

SYCAMORE COLLABORATIVE



February 6, 2025

Senator and Assemblymembers of the
Joint Budget Hearing on Health
New York State Legislature

Esteemed Senators and Assemblymembers,

At the Sycamore Collaborative, *we connect people to resources they need for healthy eating, self-care, and community building. We collaborate* with our neighbors to grow, source, learn about, prepare, and provide access to food; to bring people together around healthy life choices; and to look ahead together at ways *to promote a thriving, interconnected community in Schenectady County.*

On behalf of the thousands of Schenectadians we serve, and the scores of volunteers and staff that make this work possible, I ask that you support these initiatives to encourage the ability of local food relief organizations to meet the increasing demand for food relief services by:

- ensuring that the *Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) is funded at \$75 million*
- ensuring that *Nourish New York (NNY) is funded at \$75 million*, and
- securing the 40-yearlong precedent of *supporting and directly contracting with local food pantries, food rescues, and meal programs*, in addition to food banks, is reflected in any financial increase to these programs

New York State is experiencing an increase in food insecurity. The 2023 USDA Economic Research Service reported that *1 in 8 New York households are experiencing food insecurity*. That is an increase from 1 in 10 in the year prior. This statistic is compounded by the *dramatic rise in food prices* since 2019, and by the *increased demand for service and resources direct providers of food relief initiatives are having to manage*.

The Sycamore Collaborative is projecting a 20% increase in demand for food pantry services compared to FY 2023-24. This is on top of a 40% increase in service compared to FY 2021-22. That means that in Schenectady County - the second geographically smallest county of NYS - the Sycamore Collaborative alone projects delivering *the equivalent of 950,000 meals worth of groceries to well over 20,000 visits to our pantry initiatives from July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025.* The people we strive to serve are not all at or under the arbitrary federal poverty level. Even at 200% over that level, thousands of Schenectadians (many whom we serve) are one catastrophic health situation or losing a job away from falling into significant financial strains - of having to decide whether to pay for rent or food or transportation or healthcare or else. *Having a strengthened and reliable food relief network is a lifeline to hundreds of households in Schenectady and millions in New York State.*

I join the call to increase funding for HPNAP and NNY, alongside many colleagues of the Alliance for a Hunger Free New York, because of the immediate impact it will continue to have on households throughout the State. HPNAP allows us to purchase food products in bulk more efficiently. NNY allows us to acquire higher quality foods, produce, and vegetables, create relationships with local farmers and food producers, and positively impact the capacity for nutrition and freshness we can provide the communities we serve.

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It is important to highlight that *when funds are received through a direct contract*, as the Sycamore Collaborative has for well over two decades, *food relief organizations can procure and distribute food more efficiently and effectively with and alongside the communities we serve*. The City of *Schenectady is one of the most diverse cities in the Capital Region*. *Food is a significant expression of that diversity and culture*.

The flexibility of operational funding from HPNAP that is only possible through *direct contracts allows the Sycamore Collaborative to better partner with organizations* that are helping us take on the increase in demand for service, supporting them in strengthening and sustaining the significant work they are already doing. With direct contracts with HPNAP and NNY funding allocation, *we can acquire more food, be adaptive and responsive to community needs, and more efficiently move the food to our communities through partnerships*.

As we continue to face the challenges of the demand to serve thousands of households through our food pantry initiatives and partnerships, we also serve the community through *community urban farms initiatives* and the *Summer Meals program*. For these we partner with the local cooperative extension, the Schenectady City School District, the county Soil and Water Conservation District, and others *to provide children and their families with food development experience and the ability to have reliable and consistent access to food* through the summer. As high as our numbers are, we know we are not meeting the full need. *Making sure student feeding programs are fully funded and available year-round, and that urban farm initiatives are supported goes in tandem with our commitment to food relief community work*.

As policymakers, *you can center community-based responses to wide community needs*. I remain at your service to *find ways in which funding and policy can impact New Yorkers wherever they are in a way that acknowledges and addresses the particularities each community* and, at the same time, impacts New York State's commitment to the welfare and resilience of all who call this great state home.

We appreciate your leadership, your committed presence in the community, and your support.

Peace!

Rev. Dr. Amaury Tañón-Santos
Executive Director/CEO

The Sycamore Collaborative (formerly the Schenectady Community Ministries – SiCM) is a network faith and community organizations serving the greater Schenectady community through food relief (food pantry initiatives, community urban farms, and summer meals) and community engagement efforts. The Sycamore Collaborative is a founding member of the Alliance for a Hunger Free New York, and the Rev. Amaury Tañón-Santos serves as vice chair of its board of directors.