

PODCAST TITLE: HEALTHIER FOOD LEADERSHIP PODCAST
AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION

- Greg Donaldson: [00:08](#) Our daily food choices, between convenience, packaged or fresh, snacking, family meals, eating out, or cooking at home are adding up for Americans. One study estimated that nearly half of U.S. deaths caused by heart disease, stroke, and Type 2 diabetes were due to poor dietary habits. I'm your host, Greg Donaldson, and today I'm speaking with American Heart Association CEO, Nancy Brown, about the Association's efforts and plans to improve our food supply through purpose-driven collaboration with leaders that influence it and, as a result, have a direct impact on our overall health and wellbeing. Hey, Nancy. Thanks for being with us.
- Nancy Brown: [00:45](#) Thank you, Greg.
- Greg Donaldson: [00:46](#) Poor dietary habits are adding up to dire consequences. Can you help us better understand the public health nutrition landscape in the United States?
- Nancy Brown: [00:53](#) Sure. I would be happy to. You know, perhaps one way to illustrate the nutrition landscape is to think back to the year 2010 when the American Heart Association created a definition of ideal cardiovascular health, those components that would need to be in a person's life for them to have ideal cardiovascular health. One of the biggest components is healthy diet. We recognize that, today, that fewer than one percent of all Americans have ideal cardiovascular health as we define it, and one of the biggest reasons that that percentage is so low is because of the diet that people are consuming. We know, as an example, that this is not just in adults, that it starts in young people, as well. As a matter of fact, on any given day, about one in four young kids at the ages of two or three do not eat a vegetable and, among those that do eat vegetables, French-fries are being counted, and I don't think that any of us would think that that's the kind of healthful diet that we would like to start our young people off on.
- Greg Donaldson: [02:00](#) Summit level change was a key theme at the 2018 Healthier Food Leadership Summit that you hosted earlier this year which, for the third year in a row, brought together leaders from across the food supply to address some of the biggest challenges in nutrition. At that summit, we heard Dr. Sonia

Angell, Deputy Commissioner at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, speak about the need for this type of change. We asked Dr. Angell for a few comments after she spoke to your group. Let's listen to what she had to say.

Sonia Angell:

[02:28](#)

We all don't have a whole lot of time to make a decision about what we're going to eat. Sometimes, we just walk into a place and we choose what's there. Now, in some instances, companies have been making decisions that have been super helpful to consumers. They've been making decisions that change the nutrition profiles of their products to make them healthier. If we walk into a restaurant or if we walk into a grocery store and we happen to pick up that product, we walk home with it, and it's a better product, and our family will eat better as a result of it. The problem is that not all companies are making those decisions so, when we have outliers that invest a lot of resources to make a product healthier and other companies aren't doing it, then it creates kind of an imbalance.

Greg Donaldson:

[03:12](#)

Nancy Brown, from the American Heart Association's perspective, what can be done to level the playing field for those outliers? What can be done to gain greater corporate commitment?

Nancy Brown:

[03:21](#)

I think one of the most important things that we have seen that has really made a difference in unifying the way that food companies think about their offerings to the public is the concept of voluntary targets. For example, Dr. Angell, who was just speaking, has led very successfully the New York City Sodium Reduction Initiative, which has been all about voluntary targets where there was a goal and metrics that were set about reducing the amount of sodium in the food supply and certainly in packaged and processed and restaurant-oriented foods in the City of New York and a plan to robustly recognize those organizations and companies that help to achieve the targets. This is one really important way to bring industry together.

The second area of focus in New York City is now added sugars. There are many similar kinds of opportunities for industry to be recognized for making significant commitments in our own subsidiary organization, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, has done a good job of really pressing industry to make meaningful commitments and then recognizing them when they do. I think this is really important because, to Dr. Angell's point, at the other end are real people, many of whom are trying to find food products that are most healthful for their family. When we can get all members of industry working together to agree together that food products can still be tasty and can still

delight consumers and that, ultimately, a consumer should decide how much salt they want to eat and how much added sugar they want because people can add salt and add sugar to their food products but, when they have no choice because companies don't give them a choice, that's when we really have a problem.

- Greg Donaldson: [05:13](#) In fact, there is a business case for creating healthy products, is there not?
- Nancy Brown: [05:17](#) Absolutely. You know, there's many cases, and food companies proudly showcase these where they have created more healthful foods, and they see food sales go up, not down. Many people really strive to live a more healthful life, and they just need help by the companies that are manufacturing or serving the foods that they eat.
- Greg Donaldson: [05:41](#) Product reformulation. Product reformulation and developing new products that meet healthier profiles are absolutely critical, at least from the Heart Association's perspective in terms of its mission. What else is new, do you think?
- Nancy Brown: [05:52](#) You know, I think we need to not think about one ingredient at a time, but really think about the entire food supply. When you think about what it takes to get a food product from an ingredient, ultimately to something that we consume either at home or in a restaurant, having this holistic look at the food supply is really important and making sure that everyone is at the table working together. We know that these public/private partnerships, just like the partnerships the American Heart Association leads and did lead through this annual Healthier Food Summit, these partnerships are really critical to produce meaningful change and to bring all the players together. Again, this idea of looking at the whole food ecosystem, from the ingredients to the end product, at the end of the day is really important.
- Greg Donaldson: [06:41](#) That's a role the American Heart Association and similar organizations can play. Lets talk policy. Another important consideration to fixing or food system, our food ecosystem, is addressing a myriad of social challenges that really speak to the dependable access to healthy food. Thirty million people in the United States live without access to healthy food. From your perspective, from your organization's perspective, what are some of the challenges facing food equity?
- Nancy Brown: [07:07](#) You know, it's such an important issue. I think, for many people, people take for granted the ability to go to the grocery store

and buy a food product or go to a restaurant and select a healthful food product but, for many people in this country, that is not a reality. We know that zip code is as important as a person's genetic code in determining their health outcomes. A lot of that has to do with access to all kinds of things, healthful food products, safe places to be physically active, access to healthcare, access to equal opportunities for education and income, and all of these social determinants of health really make a difference when it comes to a person's health outcome. We know that communities of concentrated poverty have limited access to nutritious choices and, often, are the target of marketing by food companies or fast and casual food locations or others to purchase the less healthful option. When you look at pricing as one component, it shouldn't be more inexpensive to purchase an unhealthy item than a healthy item, and we need to see more leadership in this area from food companies and from fast and casual restaurants so that we can truly turn the tide and give all people access to healthier foods and beverages.

Greg Donaldson: [08:30](#)

That's the question I was going to ask. I'm sure that ... Well, I know that you've had a long history of talking to the industry about reformulation as an example. Do you find industry to be receptive when you talk to them about health equity and access, as well?

Nancy Brown: [08:44](#)

I think that corporations want to be good citizens, and I think that people who work in corporations want to make sure their products get in the hands of people who need to eat them or consume them. We don't often have complete alignment around the topic of marketing of healthy foods, but we do our job at the American Heart Association of calling it as we see it. When we see that there's certain companies or certain lines of industry or certain fast or casual restaurant chains that are adding to the problem of inequity instead of helping to solve the problem of inequity, we use our brand and our voice to call attention to that. I think, generally, members of industry want to be great stewards and to be part of the solution, and we're excited to play a role in bringing those great companies together to make these commitments.

Greg Donaldson: [09:41](#)

You've spoken already several times in this interview about private/public partnerships and collaboration. In October, the American Heart Association recognized social entrepreneurs who have identified innovative health solutions for their communities, and it's empowered to serve Urban Health Accelerator. At that event, a Pittsburgh-based startup called 412 Food Rescue, a startup that prevents food waste and helps

solve food insecurity was actually awarded the top financial grant from the American Heart Association. We've got a clip from the founder of that company, Leah Lizarondo. Let's take a listen to Leah.

