



American Society for Nutrition
Excellence in Nutrition Research and Practice

October 20, 2023

U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Information from Stakeholders on CDC Reform

Dear Senator Cassidy,

On behalf of the American Society for Nutrition (ASN), we appreciate your review of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and its programs. ASN has more than 8,000 members around the world, working throughout government, clinical practice, academia, and industry, and conducting research to achieve the ASN vision of “A Healthier World Through Evidence Based Nutrition”. We encourage you to prioritize the role of the CDC National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) and do everything you can to elevate its work. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated clearly that we need more timely, frequent, and granular data on our nation’s health and health care on an ongoing basis. NCHS has helped meet that need through its data collection programs and partnerships with other federal statistical and research agencies, but much more is needed.

With more resources and engagement, NCHS is poised to lead essential efforts for CDC and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to provide this critical timely, frequent, and granular data. Through the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) and its three survey programs—the National Health Interview Survey, the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey and the family of provider surveys—NCHS provides authoritative data on vital statistics, the opioid crisis, cancer, obesity, suicide, health care utilization and insurance, and much more.

Despite its essential role, NCHS has lost 18% in purchasing power since Fiscal Year 2010. This has severely restricted its efforts in multiple areas including: modernization of its surveys; rapid diversification of its data sources to include administrative data, electronic health records, and private data; expansion in the scope of information provided through NVSS, and the speed at which it is provided; advancement of data linking capabilities to elucidate such information as social determinants; and ability to take advantage of methodological, technological, and data science advances. NCHS plays a critical role in the Data Modernization Initiative (DMI) as well. As such, NCHS must be fully integrated into DMI and receive sufficient DMI funding to guarantee the advancement of a modern and fully interoperable public health data system that includes, but goes beyond, vital statistics.

ASN writes to you about the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) in particular. NHANES helps to assess the health and nutrition of adults and children in the U.S.

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The survey is unique in that it combines interviews and physical examinations, including demographic, socioeconomic, dietary, and health-related questions. The physical exam includes medical, dental, and physical measurements. NHANES is essential to nutrition and health research, policy, and programs and is used for federal policymaking include dietary guidance, food labeling, food fortification, food safety, tracking progress toward nutrition and health objectives, and setting nutrition research priorities. NHANES has a record of success of improving our understanding of the link between diet and a variety of health behaviors and the major health outcomes that impact our nation.

In addition, NHANES has numerous applications beyond nutrition. It has an impact on billions of dollars in federal expenditures. NHANES data is used broadly across public and private sectors by multiple federal agencies, academia, and private industry. Data from NHANES is used in the development of medications, for review and approvals of pesticide use, to inform the development of pediatric growth charts, as well as to inform clothing sizes, just to name a few examples of its many uses.

The NHANES program began in the early 1960s and while there have been updates over time, there is a critical need to identify priorities for the future of NHANES right now. NHANES is challenged by funding gaps, increasing costs, small sample sizes and limited funds for innovation and the study of new methodologies. For example, while there have typically been about 10,000 participants in each data collection cycle, response rates fell to 46.9% for 2020,¹ continuing a trend of declining response rates that has been seen for all national surveys. There have been advances in technology and new opportunities for health care synergies that could be leveraged to make NHANES more efficient.

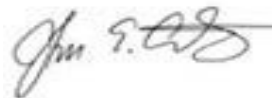
ASN recommends that Congress direct the secretaries of HHS, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other agencies as needed, to engage with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) to conduct a comprehensive study of NHANES including opportunities to modernize the survey methodology. A NASEM study would identify strategies for modernization and ensure the sustainability and efficacy of NHANES.

Additional information supporting this request can be found in ASN’s Information Brief “[Building an NHANES for the Future](#)”, in a May 2023 *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* [article](#), “Critical data at the crossroads: the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey faces growing challenges,” and from a September 2022 ASN [webinar](#) “NHANES: Opportunities for Revitalization,” each of which highlight the importance of NHANES, as well as its current challenges and opportunities.

¹ CDC.gov [Internet]. CDC National Center for Health Statistics; c2023 [cited 2023 Oct 17]. Available from: <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/nchs/nhanes/ResponseRates.aspx>.

For more than 50 years, NHANES has served as an unparalleled data resource that has benefited nutrition science and public health in numerous ways. There is currently a critical need to ensure NHANES' sustainability and impact. Thank you again for your efforts to modernize CDC programs, including NCHS and NHANES. Please contact Sarah Ohlhorst, MS, RD, ASN Chief Science Policy Officer (240-428-3647; sohlhorst@nutrition.org) with questions or for additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John E. Courtney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John. E. Courtney, PhD
Chief Executive Officer