

Transcript: Mayor Eric Adams Delivers Remarks at 'A New York City Approach to Addressing Hunger, Nutrition Security, and Health Disparities' Conference

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Kate MacKenzie, Director, Mayor's Office of Food Policy: Thank you for joining us here today at this historic event. This is the first in a series of national convenings developed by the Task Force on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health to help shape the upcoming White House Conference. Throughout the day, your recommendations to shape future federal policy will be captured, and ultimately shared with the organizers of the White House Conference. To keep you energized, we're pleased to provide a plant-powered lunch prepared by our own Department of Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Services.

MacKenzie: I want to acknowledge the entire department for their steadfast commitment to our children's health and wellbeing. I'd also like to thank the Task Force on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health for its partnership in bringing together today's event.

MacKenzie: Dr. Dari Mozaffarian, a co-chair of the task force, is here with us today, and will provide closing remarks later this afternoon. This event has been made possible with support from the Bia-Echo Foundation, the HAND Foundation, Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, and No Kid Hungry.

MacKenzie: Mayor Adams' passion and commitment to advancing food and nutrition policy has been evident since day one. Under his leadership, we are committed to holistically reshaping our food system and making healthier, plant-powered options more accessible to all New Yorkers. It is my honor and privilege to now introduce you to Mayor Eric Adams.

Mayor Eric Adams: Thank you. Thank you. Really, really excited. Excited about the thought I'm going to get that green, yellow hat with the holes in it. Amazing moment. When I was speaking to Congressman McGovern and Congressman Esapillat to learn that it was in 1969, over 50 years ago, was the last time we did a real analysis of White House Conference on food. And for us to do it now, and start the process of connecting the dots, because we have been divided in so many different areas as we have pursued some of the major issues that we are facing as a country. We're addressing the issue of our economy as we rebound from COVID. We could do it by ensuring we use our food supply right here in the state, using ways of growing food, using our buying power to leverage our dollars.

Mayor Adams: We're dealing with environmental issues. We know that the over-consumption of unhealthy meat products and food and how we use it for feed for chickens and cows and other livestock is destroying our Amazon, it's destroying our environment. Yet we never really talk about it. Even in the states that's now being examined, the connectivity between food and mental health issues, we are now starting to look at that and see what's the connection on how people are eating. Our microbiomes. The unhealthy food that you're seeing in various parts of our city. When you go to fancy places that many of us may live, Park Slope and Bed–Stuy, we have Whole Foods. But you go into those areas where NYCHA residents and those who are in economically challenging communities, you see junk food. And the grades that are connected with those areas, just wreak havoc on all of us.

Mayor Adams: But then there's this personal story. There's no one in this room, no one, that does not have someone that's gone through a chronic disease in their life. All of us. All of us. And you know what happens, it hijacks your life. You're no longer yourself. And when I think about waking up that day and having the doctor tell me I was going to be blind in a year and I was going to lose some fingers and toes because of advanced stages of diabetes, the ulcer, the high blood pressure, the American package. When I thought about that and all I had to do was just change my diet. That is an amazing moment to see that life raft thrown at you, that states, "If you change your diet, you could change your life." All the lies that told us chronic diseases were part of getting older and it was in our DNA. We finally realized it was not our DNA, it was our dinner. It was not our lineage, it was our lunch. And it was not where we were born, it was our breakfast.

Mayor Adams: And we feed those chronic diseases every day to people in hospitals, senior centers, schools, prisons, we feed the chronic diseases that we are facing in our

country. And since being on this journey, you are born in sometimes into these dark places, not realizing they are not burials, but they're planting. And as you continue to see the harvest, you come in contact with amazing people like Kate and George Hulse from EmblemHealth, whose helped sponsors this event. And so many more that have been part of this journey.

Mayor Adams: And I was just telling reporters earlier, this is not a popular journey. Every time I take a hot dog out of someone's hands, I'm losing a vote. You can't do this because you're trying to pander to people. There's so many people that get angry when you start talking about the cultural relationship we have with food. But we know this is the right thing to do. And it's not by just being silent. It's by doing this. So all of you who have worked and toiled in this field for a long time, like my good friend, Dr. McMacken over at Bellevue Hospital who had this vision of having Lifestyle Medicine at Bellevue Hospital. Now it is in every H+H facility in our city, of giving people choices. That's amazing moment that people thought was impossible.

Mayor Adams: All of you who have done this work, I want to personally say, thank you. Because right now, in this city, there's an Eric Adams walking into a doctor's office, who's being told, "You're going to lose your sight." Who's being told, "You're going to lose some fingers and toes." Who's being told that, "You have to go on dialysis." Who's being told that, "You have chronic heart disease." Right now, every day, those diagnoses are destroying the lives of people we know as families and friends.

Mayor Adams: If we get this right, we are going to turn those diagnoses around, and we're going to empower people to know that they can be controlled of their health. It's right there, right before us. And this is how we're going to get it done. So again, I thank you for coming out on this beautiful day to embrace this beautiful idea that we could have, in hungeriness, in this city, to end the fight on chronic diseases, and at the same time make this a better place for all of us. Thank you very much.

