We have many, many people who contact us on a regular basis, seeking information, people making presentations and asking for background materials. We put out publications that have been very well received, including the national blueprint on achieving quality malnutrition care for older adults; as state toolkit that tells individuals that, if they want to contact their state legislators on introducing resolutions, how to do that. And Meredith has a Federal toolkit that is being developed, right?

Meredith: Yes.

Bob: If you get to us, and come to us with your questions and your need for information, we're reaching a point now where we're accumulating a lot of good information and also producing our own good information that can be very helpful to people who want to get more engaged. An educated person is a more effective advocate to begin with, and our goal is to give everyone the necessary tools to learn about this very important topic.

Meredith: I would also like to add that if folks would like to join our policy mailing list, so they can keep abreast of all the resources we have, new resources coming out, find out about webinars we're doing, events we're holding, they can email info@defeatmalnutrition.today. There's also a link through the website where folks can sign up.

Maura: Any other parting advice for our listeners who want to make a difference?

Meredith: Yes! With all of these state advocacies that have been happening, we're going to have a webinar in November with the Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics to talk about how advocates can come together to form state and local coalitions and advocacy groups. I think that's going to be a really great 101 on how folks can get involved at the local level.

Bob: I think, you know, what we would say is, we love the fact there are more people interested in this topic than before. We think it's an issue that can be communicated effectively. One of our favorite ways to begin a presentation is to title it, "It IS What You Eat." This is what this topic is all about—focusing on nutrients, focusing on eating the right food at the right time. Where the future is brighter, if you will, on this topic, with the growing realization of the link between good nutrition and good health, topics like malnutrition and how to prevent and defeat it take on a wider context, so it's not just a nutrition issue, it's a health issue. Our goal is to work as we are with healthcare systems and the healthcare arena to make it more of a topic for their concern as well. For people who want to engage, we have a vehicle for them, which is our coalition. And we welcome any and all people who want to help us in the effort. We're grateful for that.

Maura: Meredith, Bob, thanks so much. This was great information, and it's been a pleasure speaking with you today.