

**Written Testimony of Thomas Nardacci, Chief Executive Officer,  
Regional Food Bank**

**Agriculture and Parks Legislative Budget Hearing**

**Monday, January 27, 2025**

**1pm – Legislative Office Building, Hearing Room B, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor**

**In Support of the Governor’s Budget Proposal to increase funding for  
Nourish New York and Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance  
Program (HPNAP)**

**Introduction:**

Through our work combatting hunger in New York State, the Regional Food Bank works with several agencies and departments, and their many dedicated public servants, who work diligently to ensure we are providing nourishing food to neighbors in need in our 23-county service area. I would like to take this opportunity to specifically thank the dedicated staff of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. This staff works tirelessly on behalf of the people of this state. They are professional, courteous, and always willing to help and provide their expertise. The successes showcased in this testimony are made possible through the partnership that Food Banks have with New York agencies, especially the Department of Agriculture and Markets.

I also must note the leadership and vision of Commissioner Richard Ball. Commissioner Ball has led a department which other states throughout the country look to for ideas and inspirations. These innovations continue to have profound positive impacts on New York Farmers, New York families, and New York’s natural resources. Commissioner Ball has been instrumental in making positive connections and leading collaborations throughout our state to the benefit of all New Yorkers.

**Support:**

By connecting New York farmers to New Yorkers in need, the creation of the Nourish New York program became a reality amid the pandemic of 2020. New York growers and producers create healthy food staples, which Food Banks in turn help deliver to New Yorkers in need. This has created a supply line which helps directly feed neighbors in need while also supporting economic development. This initiative is keeping New York farms in business and inspiring the next generation of producers to plant roots and allow their creativity to flourish right here in the Empire State.

Since its inception, Nourish New York has further stimulated the state's agricultural economy by allowing Food Banks to purchase fresh, local food from New York growers and producers and expand access for New Yorkers facing food insecurity.

In the past four years, powered by Nourish New York the Regional Food Bank has purchased and distributed more than 16.5 million pounds of food, more than \$28.8 million has been spent on fresh, local food to support New York growers and producers. We have partnered with more than 60 New York farmers and producers. This has gone a long way in providing healthy food to the 350,000 New Yorkers we help to feed each month.

It is also important for this Committee to know that Nourish New York is a program that other states not only know about but are actively looking to replicate. I often attend national events and conferences and representatives across the country want to talk and learn about what we are doing right here in New York. This nationally recognized program is also being emulated by the Federal Government.

As an example of how innovation leads to more innovation, Nourish New York is inspiring not only the Federal government and other states, but also the business community here in New York and beyond. For example, the Regional Food Bank, along with Food Bank of Central New York, are partnering with Chobani, a New York-based company to provide a new product called "Super Milk" for our neighbors in need.

Shelf stable milk is commonly purchased in Europe. It is an ultra-pasteurized milk which allows it to remain on shelves for several months. While this product has not yet found a significant market in the United States, the value for food banks and food pantries is obvious. Milk is a staple need for our customers, and we are constantly in a race against the clock to provide this product prior to the expiration date. With this in mind, Chobani created Super Milk, a shelf-stable milk with added protein and calcium that can live on shelves for up to nine months. Created specifically for food banks and disaster relief organizations, and not offered up for sale to consumers, Super Milk allows us to serve more New Yorkers in need, and with a New York product.

We could not have done this without the forward thinking of Chobani, who produces this product in their Central New York facilities. It should also be noted that Chobani is doing the same out of their Idaho facilities and providing Super Milk to food pantries in southern Idaho.

This creation of a product and distribution to those in need is born out of the Nourish New York program. It's a clear example of how innovation and creativity can and does have far reaching positive impacts.

Another great example of how Nourish New York impacts farmers can be described in our relationship with Brey's Egg Farm in Sullivan County, which is a fourth-generation

family egg farm. Today this farm is run by Daniel Brey, his wife Nancy and their youngest daughter Vanessa. Like many businesses they were negatively impacted by the pandemic, when all the New York City restaurants were shut down all their orders for eggs stopped. Through Nourish New York, we were able to purchase these eggs and get them to New Yorkers in need, supporting both the grower and our neighbors. Without Nourish New York, the Brey family humbly says they would have been staring at the reality of going out of business. We are proud to continue to purchase and distribute Brey's Eggs throughout our 23-county service area.

