



December 12, 2023

The Honorable Senator Rachel May
198 State Street, LOB Suite 803
Albany, New York 12247

Dear Senator May & the Committee on Cities 2,

I am President & CEO of Feeding Westchester, the food bank that serves Westchester County, and I want to thank the Committee for having this important conversation. Poverty impacts all communities in our state, without exception. In spite of the fact that Westchester County has much wealth, there is also much poverty, need and food insecurity. In fact, seven communities in our county have double-digit poverty levels. However, this is a false framework. The federal definition of poverty is out of touch with the reality faced by our neighbors.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to share some details to frame the struggle our fellow Westchester County neighbors have in putting food on their tables. Food insecurity and the fear of hunger is why Feeding Westchester exists...and the problem is greater than ever. Today, we are providing food through more than 220,000 neighbor visits every month.

We ask that you:

- Continue strong support for Fund Nourish New York, at \$75M
- Fund the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) at \$64M (which we're grateful to see aligns with the Assembly's Fiscal Year 2024 One House Budget)
- Establish a state SNAP minimum benefit program ensuring no New York SNAP recipient receives less than \$100 per month in vital nutrition assistance. (A.6214 / S.7663)
- Some New York residents, including the 74,000 Westchester County residents who rely on support from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), receive as little as \$23/month to buy groceries for their family
- We also ask that you provide funding for universal school meals, nourishing children's bodies and minds, and eliminating the stigma of hunger. (A.1941 / S.1678)

In 2019, Feeding Westchester distributed 10 million pounds of food (the equivalent of 8 million meals). For the each of the past three years, we have doubled that number, averaging over 20 million pounds annually (17 million meals). While we couldn't be prouder of our service increase, realization of a growing unmet need is troubling: to fully supply all Westchester County residents in need identified by the ALICE report, we would need to increase our annual distribution to 35M lbs.

That, is what keeps us up at night. I thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony and will be happy to follow up with any supporting information should it be requested.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "KAREN C ERREN".

Karen C. Erren
President & CEO

Opening Statement / Why We're Here (approximate time: 0:50)

- My name is Karen Erren. I am President & CEO of Feeding Westchester, the food bank that serves Westchester County, and I want to thank the Committee for having this important conversation
- Poverty impacts all communities in our state, without exception.
- In spite of the fact that Westchester County has much wealth, there is also much poverty, need and food insecurity. In fact, seven communities in our county have double-digit poverty levels* [* Yonkers 15%, Mount Vernon 14%, Sleepy Hollow 13%, Peekskill 12%, White Plains 12%, New Rochelle 11%, Port Chester 11%]
- *However, this is a false framework. The federal definition of poverty is out of touch with the reality faced by our neighbors.*
- I am pleased to have the opportunity to share some details that frame the struggle our fellow Westchester County neighbors have in putting food on their tables.

The Problem We Face (approximate time: 2:10)

- Food insecurity and hunger is why Feeding Westchester exists...and the problem is greater than ever: Today, we are providing food through more than 220,000 neighbor visits every month, with our partners, including food pantries, congregate meal sites, afterschool feeding programs, school pantries and our own direct distributions.
- This surprisingly high number is directly related to understated poverty levels:
 - current federal poverty guidelines are far too low: \$14,580 for a single adult and \$30,000 for a family of four
 - Full picture is better illustrated in the 2023 ALICE report, conducted by our friends at United Way
 - ALICE [acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed], identifies households that are *below the true cost of living required for minimum necessities, including food*
 - The ALICE study shows that *1 in 3 households are at risk for hunger in Westchester County* (vs 1 in 10 according to the federal poverty level)
 - But because they are above the federal poverty line, they may not qualify for federal benefits. This increases the burden both on the state—you all—and the hunger relief system.
 - Folks who are hungry are often not who you expect. They are working families, often working second jobs or extra shifts to feed their children; they are students; they are seniors.
For example...
 - Jaime – works at a local College but also attends our Mobile Food Pantry

- Has a family of 4 to feed and visits our Pantry because of rising prices at the supermarket. The fresh fruit and vegetables we provide him helps him make it through the month
 - Jamie tells us: “The mobile distribution is a huge help for the community. You are doing a great service. Thank you for helping us.”
 - Clara, a Mobile Food Pantry visitor from Mount Vernon
 - “I work full time at a doctor’s office as a medical assistant and I don’t make enough to be able to afford the food I need”
- Finally, many of the neighbors we serve struggle to overcome systemic factors that contribute to the difficulty of finding a path out of poverty
 - Large Latino and Black populations, who are more likely to experience poor health outcomes and racial discrimination
 - Higher rates of chronic diet-related health conditions -- disparities
 - Hesitation to seek help. We try our best to provide a dignified experience at our distributions, but it’s understandable that people with a sense of pride might not want to be seen receiving much-needed food

Our Advocacy and What The State Can Do (approximate time: 2:00)

New York State has done a lot to address poverty and hunger. For example,

- NourishNY, through which you all fund NY grown and manufactured products, is a true win-win
 - Has provided millions of pounds of healthy, nutritious food to hungry New Yorkers since 2020, while generating \$150M in direct benefits for over 4,000 producers across the state
 - In Westchester we’ve distributed over 8 Million pounds of food through NNY in the past four years.
- The Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) at \$64M (which we’re grateful to see aligns with the Assembly’s Fiscal Year 2024 One House Budget) [was \$56.5 in 2022-23]
 - For over 30 years, the program has helped improve nutrition security for hungry New Yorkers through healthy food procurement; storage and distribution; and operational expenses. Specifically in Westchester: distribution of over 6 million pounds of food between 2020-2022.
- We thank you and appreciate you...but our community needs you to do even more
 - Continue strong support and fund Nourish New York at \$75M
 - We ask you to support Senate Bill 7663 and establish a state SNAP minimum benefit to ensure no New Yorker receives less than \$100 per month in vital nutrition assistance. **(A.6214 / S.7663)**
 - Some New York residents, including the 74,000 Westchester County residents who rely on support from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), receive as little as \$23/month to buy groceries for their family
 - And we also ask that you provide funding for universal school meals, nourishing children’s bodies and minds, and eliminating the stigma of hunger. **(A.1941 / S.1678)**

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- Over 40,700 students in Westchester County still have to pay for meals at schools that are not able to offer them free; without government support, children accrue school meal debt or, worse, choose not to eat to avoid financially burdening their families

Close (approximate time: 0:35)

- In 2019, Feeding Westchester distributed 10 million pounds of food (the equivalent of 8 million meals)
- For each of the past three years, that number has been double, averaging over 20 million pounds (17 million meals)
- While we couldn't be more grateful to be able to provide our increased volume, realization of a growing unmet need is troubling: to fully supply all Westchester County residents in need identified by the ALICE report, *we would need to increase our annual distribution to 35M lbs.*

That, is what keeps us up at night—food and money. This is what keeps us up at night most of all—Jaime, and Clara, and all our neighbors who, like them, struggle to put food on their tables.

I'd be happy to take any questions y'all might have...thank you!