



**Testimony Submitted by**  
**Leah Eden, Executive Director, Co-founder, Equity Advocates**  
**For the Environmental Conservation Budget Hearing on the FY24-FY25 NYS Budget**  
**February 7, 2024**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Equity Advocates. Equity Advocates works to ensure all New Yorkers have access to healthy, affordable food by building the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address the underlying causes of food inequity through policy and systems change. We partner with New York-based organizations working to alleviate hunger and poverty, providing them with the tools they need to be more civically engaged—including policy education, advocacy training and coalition building services.

Equity Advocates convenes and facilitates the [NY Food Policy Alliance](#), a multi-sector group of 70+ food system stakeholders from across New York State that work together to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to our current economic and hunger crises, but also address the ongoing vulnerabilities and injustices of the food system.

Recent qualitative and quantitative research has highlighted the multifaceted benefits of sustainable agriculture and community gardens, including improved health, nutrition security and food sovereignty, and environmental stewardship. Sustainable agriculture plays a pivotal role in environmental conservation by promoting practices that minimize the use of harmful chemicals, reduce soil erosion, and enhance biodiversity. Through the adoption of eco-friendly farming and gardening techniques, sustainable agriculture helps preserve natural ecosystems and mitigate the negative impact of conventional farming on the environment. Urban farms and community gardens reduce stormwater runoff, provide habitats for wildlife, increase beautification, and more. All of these address inequity by reducing environmental injustices such as increased pollution in under-resourced neighborhoods.

Further, food insecurity is on the rise in New York and across the country. Back in October, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that, in 2022, food insecurity rose at the fastest one-year rate since 2008 – the first full year of the Great Recession. That came just one month after Census data from 2022 found child poverty more than doubled following the expiration of the expanded Child Tax Credit. Meanwhile, here in New York, our Department of Health just reported that nearly one in four (24.9%) New York adults experienced food insecurity within the past 12 months. These alarming data points along with the State’s mandate to promote and foster growth in urban farms and community gardens throughout the state, highlight the need for substantial investment in urban agriculture, community gardens, farm to institution programs, the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), Nourish New York (NNY), and for creating a SNAP Minimum Benefit of \$100 to address the growing food insecurity and support regional farmers.



We respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following budget recommendations in the FY25 Budget:

#### **FY25 BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **\$11.5 Million to Support Farm to School in New York State.** Maintain \$10 million for the Farm to School Reimbursement Incentive program which incentivizes schools that spend at least 30% of total meal costs through all federally reimbursable meals in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) on New York foods with an increased reimbursement of 25 cents per lunch. In addition, include \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants program to continue to meet demand, ensuring at least \$500,000 remains set aside as non-competitive funding to support a growing statewide network of regional farm to school coordinators.
- **Increase funding to \$500,000 for Black Farmers United NYS.** We applaud the State for its initial investment in Black Farmers United of NYS for services and expenses of programs to support capacity building and assist farms and food businesses owned by people of color in New York state. It is crucial to increase this level of funding to amplify and create pathways to ownership for NYS Black farmers through education, policy development, networking, mutual aid, and access to markets at the appropriate scale.
- **Maintain \$1 Million for the Urban Farming and Community Garden Grant Program.** We urge the State to continue investing in urban farms and community gardens through this grant that funds the development and enhancement of community gardens, school gardens and urban farms across the state.
- **Maintain \$4 million for the Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Farmers Grant and \$1 million for the Beginning Farmers Grant** programs to support BIPOC farmers and community gardeners in and ensure equity in agriculture.
- **Increase Nourish NY (NNY) Funding to \$75 Million.** NNY has been a valuable source of funding for NYS farmers and producers to get fresh, local food into the emergency food system and fuel local economies. We call for an increase in funding for the program to \$75 Million per year to keep up with demand. We urge the State to increase transparency and evaluation of this program by making public information on who receives Nourish NY funding and at what levels across as well as data on and analysis of the economic, farming, supply chain, anti-hunger and nutrition impacts of the program. There is currently only one training on Nourish management which does not provide enough guidance and resources for program management are difficult to locate, we urge additional trainings to be provided as well as more communication around existing resources. Finally, we ask that the Administration provide more clarity regarding the NNY and HPNAP programs including related to funding, applications and administration so that providers are better able to navigate the funding structures