These are just two of the countless impacts Nourish New York is having on businesses and neighbors in our state. It is no surprise that Commissioner Ball and the staff of the Department of Agriculture and Markets are seen as leading the way for their colleagues across the country.

We are all confronted with rising costs when we go to the grocery store, and this has the deepest impact on New York families who are living at or near the poverty level. New Yorkers are making decisions each day, not just on what kind of food they are purchasing but whether they will be able to keep up with the cost of groceries while also meeting many other essential needs.

An example of this is the cost of eggs and I want to share with you how it impacts not only the Regional Food Bank, but all our partner agencies. In July of 2025, the cost of a dozen eggs was \$1.50. Today a dozen eggs are being sold to us for \$5 a dozen with a true market value of more than \$7 a dozen. With a monthly distribution average of 5,500 dozen eggs, our purchase of eggs alone now costs \$20,000 more than they did six months ago.

We deeply appreciate Governor Hochul's commitment to this program with additional funding supporting policies which enhance food security and nutrition for New Yorkers. Our ask is simple: increase the Nourish New York Program from its current \$50M funding level to \$75M, which will allow us to help meet the growing demand and counteract the rising costs of food.

The need today in our communities and neighborhoods is as high as ever. According to recent data released by Feeding America food insecurity rose from 1 in 11 individuals to 1 in 9, last year alone. The total number of meals missing from the plates of our neighbors in our 23-county service area is more than 37.7 million annually, with an estimated \$270 million cost. Our neighbors rely on their local pantries to make up for these missing meals, and the pantries rely on the Regional Food Bank to source more than 90% of their product.

Another vital program supported and administered by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, is New York Food for New York Families (NYFNFF). Through

funding by the US Department of Agriculture, we are partnering to support local and traditionally disadvantaged growers and producers. These efforts are expanding economic opportunities and creating new marketing channels, improving access to underserved communities. This has increased our ability to source and distribute quality foods while also expanding our relationships with new vendors to foster a more equitable food sourcing strategy.

At the Regional Food Bank, we are on pace to have our largest volume year ever, distributing more food than even at the height of the pandemic. We expect to distribute more than 54 million pounds of food in 2025. Our neighbors want food produced locally in New York, whether it's steelhead trout from Hudson Valley Fish, a minority-owned business in the city of Hudson or pasta sauce from Casa Visco, a woman-owned business in Schenectady. These are high quality, locally sourced products and we are proud to deliver them to people who are hungry. Our neighbors in need are asking for these products again and again.

We are deeply grateful for the partnerships we have with New York and the ongoing support we receive. Over the past four years, we've experienced significant growth to meet the rising demand across our 23-county service area. Unfortunately, the meal gap in New York continues to widen, and the need far exceeds the state funding we receive. Food banks are constantly innovating, working tirelessly to become more efficient with the ultimate goal of closing this gap. At the Regional Food Bank, we've recently made key investments in enhancing our infrastructure, from upgrading distribution centers to improving equipment and technology.

One example is the creation of an online partner portal. Today the overwhelming majority of the more than 1,000 agency partners are accessing the wide variety of products we offer on-line and in real-time, to shop more efficiently and to save money. We have trained many volunteers and helped to equip agencies to improve these systems. This system allows us to monitor inventory, track trends, and realize shortages and emerging needs in real-time to react quickly. It provides for data-driven decisions so that we can make quicker, more informed purchases to ensure we are supplying the products our neighbors need while reducing waste. It's also giving us a clearer and broader view of our community. We can identify an area with increased need and quickly work with local and community leaders to address it, through mobile food pantries and drive through distributions.

Lastly, we are opening a new and modern distribution facility in Orange County to better serve the Hudson Valley region and 170,000 people we help feed there each month. The \$25 million needed to make this new state-of-the-art facility a reality has been raised primarily through large, private donations.

**Conclusion:**

We thank Governor Hochul, Commissioner Ball and his team, the leadership and staffs of the Department of Health and Office of General Services. And especially the members of this committee, for your leadership, consideration and support. These successes would not be possible without you and your tireless efforts.

I would like to close by echoing a comment made by Commissioner Ball earlier this month at the State of Agriculture Address at 193<sup>rd</sup> Annual NYS Society Forum in Central New York when he said:

“Food insecurity should not be an inevitable consequence of geography or poverty; we need to see it as a solvable problem.”

We are working every day to solve this problem and with the leadership of Governor Hochul and the support of the Commissioner – we are solving it - community by community, street by street and kitchen table by kitchen table.