

NEW YORK COVID-19 FOOD COALITION

**Testimony Submitted by
Gabrielle Blavatsky, Policy Director of Equity Advocates
on behalf of the NY Covid-19 Food Coalition
Before the NYS Senate Standing Committees on Agriculture, Labor and Social
Services**

**Hearing on Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside Continuing
Inequalities in our Food System
April 13, 2021**

My name is Gabrielle Blavatsky and I am the Co-Founder and Policy Director of Equity Advocates. Thank you to Chairwoman Hinchey, Chairwoman Ramos, and Chairwoman Persaud and members of the Committees on Agriculture, Labor and Social Services for holding today's hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Equity Advocates works to ensure all New Yorkers have access to healthy, affordable food by building the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address the underlying causes of food inequity through policy and systems change. We partner with New York-based organizations working to alleviate hunger and poverty, providing them with the tools they need to be more civically engaged—including policy education, advocacy training and coalition building services.

New York was the first American epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis is causing major disruptions to our food system and is exacerbating poverty and food inequity across the state. New York's unemployment rate skyrocketed during the pandemic and remains over 8% - twice 2019 levels¹- and an estimated 2.2 million are struggling with hunger across the state². In addition, significant racial disparities in food insecurity which existed before COVID-19 have been exacerbated by the crisis. Feeding America estimates that 21% of Black people across the country (1 in 5) may experience food insecurity in 2021 compared to 11% of White people (1 in 9).³ As organizations embedded in community food access and emergency hunger relief work, we have seen demand for emergency food and social services increase significantly over the last year as a result.

In response, Equity Advocates organized the New York Covid-19 Food Coalition: a diverse multi-sector group of over 40 food system stakeholders including frontline nonprofits and CBOs. The mission of this coalition is to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to today's crisis, but also address the vulnerabilities and

¹ New York State Department of Labor. *NYS Unemployment Rate Falls to 8.2% in December 2020*. <https://labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/pruistat.pdf>

² Hunger Solutions New York. *COVID-19 Updates*. <https://hungersolutionsny.org/covid-19/>

³ Feeding America. *The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity*. March 2021. https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief_3.9.2021_0.pdf

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injustices of the current food system. Our coalition promotes equity, collaboration, and inclusion in COVID-19 responses to ensure communities of color and other systemically under resourced communities benefit from the recovery and prosperity following the crisis.

We are advocating for resources to ensure that the local food system and supply chain remains intact, that all families are able to access the food and support they need, and that front line community embedded organizations can respond effectively to the crisis. The undersigned 25 member organizations of the [NY COVID-19 Food Coalition](#) respectfully call upon our representatives and policy makers across New York State to allocate resources towards programs that support low income communities who have been hardest hit by the health and economic disasters caused by COVID-19. These investments will help advance racial equity, addressing some of the existing systemic inequalities exacerbated by COVID, and ensure that New Yorkers are well fed and supported as we start the slow process of rebuilding from these crises:

- **Increase funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) to \$51 million** to adjust for rising food costs and increased need during the pandemic. In the recently passed FY22 budget, the HPNAP program was once again funded at \$36.9M. An increase in funding would help EFPs purchase higher quality food, cover additional administrative and operational support for the program.
- **Invest \$10 million to support the Wellness in Nutrition (WIN) program**, which provides funding for home delivered meals to New York's older adults, as well as nutrition counseling, nutrition education and congregate meals. This \$10M will be a downpayment for the \$27 Million that is needed to clear wait lists, support home delivered meals and case management services for older adults. After years of stagnant state investment and the impact of COVID-19, funding for this program is critical. There has been significant growth in the 65+ population; rising programmatic costs; alarming rates of food insecurity among seniors; and federal threats to food access.
- **Maintain \$3.02M for the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP)** for community-based organizations to conduct outreach and increase participation in federal food benefits. This program includes a 50% federal funding share using SNAP dollars. Future RFP and/or guidance for NOEPs should offer specific resources/technical assistance and targeted outreach to immigrant communities and vulnerable populations that were impacted by COVID.
- **Continue NYS's investment in the Vital Brooklyn Initiative's Health Food and \$28.92 Central Brooklyn Food Hub project, including:**
 - \$11.5M in Capital Funds and \$7.7M in Operational funds for a 20,500 sf Food hub processing and distribution warehouse
 - \$2.5M in Capital funds for a 10,000 sf community mixed temperature storage facility
 - \$1.2M in Capital Funds and \$530K in Operation funds for a Community Kitchen

For more information please contact:

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- \$990K in Capital Funds and \$2.9M in Operational funds for Community-owned Retail
- \$1.6M over two year for Dedicated support & grant program to local growers (for food production)

Sincerely,

American Farmland Trust
Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation
Broome-Tioga Board of Educational Cooperative Services
Bushwick Food Cooperative
Capital Roots
Center For Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship (CADE)
Citizens' Committee for Children
City Harvest
CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute
Equity Advocates
Food Bank For New York City
Food Bank of the Southern Tier
Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy
LiveOn NY
New Settlement
Phipps Neighborhoods
Poughkeepsie Farm Project (PFP)
RiseBoro Community Partnership
Swipe Out Hunger
Teens for Food Justice
THE POINT Community Development Corporation
UJA Federation of NY
United Neighborhood Houses
Urban Outreach Center
Wellness in the Schools

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