- **Increase the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program Funding to \$64 Million.** We are concerned about the apparent reappropriation of \$22M from the FY23 Budget to this incredibly impactful program that addresses the ongoing hunger crises. Given rising levels of inflation and increased demand at emergency food providers across the state, we call on the State not to cut the \$22M as well as an increase in program funding for a total of \$64 million per year. We also ask that, going forward, HPNAP allow program participants to use funds to cover overhead administrative costs and that education and technical assistance on how to source, prepare and offer culturally and religiously responsive food is offered to participants through the existing food safety/training curriculum.
- **Establish a state SNAP minimum benefit program of \$100 per month.** In March of this year, the nearly 3 million New Yorkers who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) saw a significant drop in their monthly benefits following the end of SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs). New York households saw an average loss of \$151 per month, while some saw their monthly benefits drop to just \$23. With food insecurity on the rise, we urge you to support an adequate minimum SNAP benefit of \$100 per month in your 2024-2025 Executive Budget.

SNAP is a vital support for New Yorkers struggling to afford food. The program has been proven to reduce poverty, improve health outcomes, and stimulate local economies. By investing in an adequate minimum benefit for New Yorkers, our state can take a meaningful step in affirming food security as a basic human right. In addition to reducing poverty and improving nutrition security for vulnerable families, SNAP is a proven tool for supporting jobs and grocers while stimulating local economies. Every dollar invested in SNAP generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in local economic benefits, and SNAP accounts for around 10% of grocery industry sales. Research also shows that higher SNAP benefit levels increase participation rates – meaning New York could bring in additional federal dollars with a higher minimum benefit. Increased SNAP benefits would help low-income families across the state, with a particularly significant impact in Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse; three cities that are among the 25 U.S. communities with highest percentages of food stamp recipients.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, higher SNAP benefit levels helped reduce poverty and food insecurity rates between 2020 and 2021, despite the unprecedented challenges to our economy and food system due to the global pandemic. According to the Urban Institute, the pandemic-era enhancements to SNAP benefits lifted over 400,000 New Yorkers out of poverty – all the while reducing unacceptable poverty disparities for Black and Hispanic families. Despite this policy success, the pandemic-era expansion of SNAP benefits and eligibility expired March 2023. The elimination of these supplemental benefits represents a reduction of nearly \$228 million per month in federal food benefits for New York families, and affected more than 1,610,000 households in New York. Worse, this loss of benefits comes as families and individuals continue to face higher prices at the grocery store.



New data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), released in October, showed that food insecurity rose significantly in 2022 – the sharpest one-year increase in food insecurity since 2008, the first full year of the Great Recession. The report also found that nearly one in five children are experiencing food insecurity. The USDA’s report aligns with testimonials from food banks and food pantries across the state, the majority of whom observed a major uptick in households served last year.

It is simply not feasible for low-income New Yorkers to afford groceries with just \$23. Early last year, our neighbors in New Jersey invested a modest amount of state funding to guarantee that no SNAP participant receives less than \$95 per month. States including Massachusetts and California have used state dollars to fund supplemental SNAP benefits or a higher minimum benefit. New York should join the movement of states enhancing vital nutrition assistance. Legislation (S.7663/ A.6214) on this issue has been introduced by Assemblymember Jessica González-Rojas and Senator Rachel May, and a total of 56 state legislators signed a letter to Governor Hochul in support. Further 66% of registered NY voters supported increasing SNAP minimum benefits to \$100 a month, according to a November Siena College poll.

New York needs to step up as a leader in the absence of federal policy. Food insecurity is on the rise and our state has an opportunity to lead on the issue of food security. We urge you to include a \$100 SNAP minimum benefit in the 2024-2025 Executive Budget.

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