



**Testimony of Joel Berg, Executive Director  
New York City Coalition Against Hunger  
before the  
New York State Senate Committee on Health  
Public Hearing on Food Policy in New York State  
January 22, 2009**

**Introduction**

Good morning. I'm Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH), which represents the more than 1,200 food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City, and the more than 1.3 million low-income New Yorkers forced to obtain food from these charities. This testimony is submitted on their behalf.

I want to thank the Committee on Health and Chairman Thomas Duane for holding a hearing on the vital issues related to food policy in New York.

To summarize my testimony, because there are complex reasons for obesity in New York, the public policy responses necessary are equally complex. My organization supports the State joining the City in requiring chain restaurants to post the caloric value of all items on their menus and prohibiting restaurants from utilizing any artificial trans-fats in the preparation or cooking of any food item and from serving any food containing artificial trans-fats. We oppose a tax on sodas and sports drinks because that would impose additional financial burdens on low-income and working class New Yorkers without giving them any better ability to afford more nutritious foods. Yet even if all three measures became law in New York State, I believe they would have only limited impact in reducing obesity.

Obesity and hunger are flip sides of the same poor nutrition coin, which explains why the neighborhoods and rural communities that have the highest levels of poverty and food insecurity tend to have the highest rates of obesity. If the State truly wants to make the largest impact upon reducing obesity, it will undertake far more comprehensive efforts to make more nutritious food both economically affordable and physically available to all families and in all neighborhoods and communities, of the state.

**Hunger Crises in New York State**

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in New York State over the 2006-2008 time period, the percentage of households suffering from the greatest hunger – what USDA calls “very low food insecurity” – rose from 3.1 percent in 2003-2005 to 4.3 percent. The overall number of food insecure households also increased statewide, from 10.4 percent in 2003-

2005 to 11.3 percent in 2006-2008. That means that, even before the height of the downturn, throughout New York State – more than one in ten families couldn't afford enough food.

It is morally unacceptable to have such hunger in the State which, even in a major economic downturn, still has vast reserves of private wealth. Additionally, having such hunger and food insecurity seriously harms the State's long-term finances, since hungry children learn less effectively, hunger workers work less productively, and food insecurity (and the obesity it often causes) cost the state billions in long-term health care spending.

### Food Deserts Are Also Job Deserts

In 2008 Americans spent \$1.165 trillion on food, of which \$600 billion was for food consumed at home and \$565 billion was for food eaten away from home. That's more than four times what Americans typically spend on clothing. As has always been the case in U.S. history, the reason people are going hungry has nothing to do with the nation's lack of food and everything to do with their inability to *afford* food, particularly the most nutritious food.

In 2006, while the wealthiest fifth of U.S. families spent only seven percent of their income on food, the bottom fifth spent 32 percent. As Charts 1 and 2 show, while the wealthiest Americans spend three times as much money on food as the lowest income Americans, food took up 25 percent less of their total income.

Chart 1

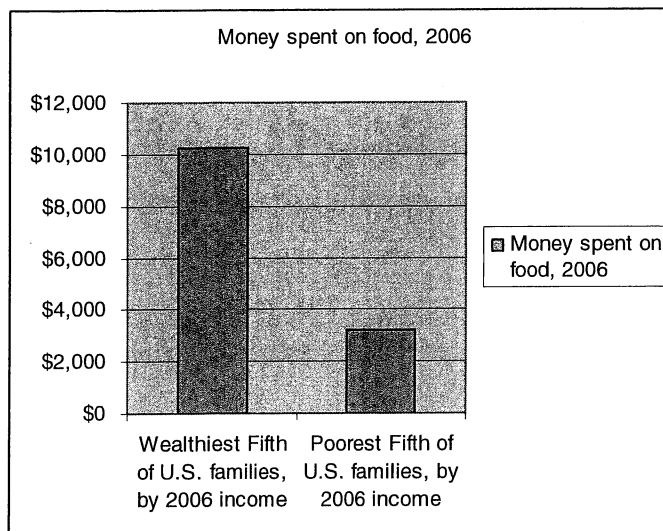
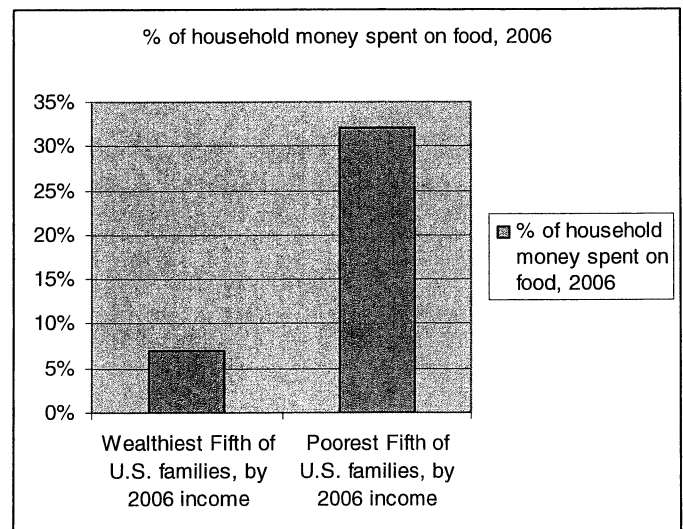


