



## **Testimony of Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America, before the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services**

**February 12, 2025**

Good afternoon. I am Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America, a nationwide direct service and advocacy organization that is headquartered in New York. I am honored to submit this testimony today on behalf of the estimated 2.4 million state residents, including nearly 650,000 children, who live in food insecure homes, unable to always afford an adequate supply for food.

Our message is simple: New Yorkers still face massive hunger and food insecurity crises statewide, and we need a massive response from the state government, especially one that focuses on increasing participation in the federally funded SNAP, WIC, school breakfasts, and new summer EBT programs.

The most impactful and cost-effective way for the state to fight hunger is to **increase participation in the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamps Program). Doing so would dwarf any other effort. If current caseloads and benefits levels stay stable, federal SNAP spending in just New York City alone over the next year would be \$4.9 billion, which dwarfs government and private spending on charitable food. If the state did more to work with nonprofit groups on SNAP outreach and access, and were able to raise the SNAP caseload and SNAP spending by merely five percent, that would equal \$245 million in extra federal spending on food relief.

The state legislature must also **pass Universal School Meals** in this year's budget. Recent research shows school cafeterias provide some of the healthiest meals children eat in a day. In fact, the nutritional quality of school meals greatly increased after the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act went into effect in 2010. This legislation created new nutrition standards for school meals to ensure that kids were receiving healthy, nutrient-dense foods in school lunches and breakfasts. The impact of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act shows how a single policy passed by Congress can dramatically improve the nutrition of millions of children.

To ensure that as many children as possible receive healthy school meals, Hunger Free America

has long advocated for making school breakfasts and lunches universally free for all students, regardless of their families' income. In school districts that have already implemented universal school meals, the policy has been shown to decrease child hunger, improve students' health outcomes, and boost academic achievement.

Finally, the state must **ensure the success of the new, federally funded Summer EBT Program for children.** According to HFA's recent Summer EBT Impact Report, the Summer EBT program was a huge success. Among families who received Summer EBT benefits, 75% were able to buy more fruits and vegetables and/or shop more frequently at farmers' markets. 63% reported that healthier food was a larger portion of their diet because of the benefits.

In New York City alone, as of September 14, 2024, \$111.7 million in Summer EBT benefits were issued to more than 900,000 NYC children, with \$67 million (60%) already redeemed. The key to Summer EBT is that it is legally available to key populations often ineligible for SNAP: immigrants (including recent migrants) and working people who earn just a bit too much to be eligible for SNAP. The challenge is that the Summer EBT benefits generally require a separate application process for most families not currently receiving SNAP or Medicaid. The immigrant families and low-income working families who may most need this new benefit will be the least likely to apply.

That is why the State should work with the City of New York, counties, school systems, nonprofit groups, food retailers, and farmers markets to conduct a comprehensive outreach and communications campaign to help eligible families enroll in, and properly utilize, Summer EBT benefits in 2025.

### **Background on The Current State of Hunger In New York State**

According to raw USDA data analyzed by Hunger Free America:

- The number of New York State residents who didn't have enough to eat over two one-week periods was 76.1% higher in August/September of 2024 than in August/September of 2021, according to new data from the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey. Hunger Free America attributes that surge to the expiration of the expanded Child Tax Credit, increased SNAP allotments, and universal school meals, coupled with the impact of inflation.
- Across the New York City Metropolitan Area (New York City, New York suburbs, and parts of NJ, CT, and PA), the number residents who didn't have enough to eat over two one-week periods was 67.1% higher in August/September of 2024 than in August/September of 2021, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey.
- 12.5% of New York State residents, or 2.4 million people, lived in food insecure households from 2021-2023. This includes 16.3% of children (647,509), 9.6% of

employed adults (866,737), and 8.7% of older residents (412,248).

- Across New York City, 14.3% of the population, or 1.2 million people, lived in food insecure households between 2021 and 2023. The Bronx is New York City's hungriest borough in terms of prevalence, with 19.1% of residents (227,086 people) living in food insecure households. Queens contains the highest number of individuals living in food insecure households, reaching 310,310 people between 2021 and 2023.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of New York residents eligible for federally funded benefits do not receive them. The best under-participation estimates that we have for SNAP that are official are old (for 2018, pre-pandemic). For technical reasons we would be glad to discuss, we believe USDA's estimates, even in 2018, undercounted those who are eligible but did not then receive SNAP. But even if USDA's numbers were correct, that still meant that 1 in 10 people overall, 25 percent of working people, and 30 percent of older New York State residents who were eligible for SNAP did not get it.

As for federally funded WIC benefits (for pregnant women and children under five), as of 2021, USDA estimated that whopping 45 percent of the pregnant women and children under five eligible for WIC statewide did not get it. Unlike SNAP, WIC has no immigration restrictions in the program and has slightly higher income eligibility than SNAP, so this under-participation in WIC is especially harmful.

**As for additional steps the state can take to fight hunger, we have two recommendations:**

- **Oppose Any Attempts by the Trump Administration to Roll Back the Community Eligibility for School Meals**  
The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Instead, schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students categorically eligible for free meals based on their participation in other specific means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). New York state must oppose all efforts by the federal government to eliminate or roll back the CEP.
- **Pass a State Minimum SNAP Benefit**  
S665/A1318, sponsored by Senator Rachel May and Assembly Member Assembly Member Gonzalez-Rojas, would establish a state SNAP minimum benefit program at \$100.

We hope you can take all or some of these actions rapidly. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.