Leah Lizarondo: [10:19](#) 412 Food Rescue is a direct response to the fact that we waste almost half our food supply while one in seven are food insecure. Our mission is to redirect perfectly good food from entering the waste stream and donating it to agencies that serve vulnerable populations. We design our distribution network so that we take advantage of surplus food and actually be able to get to where people live, work, learn, and gather. That way, we provide food access to everyone who needs it, considering their limitations of mobility and time and access. All of us have the power to change something, have the power to impact something, and we all contribute little by little.

Greg Donaldson: [11:13](#) Nancy Brown, you've already alluded to this, but leaders like Leah are uniquely positioned to find real solutions to real problems, and your American Heart Association is uniquely positioned to connect the dots. Tell us more about how the AHA is fostering community growth and supporting consumers in these ways.

Nancy Brown: [11:28](#) Sure. I'm excited to do that because I think it's such an important part of the strategy that solutions are going to come from communities themselves, individuals, business leaders. Faith-based organizations and communities know and understand the fabric of their community better than anyone. What we're trying to do at the American Heart Association is to stimulate innovation and to recognize and reward those individuals, companies, or organizations that are doing really great things to solve the problems around the social determinants of health. The Urban Accelerator that you've mentioned was one very important aspect of our organization's strategy. That really is a way that we open up in a competition, individuals to share their stories about how they're making a difference in our communities and for us to better understand their innovation and how it's solving problems around food access or homelessness or income inequality, education inequality.

At this event in October, we had ten spectacular finalists, and we were really honored to give Leah this prize because what she's doing is helping to use the power of social media and technology to inspire individuals who have a few hours to donate and to give, to take this food that otherwise would be wasted and make sure it gets to people that ultimately would

not eat otherwise if it were not for this food. This concept of helping people on their journey to health has to have as a central point learning from and helping to stimulate innovation for new solutions.

Greg Donaldson: [13:08](#) Nancy Brown, you are a relentless force in convening and catalyzing stakeholders in this space. Since the 2018 Healthier Food Leadership Summit, American Heart Association staff and volunteers have been hard at work on identifying solutions identified by the group of multi-sector stakeholders you brought together. Can you give us a sense of what might come next?

Nancy Brown: [13:26](#) Sure, absolutely. We have several goals of what will come next. First is making sure that we continue to do our job to strengthen the connection between the public health community and the food industry. At this meeting, we brought together, not just leaders of the food industry, but leaders like Dr. Sonia Angell from New York City, folks from the FDA and the CDC, and other public health organizations. As we think about our 2019 summit, we will make sure that that's a very important aspect of our continued work.

We also want to make sure that we are looking at creating, not just individual relationships with organizations, but inspiring collective action. That's why we've asked our longtime industry nutrition advisory panel to expand its membership and approach so we can bring more people to the table that will allow us to lead change on behalf of consumers and the public.

Then, finally, we're going to create an innovative awards program that will allow us to recognize great things that are happening. We will have science-based benchmarks to recognize significant progress by restaurants and food service organizations, retailers, ingredient suppliers, and packaged goods companies in areas like menu renovation and product innovation and reformulation.

Greg Donaldson: [14:49](#) There's certainly a lot to think about and much to look for in the coming weeks and months. Final thoughts to share, Nancy?

Nancy Brown: [14:56](#) You know, I think at the end of the day, we have a common agenda with the food industry, and it's really an important opportunity for us to come together and to think about the individuals at the line who are trying to live a more healthful life and to work together to come up with new solutions to provide tasty options for people that they can incorporate into their daily life, and we're very committed to this work. We recognize

the power of the American Heart Association's ability to bring people from many sectors together, and we intend to continue to do that in many areas, including in the area of healthier food.

Greg Donaldson:

[15:38](#)

Thank you, Nancy. You've been listening to a conversation with American Heart Association Chief Executive Officer, Nancy Brown, about collaboration and innovation to improve our food system to make a collective impact on the overall health and wellbeing of all people.

You can visit us at heart.org/healthierfood, and feel free to reach out to Nancy or the American Heart Association and its staff at any time. I'm today's host, Greg Donaldson. Thank you for listening.