



OFFICE OF THE BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT

## Written Testimony for 2020 USDA Dietary Guidelines

I am not a nutritionist or a medical professional. I do not work in a laboratory or a hospital. I am the president of the borough of Brooklyn, representing approximately 2.6 million people. I am a longtime public servant, first as an NYPD officer, then as an advocate, later a state senator, and now as Brooklyn's borough president. I have spent my professional life trying to improve my community, regardless of whether it was from a patrol car or a podium.

More than three years ago, in March 2016, my life and work came to a halt because my health began to deteriorate. I was experiencing numbness in my fingers and toes and a loss of eyesight so severe I could not see my alarm clock in the morning. I was stubborn. It took me a while before I went to see a doctor about my conditions. I thought, "This will pass; I'm fine." Well, after seeing some of the finest doctors across New York City, I was not fine. I was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and told that I would have to take medication for the rest of my life.

I could not stand the idea of managing medication my entire life, so I started researching how to reverse diabetes. As I mentioned, I am not a clinician, but as a former cop, I know how to read, write, and conduct investigations. I discovered that there was a whole body of research related to chronic disease reversal based on whole-food, plant-based nutrition and lifestyle change. After consulting with a number of doctors across the country in this field, I overhauled my food consumption and lifestyle by removing animal products from my diet and increasing my intake of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, and seeds. Consequently, I lost 35 pounds, regained my eyesight, and recovered full sensation in my hands and feet. Within a few months, I was considered free of diabetes, having reversed my condition as well as evaded permanent blindness and nerve damage.

My mother, at 80 years old, saw my transformation and utilized the same dietary and lifestyle changes to reverse her own Type 2 diabetes. She had been diabetic for 15 years, had been on insulin for seven years, and had thought there was no chance of reversing her condition. Within two months of embracing a whole-food, plant-based lifestyle, she reversed her condition and soon after no longer needed the nine medications upon which she previously relied. She discovered the same thing that I did: It is not our DNA — it is our dinner that is making us sick. Furthermore, she was caught in a medical model led by pharmaceutical companies that hook our loved ones on medications to manage disease.

These experiences fundamentally changed the way in which I advocate and represent my community as a public official. I have used my platform to march for healthier food in schools; to collaborate with City Council officials to make healthier plant-based options available in hospitals; to educate my constituents on the power of plant-based nutrition, and to partner with NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue location to establish a Plant-Based Lifestyle Medicine Program designed to treat chronic disease with lifestyle change: a clinic, that currently has 650 people on the waitlist.

We must now undertake an entirely new conversation about the role of nutrition in health; it is no longer just about disease treatment, management, or care. It is about how we can reverse disease. This committee knows well the exorbitant and rising rates of death and disability from chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke, which are touching every community across the country.

That is why I traveled here today from Brooklyn. These issues are too important and they touch all of us. I experienced it myself and perhaps you have too, and I am certain that each and every person on the committee knows someone who has been plagued with chronic disease. My life changed when I learned that I could reverse my disease with the kinds of foods I chose to put on my breakfast, lunch, and dinner plates, and this committee is charged with the profound task of recommending to Americans what they should put on their plates.

Therefore, I urge you to continue the trend of favoring plant-based foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole-grains, nuts, and seeds over animal-based foods such as red meat, chicken, fish, and dairy milk. I say this not because this is the diet that reversed my disease, but because there is an ever-growing body of peer-reviewed, scientific literature supporting plant-based diets as the healthiest eating pattern to prevent, treat, and reverse chronic disease.

Continuing to move these guidelines in a more plant-based direction will fundamentally change programs across the country. From hospitals to schools and any institution in between, to seek USDA reimbursement you are required to abide by the dietary guidelines. Too often I sit in meetings and ask people why they are not providing more nutritious food; they respond that they need the reimbursement from the Federal government, which is contingent on ticking boxes on a sheet informed by the guidelines we are discussing today. We can do better. Structural change requires your participation. I am tired of hearing that people cannot do this or that because they need reimbursements. This committee's guidelines should provide a gold standard for provision of healthy food; they should not be a barrier in the process of feeding people the best food for their health and well-being.

Additionally, this committee has previously considered the sustainability of our dietary patterns as they relate to our food system, environment, as well as related natural resources and biodiversity. As a public official, I know that my decisions have intended consequences and, sometimes, unintended consequences. Evidence shows that plant-based foods are far less resource intensive to produce than are animal-based foods, and it is my belief that dietary recommendations should not be isolated from their effects on intergenerational public and planetary health. If we are to be good stewards of the environment while continuing to feed our growing population, we must prioritize plant-based foods over animal-based foods.

Furthermore, we see our allies moving in this direction. Canada's 2019 dietary guidelines were created without the influence of agricultural stakeholders, and, for the first time since 1942, they prioritize plant-based protein sources and do not recommend dairy consumption for optimal health.

Learning that I could reverse my own chronic disease with lifestyle interventions saved my life. This committee can offer that information to every American. I implore you to do just that and, in so doing, you will fundamentally improve how Americans eat, how they live, and how they can prosper.