



**MET
COUNCIL**

Feeding the hungry. Serving the poor.
Changing lives.

**2025 Joint Legislative Hearing of
the Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee
on the FY 2026 Budget for the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets**

Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, and fellow members of the Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for holding this budget hearing on the Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget for the New York Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYS Ag and Markets) along with Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. We are writing testimony on behalf of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty (Met Council) regarding the NYS Ag and Markets budget and administration of Nourish New York and New York Food for New York Families. Both programs provide vital resources to Met Council's Food Programs, working to meet the emergency food needs of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers.

For over 50 years Met Council has been one of America's largest Jewish charities dedicated to fighting poverty. We operate ten departments ranging from 100% affordable housing to our award-winning family violence program to comprehensive Holocaust Survivor assistance, senior programming, crisis intervention, and the country's largest kosher emergency food network. Over the past five years, we have also been growing our emergency food service in halal observant communities and now regularly serve a network of halal pantries meeting the needs of Muslim New Yorkers. Met Council provides a wide array of support to over 320,000 New Yorkers, including those with religious dietary restrictions, a year.

New York, a diverse and dynamic state, is a refuge for millions of people. Whether it is Ukrainians fleeing war, immigrants looking for a better life for themselves and their families, or Americans seeking opportunities in a state that supports their fundamental rights and allows them to truly be themselves, New York State provides a home. With this incredible diversity also comes the significant poverty that unduly affects millions of our residents. This poverty persists and directly affects food insecurity and the need for emergency food in urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout New York State. Access to nutritious foods through our state's investment in, and administration of, NYS Ag and Markets programs Nourish New York and New York Food for New York Families leads to lower healthcare costs, higher educational attainment, financial flexibility to pay rent or bills, and an overall improvement in mental and physical well-being.

More than 2 million New Yorkers face food insecurity. And within this population, New York State is also home to the largest Jewish and Muslim populations in the country, about 20% of the United States Jewish and Muslim population. While not all of these residents are food insecure, we know that research shows that poverty within the Jewish population tracks alongside general poverty and that Muslim Americans face food insecurity at a higher rate than nearly all other religious groups in the country (Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020"; Met Council, March 2023, "Food Insufficiency and Halal Observance Among American Muslims"). New Yorkers observing religiously informed diets are often put in a position to compromise their religious observance or go without food when they try to access the emergency food system which does not meet their needs.

Additionally, the products currently available through both Nourish NY and NYFNYF are often inherently kosher and/or halal products, such as produce, fish, and fresh eggs, that do not cost more. This means these programs allow providers like Met Council to utilize our funds flexibly to purchase both kosher and halal food where other programs fall short. Due to this, New York State must invest in these anti-hunger programs that meet the needs of kosher and halal observant New Yorkers.

Over the course of 18 months in 2023 and 2024, Met Council's Policy Team conducted research into the need for kosher and halal emergency food assistance across New York State. The team collected 29 interviews from 11 counties and 230 survey responses from providers in 46 counties. The results of this research showed a widespread need for kosher and halal emergency food throughout the state.

One hundred two (102) emergency food providers from 24 counties (44% of respondents) reported unmet kosher and halal food need. Kosher and halal food needs were reported in each of the 10 food bank regions in New York State (Met Council, September 2024, "Mapping the Need: Identifying Kosher and Halal Emergency Food Needs in New York State"). With this new research we now definitively know that culturally appropriate food assistance is not an issue that is isolated in New York City. There are New Yorkers from all over the state who follow religiously informed diets and need food assistance.

This understanding of the state of food insecurity in NYS is why we have two specific requests from members of this joint committee.

First, we join with other leaders from across the state in requesting \$75 million of funding for Nourish NY. This program, established as a pandemic response program and made permanent by Governor Hochul, has successfully moved beyond a simple pilot program and become a vital resource for emergency food providers. While we welcome the recent additional \$5 million allocated to this program, we believe that this is not sufficient funding for the continued success of Nourish NY.

New York Food for New York Families (NYFNYF) is a federally funded grant program designed to promote the purchase of food grown in New York State by programs that will deliver it to food-insecure communities. Like Nourish New York, NYFNYF supports local farmers by encouraging local food purchasing while supporting statewide programs providing vital emergency food to hungry New Yorkers. While NYFNYF is not a line item in this budget, it has the potential to strengthen New York's local agricultural systems and fight hunger across the state.

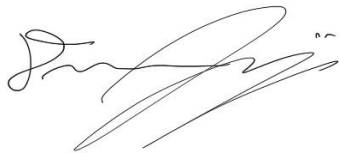
The federal program that funds NYFNYF, the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), only requires that food be sourced within 400 miles of the distribution site. State rules require that all fresh food purchased through NYFNYF must be produced within the state of New York and that any minimally processed foods contain at least 51% NYS ingredients, with the remaining ingredients sourced "locally" (within 400 miles of the processor and processors must be within 400 miles of a NYS border). These rules present a challenge for emergency food providers serving clients with religiously informed diets. There are a limited number of suppliers providing kosher and halal products within NYS, and there are additional producers either within the 400 miles mandated by the LFPA program or who work directly with NYS producers but fall just short of the 51% threshold.

This state rule does not allow kosher and halal food providers to source competitively priced kosher protein and dairy products for their purchase with NYFNYF funds. This creates pricing inefficiencies and undue barriers to using NYFNYF funding to provide food for communities that follow religiously informed diets. A waiver enabling providers to follow the broader federal rules would greatly expand providers' ability to source culturally appropriate products for their religiously observant clients. Providers using this waiver would still support their local farmers but would also be able to better serve the needs of their communities.

Both Nourish NY and NYFNYF provide vital state resources for the local food economy of New York-based farmers, distributors, and emergency food providers. The funding and administration decisions made by the Senate, the Assembly, and the Governor have the power to impact the lives of millions of food-insecure New Yorkers. Based on the research Met Council has shared above, we now know that within the overall food-insecure population of NYS, nearly 40% of our state's counties are also home to New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity with a specific requirement for either kosher or halal emergency food. By fully funding Nourish NY at \$75 million and properly administering NYFNYF to federal standards, this committee could greatly benefit all New Yorkers, including those with religiously informed dietary restrictions.

We thank you for taking the time to review our testimony, and we hope to continue to work with this committee and the state legislature to better meet the needs of all New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dickran Jebejian', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dickran Jebejian
Director of Policy
Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty