



**Testimony of City Harvest  
Before the New York State Assembly Committee on Human Services**

**Joint Legislative Public Hearing on NYS FY2026 Executive Budget**

**February 12, 2025**

Thank you, Chairwoman Maritza Davila and members of the Human Services Committee for holding today's hearing on the Governor's FY2026 Executive Budget. My name is Jerome Nathaniel, and I am the Director of Policy and Government Relations at City Harvest, New York's first and largest food rescue organization.

Firstly, I want to thank all of you and the Governor for making significant strides in bolstering New York's investments in food security, including commitments to strengthen our state's child tax credit, expanded access to affordable childcare and providing healthy school meals for all New York kids — all of which would have a significant impact for New York families. We were also encouraged to see that the FY2026 Executive Budget Briefing Book proposes to maintain nutrition program funding at the same levels as the previous year, thereby shifting the discussion from defending programs that work to finding ways to ensure they meet the exceeding demand for emergency food.

However, we believe that our state can do more to reduce food insecurity for the millions of families who are struggling to afford the rising cost of food while also paying for housing and childcare. In City Harvest's network of 400 pantry programs across New York City, we are seeing over 1 million additional pantry visits per month when compared to pre-COVID data from 2019 and a 10 percent increase in the number of New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity that has disproportionately impacted Black and Brown communities who have experienced a 30 percent increase over the same period.<sup>1</sup> And based on a recent Robin Hood Poverty Tracker spotlight on food hardship that City Harvest collaborated on and Columbia University's Center on Poverty

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cityharvest.org/hunger-in-nyc/>

and Social Policy verified, we found that 1 in 3 New Yorkers visited a pantry over the past 3 years, with at least 67 percent having a job.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the growing demand for anti-hunger programs, City Harvest has increased the food we distribute by 30%, bringing us to a total of 81 million pounds of nutritious, high-quality food per year. But we know firsthand that charity cannot stand in the place of effective and equitable public policy. That is why we have also leaned deeper into our community first values and ramped up our community-powered advocacy. Based on a community survey we conducted with Food Bank for NYC and United Way of NYC, nearly 250 food pantry leaders from across your districts made it clear that investments in food security programs, expanded access to affordable childcare, and investments in housing stability are key policy strategies to fight hunger in our State.

For those reasons and more, we stand in alignment with our network of food pantries, FeedingNYS, Food Bank for NYC and the United Way of NYC in our advocacy for the FY2026 Executive Budget to:

- 1. Create Food Security**

- a. Raise the SNAP Minimum in NYS from \$23 to \$100 (S.665/A.1318)** *(Budget Letters Led by Assembly Member Jessica Gonzalez Rojas and Senator Rachel May)*
- b. Increase funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) to \$75 million and increase funding for Nourish NY (NNY) to \$75 Million** *(Budget Letters Led by Assembly Member Catalina Cruz and Senator Michelle Hinchey)*
- c. Full funding for the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) at \$5.503 million** *(Budget Letters Led by Assembly Member Jessica Gonzalez Rojas and Senator Roxanne Persaud)*

- 2. Invest in Access to Affordable Child Care**

- 3. Support Housing Stability**

### **Create Food Security: Raise the Minimum SNAP Benefit**

Charity cannot replace the gaps and efficiencies that effective public policy and a strong nutrition safety net provides for families. In fact, SNAP provides access to 9 meals for every 1 meal that a food bank provides<sup>3</sup>. For nearly 3 million New Yorkers, SNAP remains one of the most critical lifelines for putting food on the table, especially given the economic challenges that were exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, the expiration of the national public health emergency declaration in May 2023 marked the end of many

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cityharvest.org/spotlight-on-food-assistance-from-nycs-pantry-system/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://feedingamericaaction.org/learn/issue-areas/snap/>

improvements to SNAP that lifted well over 400,000 New Yorkers out of poverty<sup>4</sup>. The expiration of SNAP Emergency Allotments led to a drastic reduction in benefits, with households losing an average of \$151 every month— some now receiving as little as \$23<sup>5</sup>. We all can attest to \$23 not being enough to feed a family for a full month, especially in the current environment in which grocery prices continue to increase. Several states have stepped up in response to the federal government undercutting SNAP benefits. New Jersey responded by raising their minimum benefit to \$95. In a political reality in which the health of these programs is uncertain on the federal level and the cost of food may become further out of reach, it is imperative that New York does all it can to fill the gaps.

According to data from OTDA, 107,672 New Yorkers receive less than \$100/month in SNAP, with 28,460 coming from New York City and more than 25,000 identifying as Black, Latinx, AAPI, and Native American or Alaskan Native. Bringing these individuals up to a \$100 minimum would cost the State roughly \$70M, a relatively small cost that is outweighed by the benefit for New York families and the local food economy. With nearly 3 million New Yorkers spending \$6.5B worth of SNAP at 16,900 food businesses across the state<sup>6</sup>, there is a robust SNAP program benefits multiple facets of our food system.

