

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing – Health

Testimony of Feeding New York State

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Feeding New York State, the state association of New York's 10 Feeding America food banks. Our food banks and nearly 5,000 community-based partners appreciate the longstanding partnership with New York's Department of Health in our shared work to assist those who are hungry in New York state.

While New York State government has taken important steps in the fight against hunger in recent years, the truth is that we have more work to do.

While many of us hoped that the extent of hunger would fall after the covid pandemic, unfortunately it has stabilized at a higher level than before the pandemic. Food insecurity persists in our state. Roughly 3 million New Yorkers are food insecure, primarily because wages have not kept pace with the cost of living. On average, New York is approximately 29% more expensive than the average US cost of living. Compounding this problem, in the last few years, food prices have jumped by more than 25% compared to pre-pandemic levels. Inflation has recently leveled off, but at a higher level. We have seen these increases reflected in the demand for food across our network of emergency food providers, which is about 70% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

These data are alarming. But the good news is that our state has the ability to both support the immediate need and reduce the prevalence of hunger, poverty, and food insecurity in the long term.

Critically important to supporting hungry New Yorkers is the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), which is administered by the Department of Health. The program supports a network of over 2,600 emergency food providers, providing grants for food purchases and operational expenses. Last year, HPNAP was funded at \$57.8M, and we are encouraged by the inclusion of this figure in the Executive Budget. However, with the aforementioned increase in need and in food prices, level funding is not adequate. As food insecurity persists, we must increase the investment in HPNAP to the \$75 million level.

This year, we are requesting a \$75 million allocation for HPNAP to account for higher food costs and greater need.

Beyond HPNAP, New York responded to the unprecedented global pandemic by establishing Nourish New York, which is co-administered by the DOH and the Department of Agriculture and Markets. To date, the program – which enables emergency food providers to purchase fresh, nutritious, New York-grown food – has generated over \$200 million in direct revenue for thousands of farmers, producers, food hubs, and vendors. Nourish New York is an important tool for strengthening local food systems, all the while enhancing the availability of halal, kosher, and culturally relevant options at distributions.

Last year, Nourish New York was funded at \$54M, and we are encouraged that Executive Budget included funding for Nourish New York at \$55M. However, again, considering the increased cost of food, the persistence of food insecurity, as well as the significant impact of Nourish New York for farmers, we must fund Nourish New York at \$75 million.

We are respectfully requesting a \$75 million allocation for Nourish New York. Every dollar of this program is spent in New York State.

Finally, we recognize that that fight against hunger and food insecurity will not be solved solely through investing in immediate hunger relief programs. That immediate funding is necessary but not sufficient. We must address the root causes that bring New Yorkers to the charitable food system in the first place. There are meaningful and cost-effective steps we should be considering.

On the issue of childhood hunger, we must guarantee universal free school meals for all New York children. The initiative would not only eliminate school meal debt, it would also save New York families roughly \$165 per child in monthly food costs. To tackle the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity among older adults, we must guarantee a \$100 minimum SNAP benefit for all New Yorkers participating in the program. And to better support excluded New Yorkers, we fully support recommendations from New York's Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council (CPRAC) to create a state-funded food assistance benefit for New Yorkers ineligible for SNAP due to their immigration status.

Each of these initiatives would go a long way in reducing hunger and building a more affordable state for working families. By providing universal school meals, strengthening the purchasing power of SNAP participants, and expanding access to vital food assistance, our state can play a leadership role in tackling hunger.

Hunger, poverty, and food insecurity are issues of public health. According to our Department of Health, "adults experiencing food insecurity have a higher probability of several chronic diseases, including hypertension, coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer, asthma,

arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and kidney disease.” Public health research also identifies a strong correlation between food insecurity and mental health challenges including clinical depression, anxiety, and cognitive impairment.

But hunger is a solvable problem. Through the steps we have outlined here, let us solve it together.

We thank New York State for the decades of partnership, as well as this committee for the opportunity to provide testimony.