The Connection Between Nutrition and Health:
Food as Medicine Strategies

November 17, 2026
2 pm – 3 pm ET

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES
(In order of appearance on the program)

Caitlin (Cait) Ellis, MPA, serves as NIHCM's Vice President, providing strategic leadership across the organization to support NIHCM's work to improve health care through policy research, education, and innovation.

In her role, Ms. Ellis oversees the Foundation's programming portfolio — policy research and journalism grants, awards, and policy communications — with a focus on enhancing the affordability and quality of health care in the United States. Her areas of interest include the drivers and impacts of rising health care costs, market dynamics, maternal and child health, behavioral health, and social determinants of health.

Ms. Ellis joined NIHCM in 2014 and has held several key leadership roles. She holds a Masters of Public Affairs from the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University Bloomington, and a Bachelors of Arts in Politics from Willamette University.

Dariush Mozaffarian, MD, DrPH, MPH, is a cardiologist, Director of the Food is Medicine Institute at Tufts University, and author of the book, *Food is Medicine* (Holt/Macmillan). He serves as Distinguished Professor, Dean Emeritus, and Jean Mayer Professor; and is clinically active in cardiology at Tufts Medical Center. His work aims to create the evidence and translation for a food system that is nutritious, equitable, and sustainable. Dr. Mozaffarian is a global authority in Food is Medicine, has authored nearly 700 scientific publications, and has served in numerous advisory roles. His work has been featured in leading media outlets, and Thomson Reuters has named him as one of the World's Most Influential Scientific Minds. Dr. Mozaffarian received his B.S. in biological sciences from Stanford, M.D. from Columbia, Doctorate in Public Health from Harvard, and clinical training in internal medicine at Stanford and in cardiology at the University of

Washington. He is married, has three children, and actively trains as a Fourth Degree Black Belt in Taekwondo.

Melanie Hall, MS, RDN, is an accomplished innovator committed to health equity and community empowerment. She has pioneered internal systems change across government, commercial, and nonprofit organizations to help them collaborate with communities to improve access to nutritious food and promote lifelong healthy habits through data-informed solutions.

Believing that innovation stems from rigorous research, Melanie excels at multi-year strategies and engaging data interpretation to turn insights into action. From state-wide fruit and vegetable campaigns for SNAP households at the CA Dept of Public Health; to novel WIC resources, staff trainings and merchandising practices that increased program engagement at Kellogg; to launching the first Organic WIC-eligible breakfast cereals at Kashi—each initiative leveraged data and actionable insights to secure funding, ensure organizational commitment, and spark public/private collaboration.

Feeding America is a national network of 250+ members who provide food and a combination of training, funding, and/or technology solutions to 60,000+ programs and organizations delivering healthy food and other social determinants of health services to food insecure communities. As Chief Health, Research and Evaluation Officer at Feeding America, Melanie leads Research and Evaluation teams that work to deepen our collective understanding of the scope and drivers of food insecurity in America, while her Health Impact team supports the development of dignified Food Is Medicine solutions that address the unique needs faced by the 47 million people who don't have access to healthy food.

Melanie is a graduate of Tufts University with an MS in Nutrition Communications; she completed her dietetic internship at Frances Stern Nutrition Center and holds a BS in Nutrition Science from the University of California at Berkeley. She lives in the Chicagoland area with her husband, two sons, and two cats.

Kofi D. Essel, MD, MPH, FAAP, is a nationally recognized physician executive leader at the intersection of healthcare, nutrition, and social impact. He serves as the inaugural Food as Medicine Program Director at Elevance Health, where he leads enterprise-wide strategy to design, implement, and scale innovative food-based interventions addressing diet-related chronic disease and social risk. As a core member of the Health Outcomes Organization, Dr. Essel works across social impact, medical policy, and health quality

initiatives to advance Food as Medicine as a foundational component of whole-person care.

Dr. Essel is a board-certified community pediatrician at Children's National Hospital and Clinical Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the George Washington University School of Medicine & Health Sciences, where he previously served as Director of the GW Culinary Medicine Program and Founding Director of a Food as Medicine research and innovation lab. His career has been defined by advancing workforce training, clinical innovation, and community-engaged research focused on food insecurity, obesity, and diet-related disease across the life course.

An award-winning executive, scholar, and author, and a highly sought-after national speaker, Dr. Essel is widely recognized for his ability to translate complex research and policy into compelling, actionable insights for clinical, policy, industry, and public audiences. He has been extensively published in peer-reviewed journals, authored nationally disseminated clinical toolkits, and frequently appears in national media. His scholarship and thought leadership have informed clinical guidelines, federal policy discussions, and multiple National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convenings.

Dr. Essel currently serves on the National Academies' Roundtable on Obesity Solutions Lived Experience Innovation Collaborative, the Board of Directors for the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), and as Physician Advisor to the Partnership for a Healthier America's Veggies Early & Often campaign. He previously served on the Executive Committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Obesity.

Dr. Essel earned his bachelor's degree from Emory University and his MD and MPH in Epidemiology from the George Washington University.