



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of November 29, 2021 ~ 'Nourish NY emerges as a highlight of effective government'

THOMAS F. O'MARA November 29, 2021

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In a year of dubious actions, this new law emerges as a highlight and important to the future. Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "**Nourish NY emerges as a highlight of effective government**"

One of the most positive state-level actions heading into this holiday season was the recent enactment of a new law I helped co-sponsor and strongly supported to make the “Nourish New York” program a permanent fixture of New York government moving forward.

It is the product of legislation (S4892/A5781, Chapter 631 of the Laws of 2021) that received overwhelming bipartisan support in the state Senate and Assembly, where it was unanimously approved earlier this year, and was recently signed into law by Governor Kathy Hochul.

In a year of dubious actions, this new law emerges as a highlight and important to the future.

We all can recall the earliest weeks and months following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid shutdown of life as we had known it imposed unprecedented hardships throughout our communities. One of the most alarming scenes occurred at regional food banks – right here in the Southern Tier and throughout New York – where residents and families lined up for assistance in numbers most of us had never before witnessed.

The Food Bank of the Southern Tier delivered an incredible response to this unprecedented demand, shifting its operations to respond quickly and effectively to meet the community’s needs, while also ensuring the safety of staff, volunteers, and clients. The food bank ended the first year of the pandemic with a record-breaking distribution of 17.6 million pounds of food – a 40% increase over the previous year!

Remarkable. Nevertheless, it wasn’t easy and it took an enormous amount of creativity, collaboration, and perseverance.

Nourish New York established what would become an indispensable lifeline of assistance.

Nourish New York was launched in May 2020 as a pandemic relief initiative to help respond to the rapid, statewide escalation of community residents and families seeking assistance at local and regional food banks, and the hardships farmers were facing due to supply chain disruptions. An initial \$25 million in state funding directed the purchase of food and products from Upstate New York farms and food producers for distribution to food banks throughout New York. An additional \$10 million was delivered in late October to sustain the program through the end of 2020. The 2021-2022 state budget included an additional \$50 million for the program’s continuation.

The successful farm to food bank strategy has been widely praised by farmers, food banks, and many other community leaders for its partnership approach to meeting dire community needs and challenges. Through the program, food banks have purchased food and other agricultural products directly from New York

farmers and food processors. It has connected, like never before, New York's surplus agricultural products to those most in need through New York's vital network of food banks. At the same time, Nourish New York has helped provide badly needed support for farmers and food producers who have had to face lost and shrinking markets because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the governor's office, through the first three rounds of the program, New York's food banks have purchased over 35 million pounds of New York food products. That equals nearly 30 million meals for New York residents and families in need. The state has invested a total of \$85 million to Nourish NY which, in turn, has assisted more than 4,000 businesses across the state.

In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic forced local communities to work together like never before to meet these unforeseen and unprecedented challenges and needs. Nourish New York evolved as one of the most successful efforts. Local food banks and farmers recognized the opportunity to join together to address the twin challenges of food insecurity and struggling farms, and it has made an enormous difference for farmers, food banks, and countless New Yorkers in need. I have been proud to help sponsor and strongly support making this program a permanent fixture of New York State investment.

The legislation directs the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets to provide financial and technical support for the development of a permanent initiative to provide surplus New York agricultural products to communities in need. As previously noted, the distribution is facilitated through the state's network of food banks and other emergency food providers. The new law seeks an expansion of the current program and will also complement related efforts, such as the Farm-to-School program.

In a statement, New York Farm Bureau President David Fisher said, "Nourish NY has served as a lifeline for many in and out of the farm community over the past 18 months. It moved fresh food that might have otherwise gone to waste into alternative markets like emergency food pantries and regional food banks. (The signing of this law) makes the program a permanent fixture in New York State. Nourish NY will continue to assist farmers with the costs of harvesting, packaging, and transporting fruits, vegetables, dairy products and more while making sure people in need can put food on their tables. We thank the governor for her support, as well as the legislative champions of this important program. It demonstrates that by working together, we can creatively strengthen our vital food system and support New York agriculture."

Ensuring the continuation of Nourish New York represented a great start to this holiday season, as we all begin looking forward to and hoping for a better, more positive, and stronger new year for our communities, families, friends, and neighbors.

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