### **Create Food Security: Increase funding for the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) to \$75 Million and increase funding for Nourish NY (NNY) to \$75 Million.**

Food charities cannot do it alone. That is why it is critical that the state invests in HPNAP and NourishNY to help stock pantries with healthful New York State products.

Since 2020, Nourish NY has provided funding for food banks to fairly compensate over 4,000 local growers to procure over \$150 million worth of fresh and nutritious food for pantry participants. The program provides high quality, retail-ready, farm-fresh foods for families while also supporting New York's hardworking family farms; some of which say the program helps them afford their property taxes.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/effect-reevaluated-thrift-food-plan-and-emergency-allotments-supplemental>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.timesunion.com/capitol/article/lawmakers-call-hochul-include-increased-snap-18530518.php>

<sup>6</sup> [https://hungersolutionsny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CBPP-co-brand-SNAP-factsheet-NY-4\\_3\\_23.pdf](https://hungersolutionsny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CBPP-co-brand-SNAP-factsheet-NY-4_3_23.pdf)

Alongside the critical support that NourishNY provides to millions of New Yorkers who rely on food banks is HPNAP. HPNAP is a critical program supporting nearly 3 million New Yorkers, including 1.4 million in New York City. Established in 1984, it aims to improve the health of low-income residents by reducing food insecurity and preventing nutrient-related illnesses. HPNAP backs a network of food banks, pantries, shelters, and community organizations, enabling them to distribute over 300 million pounds of food annually. Today, HPNAP funds not only cover food distribution but also support essential administrative and capacity-building costs to ensure efficient storage and delivery.

While we are heartened to see that the Governor proposed to maintain funding for the programs as opposed to the annual budget exercise of reducing the programs to their baseline and restoring them in the final budget following months of advocacy, we believe this puts the State legislature in an even better position to go beyond the status quo for these programs. We are asking for a legislative add that increases funding for HPNAP to \$75M and NourishNY to \$75M to keep up with food price inflation and the demand for emergency food.

### **Create Food Security: Full funding for the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) at \$5.503 million**

NOEP helps low-income New Yorkers connect with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Currently, 84 local SNAP facilitate enrollers are contracted with New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to help more than 163,000 potentially eligible New Yorkers with information about SNAP, and more than 34,000 households with enrolling accessing SNAP benefits to buy food at grocery stores and farmers' markets.

Over 2.9 million New Yorkers are enrolled in SNAP, including an estimated 851,000 children, 685,000 seniors, and 57,000 veterans across New York State. Still, many more New Yorkers are eligible but not participating. NOEP helps close the gap, ensuring New York is fully leveraging federal resources to alleviate hunger. By increasing SNAP participation, NOEP also helps more low-income New Yorkers automatically qualify for other interconnected programs, including Summer EBT, WIC, and free school meals.

To sustain NOEP services and ensure that families, and the State as a whole, is fully leveraging federal dollars to build food security, it is imperative that NOEP is restored with cost-of-living adjustments to \$5.503M in the FY2026 budget.

### **Invest in Access to Affordable Child Care and Support Housing Stability**

We cannot address hunger and food insecurity without addressing some of their primary drivers and root causes. This year, we stand in solidarity with childcare advocates that are backing efforts to increased access to affordable childcare, and housing experts that are calling for investments to improve housing stability through programs like housing access vouchers. As anti-hunger leaders and food policy experts, we believe it is critically important to remove silos and recognize the connectedness of hunger, childcare and housing when making decisions about the FY2026 budget.

We heard directly from nearly 250 food pantry leaders across many of your districts and from thousands of pantry participants through previous Feeding America surveys that the cost of housing and childcare are among the leading household expenses that drive up demand for emergency food. Furthermore, we have seen corresponding evidence in the *2023 True Cost of Living Report* that points to childcare costs increasing the most for families in the past decade and housing costs being the largest expense for nearly 3 million working-age New Yorkers who are struggling to afford the true cost of living in New York City. In fact, one study shows that families experiencing housing instability had 40% higher odds of experiencing food insecurity, while families experiencing food insecurity had 62% higher odds of experiencing housing instability.

While we do not have a specific budget ask in housing and childcare this year, we hope to start and open dialogue with all of you about how housing and childcare policies can be responsive and food insecurity.

## **Conclusion**

We thank the Committee for holding this vital hearing on the Executive budget. In an environment where food security and the demand for our services are increasing while uncertainty and destabilization threatens food security across the nation, we believe that New York State's history of values, innovation and leadership are even more germane to building food security through critical state investments. We remain committed to working with you on budget efforts and policy solutions that help New Yorkers become more food secure.

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