

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing – Health

Testimony of Feeding New York State

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January 23, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Feeding New York State, the state association of New York's 10 Feeding America food banks. Our food banks and nearly 5,000 community-based partners appreciate the longstanding partnership with New York's Department of Health in the fight against hunger.

While New York has taken important steps in recent years, the truth is that we have more work to do.

Food insecurity is on the rise in New York and across the country. Back in October, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that, in 2022, food insecurity rose at the fastest one-year rate since 2008 – the first full year of the Great Recession. That came just one month after Census data from 2022 found child poverty more than doubled following the expiration of the expanded Child Tax Credit. Meanwhile, here in New York, our Department of Health just reported that nearly one in four (24.9%) New York adults experienced food insecurity within the past 12 months.

These alarming data points affirm what New York food banks have been reporting. Across our statewide network, the number of New Yorkers visiting an emergency food provider is up 62% compared with pre-pandemic levels. The good news is that our state has the ability to both support the immediate need and reduce the prevalence of hunger, poverty, and food insecurity in the long term.

Critically important to supporting hungry New Yorkers is the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), which is administered by the Department of Health. The program supports a network of over 2,600 emergency food providers, providing grants for food purchases and operational expenses. For the last two years, thanks to the work of this joint committee, our state has invested \$56.5 million in the program – enabling our network to distribute more food to more families.

This year, we're requesting a \$64 million allocation for HPNAP to account for higher food and transportation costs. This figure aligns with last year's Assembly one-house budget proposal.

Beyond HPNAP, New York responded to the unprecedented global pandemic by establishing Nourish New York, which is co-administered by the DOH and the Department of Agriculture and Markets. To date, the program – which enables emergency food providers to purchase fresh, nutritious, New York-grown produce – has generated nearly \$200 million in direct benefits for thousands of farmers, producers, food hubs, and vendors. Nourish New York is an important tool for strengthening local food systems, all the while enhancing the availability of halal, kosher, and culturally relevant options at distributions.

We're respectfully requesting a \$75 million allocation for Nourish New York. It is also worth noting that every dollar stays within New York State.

Beyond our state's hunger relief programs, we believe New York should take the lead in affirming food security as a basic human right. There are meaningful and cost-effective steps we should be considering.

Last year, the nearly 3 million New Yorkers who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) saw a significant decrease to their monthly benefits. New York households saw an average loss of \$151 per month, while some saw their monthly benefits drop to just \$23. With food insecurity on the rise, we urge this committee to support an adequate minimum SNAP benefit of \$100 per month. Legislation on this issue has been introduced by Assemblymember Jessica González-Rojas and Senator Rachel May, and a total of 56 state legislators signed a letter to Governor Hochul in support.

Additionally, New York should take the lead on eliminating child poverty. We proudly stand with a coalition of anti-poverty and public health organizations in support of Healthy School Meals for All and the Working Families Tax Credit – both of which would increase the health and wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of New York children.

Hunger, poverty, and food insecurity are issues of public health. According to our Department of Health, “adults experiencing food insecurity have a higher probability of several chronic diseases, including hypertension, coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer, asthma, arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and kidney disease.” Public health research also identifies a strong correlation between food insecurity and mental health challenges including clinical depression, anxiety, and cognitive impairment.

Needless to say that hunger and food insecurity impact New Yorkers in all corners of the state. We see disproportionately high rates in urban (Bronx), rural (Herkimer), and suburban counties (Rockland) alike. No community is immune, and we should commit to building a New York in which no family or individuals struggles to afford food. We have a lot of work to do but never forget that hunger is a solvable problem.

We thank New York State for the decades of partnership, as well as this committee for the opportunity to provide testimony. To summarize our view: instead of cutting funding for vital anti-hunger programs, we should take a national lead on eradicating hunger and establishing food security as a basic human right.