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TESTIMONY

Joint Public Hearing: Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice Alongside Continuing Inequalities in our Food Systems

*Investing in Double Up Food Bucks – An Impactful Nutrition Incentive
Program Addressing Food Insecurity, Health Disparities and Bolstering
Local Economies Across New York State*

By Lisa French
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Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on behalf of Field & Fork Network and our nutrition incentive program Double Up Food Bucks (Double Up). My name is Lisa French. I am the Co-founder and Executive Director of Field & Fork Network, a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to building a thriving regional food system that serves all New Yorkers. Double Up Food Bucks is a program that matches Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits \$1 for \$1 on local fresh fruits and vegetables, helping increase healthy food access for New Yorkers.

Both hunger and food insecurity are prevalent problems in communities all across this great state. Food is vital to the health and well-being of all New Yorkers. Poor diet is a leading contributor to death and chronic disease in New York State (NYS). Having a poor diet ranks as the number one cause for cardiovascular disease and is a major risk factor for obesity. Obesity increases risk for serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, arthritis and some cancers. Unfortunately, most of New York State's population is impacted by obesity and related non-communicable diseases. The burden of these chronic health conditions is not distributed equitably. In NYS, obesity is more common among blacks or Latinos, people without a college education, and those living in households earning less than \$50,000/year. Diets that include nutrient-rich foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, can prevent weight gain and help control cholesterol levels and blood pressure. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2019 14% of the NYS population received SNAP benefits, that's 1 in 7. Additionally, more than 58% of SNAP participants are in families with children, almost 51% of SNAP participants are in families with members who are elderly or have disabilities, and almost 38% are in working families. The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on New Yorkers facing food insecurity. Today, in the wake of the pandemic, 1 in 4 New Yorkers faces food insecurity—that is a 45% increase since 2018.

I understand one of your goals as state leaders is to ensure that no New Yorker goes hungry while also helping families who are facing hard financial times to move out of poverty. You understand the cost of hunger and the toll that diet-related health conditions take on individuals and the lost economic productivity it represents.

The Multiple Wins of Double Up Food Bucks, New York State Impact

Our experience implementing Double Up Food Bucks NYS has shown that matching SNAP benefits with incentives for locally and regionally grown fruits and vegetables is a cost-effective way to simultaneously reduce hunger, improve dietary health, and stimulate local food economies in a way that can create new job opportunities. Through this one intervention, we can meet immediate caloric needs and build a healthy population.



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Since 2014, we have seen significant impact with the Double Up program:

- Served more than 24,000 SNAP recipients
- \$1.8 Million in sales of healthy food in SNAP and Double Up, supporting local farmers and businesses
- More than 880,000 lbs. of healthy food purchased and consumed
- Over 200+ NYS farmers directly benefit from the program as participating market vendors and wholesale produce suppliers
- Of those 200+ NYS farmers, we know 6% of them identify as people of color

Our most recent program evaluation shows that 96% of Double Up customers surveyed say they increased the amount of produce they consume because of the program, and 92% of Double Up shoppers reported that they are buying more fruits and vegetables for snacks since using the program. 80% of Double Up shoppers said they are buying fewer potato chips, candy, and cookies for snacks. At farmers markets, we find that SNAP customers are maximizing the full potential of the program—redemption rates top over 90 percent. Many SNAP shoppers report that NYS produce in the markets is less expensive and of higher quality than where they usually shop, and that the selection is better. Farmers and market managers also tell us that customers that come to the markets for the first time to take advantage of the Double Up program continue to shop at the markets when they are no longer using the SNAP program. This is all important feedback. This tells us that Double Up participants are motivated shoppers who take nutrition and health seriously and work hard to get the best nutritional value for their very limited food dollars. It also indicates that new, healthy shopping habits that form as a result of the Double Up program continue when families leave the SNAP program.

Today, the program operates in 23 upstate NY counties with plans to double that number over the next 4 years. The range of food retail venues in which Double Up operates is broad and growing. We have expanded the program footprint to include farmers markets, farm stands, mobile markets, small retail, and grocery stores all in communities that have SNAP recipients. Federal and private funding has allowed us to implement the program using innovative technology solutions that are safe, secure, and convenient for the Double Up shopper.

We all know that changing dietary patterns takes time and that new healthy food cultures are forged through a combination of approaches. That's why we have built strong partnerships with over 150+ organizations and agencies in communities across New York that work to serve our most vulnerable populations in ways that aim to improve their lifestyles, health, and economic future.



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The Economic Contributions of Healthy Food Incentives

Healthy food incentive programs like Double Up Food Bucks NYS do far more than just reduce hunger and improve nutrition. These programs also support economic development and jobs. They provide increased purchasing power for low-income families who can stretch their food budgets further. These food dollars drive additional sales at grocery stores and farmers markets. And those sales, in turn, circulate in the local economy, providing a boost to workers, businesses, farmers, and communities all throughout the supply chain. A newly released research report, *The Economic Contributions of Healthy Food Incentives*, highlights the findings of a team of economists at Colorado State University that supports the notion that programs such as Double Up Food Bucks NYS can provide significant economic benefits if they were expanded widely across New York State. This pioneering study shows that broad expansions of healthy food incentives would provide powerful returns on that investment – for families, grocers, and farmers, as well as more broadly among the state economies where such benefits are expanded. Field & Fork Network was part of the coalition of nutrition incentive providers that participated in the study which yielded the following potential economic benefits if there was significant state-wide investment and expansion of the program:

- For every dollar of incentives spent on farm-direct purchases (farmers markets/farm stands/CSA), they estimate it will result in a contribution of 2.5 dollars to New York's economy. For every dollar of incentives spent on food retail stores will result in 2.2 dollars to New York's economy.
- Shows a potential of \$27M - \$52M increase in farmer income.
- Estimates employment contributions: \$500K - \$1M in labor income to the agriculture sector; \$2M - \$4M in labor income to the food retail sector; and 66 – 130 jobs gained annually.

Double Up Food Bucks NYS is a proven, innovative model that simultaneously delivers health and economic opportunity. This unique feature of the nutrition incentive program has garnered unparalleled support from private and corporate philanthropy and federal agencies. But that is not enough. For nutrition incentive programs to be sustainable, state support is critical. More than 13 states currently support nutrition incentive programs with an annual budget appropriation, recognizing the significant impact Double Up Food Bucks has in communities.

Conclusion

We know that there is no silver bullet that will solve our hunger, health and economic challenges.



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- **Our experience with Double Up Food Bucks demonstrates the power of healthy food incentives. They work.** By collaborating across disciplines, we can integrate healthy local produce into an existing federal nutrition program and create benefits on multiple fronts simultaneously.
- **The positive and immediate impact of nutrition incentives is an opportunity to help all New Yorkers thrive.** The standardized model of Double Up Food Bucks and the ability to successfully implement the program in diverse food retail outlets, makes it a unique program that has the power enhance the value of the SNAP program and build healthier food environments and a more viable and responsive food system.

We ask New York State to please support legislation for Double Up Food Bucks New York State. This will ensure New Yorkers get the food and nutrition they need to live healthy and productive lives. As it stands, food deserts, lack of transportation, and lack of income are significant barriers facing New Yorkers. Double Up can help families access healthy food where they are by working in corner stores, farm stands, grocery stores, and farmers markets. Currently, there are more than 13 states that support Double Up Food Bucks programs with effective legislation, recognizing the significant impact Double Up Food Bucks has in their communities.

Attachments:

Economic Contributions of Healthy Food Incentives New York State Policy Brief

The Economic Contributions of Healthy Food Incentives Report

Examples of Legislative Language from the following US States: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Mississippi