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MacKenzie: Thank you, Congressman. As you've said, access to healthy food, supporting farmers, ensuring that no one has to worry about where their next meal is going to come from. These are common sense values that it seems everyone should support, no matter what side of the aisle you come from. It is my pleasure to introduce a

man who embodies this bipartisan spirit. Former Staten Island president, and current leader in the Adams administration, Jimmy Oddo.

James Oddo, Chief of Staff, Deputy Mayor for Operations: Good morning, everyone. Let me start out by saying to the Congressman from Massachusetts, as a New York Mets fan, I apologize for the World Series of 1986. But as a New York Jets fan, it would seem that Belichick and Brady have more than made up for it.

Oddo: It's good to be back at Gracie Mansion, I have to tell you a very quick story. It was nearly two decades ago, January 2003, to be precise, that I was a Republican leader in the City Council, and I and my 50 colleagues were invited to dinner here at Gracie Mansion by then Mayor Bloomberg. Ostensibly, the dinner was to repair the fractured relationship the then mayor had with the City Council, particularly the three Republicans and the three other Democrats who voted no on that infamous historic property tax increase.

Oddo: And as the mayor began his speech, he fell back into the same rhetoric that had angered me to begin with. And when he was done, I stormed over to my colleague and said, "We're out of here." I stormed over to my colleague because he was a fellow Republican, but also because he had the keys and he drove the car. Storming out of Gracie Mansion in opposition to the mayor is one thing. Storming out of Gracie Mansion in opposition, and then looking around trying to figure out how to get back to Staten Island via mass transit is another.

Oddo: But I broke out the time machine because I want to take you back to another time, not measured in decades, but measured in years. I'm reading from my cell phone, January 16th, 2019 at 3:27 PM. "Eric, I just watched your testimony. Brother, when you talk on these issues, you speak to me. I feel like I can run through walls with you when you speak. Bravo. I'm still a meat eater, but I'm all in with you in this fight. We are doing our thing here on the rock, but anything I can do, count on me." My colleague and my friend in that text has a new [inaudible] these days, boss.

Oddo: Eric was then borough president, and now Mayor Eric Adams. And for these last six months, I have been blessed to be inspired on a continuous basis across a whole breadth of issues and inspired to run through walls with him. Six months have gone by in a flash, but so did the eight years as a borough president before that, so did the 15 years in the City Council before that.

Oddo: And for those of you out there who share the perspective of middle-age with me, you look in the mirror at times and you see one of your parents. Every time I see a new wrinkle or a new age spot, every time I make a sarcastic joke, I see the reflection of my old man. Now, when you work for Eric Adams, a guy who grinds like no other before him, the sight of that old man in that mirror is an inspiration. My father was a worker. He was a bull. And I look at it, and I look at myself and I see him and I say I could do this. I could try to keep up with this man.

Oddo: But then I think about something a little less inspiring. I think about the gene pool that I am swimming in. When I was in the Council, I went on this anti-tobacco tear, going to schools across the district. And I used to take the school children on a tour of the scars on my father's body. There was the ulcer. There was the kidney lost to a malignancy. There was the open-heart surgery. And then last but not least, the most difficult of all, there was the scar on the stump of the right leg, where they took a good portion of it. And I look at that image in the mirror and I worry about my fate, but then I remember DNA is not destiny. As Mayor Adams says, "It's not in our DNA, it's in our dinner." And as one food influencer and author wrote, "Genes are not destiny, they merely predict what the standard American diet will do to you."

Oddo: You all know the numbers, I don't have to go through them. So I've gone on a journey, I've put a lot of faith in epigenetics, trying to change my lifestyle, change what I eat, change how I exercise, do things differently than my father did. And I have done a lot of research and a lot of reading. But sometimes, I give in. Even though I am thoroughly blue collar and working class, I give into the privileged perspective of willpower and self-control. And I think, "Come on, man, you got to be able to do better than that." But then you do more research and more reading, Mark Bittman's book, Michael Moss's book. And you read about how production drives consumption. You read about how it's not a fair fight.

Oddo: So I am a Republican standing up here saying to local elected officials, national figures of all stripes, get in the fight. The mayor likes to say, "There are many rivers that feed the sea," pick an aspect of this fight that you could believe in. And join this fight. It is an unfair fight. And I have to tell you, I'm a political animal. Well, less so these days, but I'm a political animal, and I follow on Twitter the outrage. Everyone is outraged. Everyone's outrage leads to more outrage. We need to have that outrage, that a bunch of corporations hire lawyers to manufacture and manipulate food to hook us. And they're beating us up and our families on the inside.

Oddo: If someone came through the door of my own constituents on Staten Island to harm them or their family, they'd fight like mad. They're coming in our homes in little packages every day, and the bruises and the beatings are on the inside. And they're not seen until they are seen. I will close with this. In November of 2019, the New York Times wrote in an op-ed where two physicians said, "We need a Manhattan Project to find definitive answers to the epidemics of diet related disease." I am down with that.

Oddo: And in the meantime, I'm so inspired that all of you will join me in standing shoulder to shoulder with Mayor Adams and run through a few walls. Thank you.

MacKenzie: Thank you. Thank you. So, we're going to make a little bit of a transition up here into our panel. Thank you, our opening speakers so much.

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