Chart 2



### Hunger and Obesity: Flip Sides of the Same Malnutrition Coin

Too many Americans *are* obese. Fully 34 percent of US adults, and 17 percent of adolescents, are overweight. Yet the fact of it is, not only does hunger exist in America despite obesity, and not only are people frequently both obese and food insecure at the same time, but hunger actually is a key *contributor* to the growing obesity problem among low-income Americans. Hunger and obesity are flip sides of the same malnutrition coin.

Some hungry people *do* lose weight. Among the Americans characterized by the USDA as having very low food security (what used to be called “hunger”), 46 percent lose weight some time during the year. But it is even more common for such households to report that they “relied on a few kinds of low-cost foods to feed their children” (96 percent) and “couldn’t feed their children balanced meals” (87 percent).<sup>16</sup> An analysis by the Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University and the Food Research and Action Center found that hunger and obesity not only “pose separate and distinct health risks, but also can coexist in the same household.”

Thus, while some of the hungriest and poorest Americans eat so little that they lose weight, many others, with a marginally better ability to get food (either through limited food purchases, meager food stamps allotments, or pantry donations) eat food of such poor nutritional quality that they gain weight.

As demonstrated when I took the Food Stamps Challenge and lived for a week purchasing only products I could afford with food stamp benefits, when people are on a limited budget, the easiest way to fill their bellies is to purchase high-carbohydrate, high-fat, high-sodium foods that are cheaper to buy but more likely to cause obesity. Add to that the reality that most nutritious types of food aren’t even available in many low-income neighborhoods and you have a recipe for dietary failure.

If people can’t afford or can’t access nutritious food (especially during a time of skyrocketing food prices), they can’t eat it. While many people believe that the reason low-income people don’t eat more healthfully is that they tend to have less nutritional education (which is, to some degree, true), the primary reason is that they have less money. A formerly middle-class woman who had to face poverty and hunger for the first time as a result of a divorce explained her dilemma in Loretta Schwartz-Nobel’s book *Growing Up Empty: The Hunger Epidemic in America*:

Talking about fresh food might sound trivial under such circumstances, but until this time I had never used canned vegetables in my life.... I’m supposed to have a low-fat diet because I have high cholesterol, but that’s not what’s available. When you’re poor you take whatever you can get, not just with food, but with everything in life.

When families are forced to accept whatever food pantries or soup kitchens have to give them, they have even fewer nutritional options. While such programs have made great strides in the last few years in giving out more fresh produce and other healthier foods, in general, they are often left no choice but to give out the often processed surplus foods that are donated to them by the food industry and government, which tend to have high amounts of sugar, salt, and fat.

Of course, nutritious foods are frequently more expensive than less nutritious alternatives. In October 2007, a gallon of milk cost \$3.84 on average, but two liters of cola were \$1.23 and 16 ounces of alcoholic malt beverages cost \$1.13. Potatoes cost 52 cents per pound, but lettuce cost \$1.49, broccoli \$1.53, and strawberries \$2.00. Lean meat is cheaper than fattier meat and whole wheat bread is much more expensive than white bread.

Federal dietary guidelines recommend that Americans eat nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day, up from five servings in the previous guidelines. One study found that while average

Americans spent 15 percent of their food budgets on fruits and vegetables, low-income Americans would need to spend up to 70 percent of their food budgets on fruits and vegetables to meet those new government guidelines.

Poor people often must choose foods that give them the feeling that their stomachs are full for the least possible cost. A national study found that “poverty and food insecurity are associated with lower food expenditures, low fruit and vegetable consumption, and lower-quality diets.... The association between poverty and obesity may be mediated, in part, by the low cost of energy-dense foods and may be reinforced by the high palatability of sugar and fat.” For example, a survey of Seattle-area supermarkets found that 20 cents spent on cookies would provide the same amount of food energy as 95 cents spent on carrots. A parent can quickly and easily feed a large family on a bucket of fried chicken for less than \$10, while it would cost far more money, and take far more time, to whip up something healthier from scratch. To keep tummies full, low-income families eat a lot of cheap fast food and processed foods.

To make matters worse, even if nutritious food became more affordable for low-income families, it is often simply unavailable in their neighborhoods. Low-income areas where it is difficult to find fresh and healthy food are increasingly referred to as “food deserts.”

In Los Angeles County in 2002, an average supermarket served 18,649 people, while the average supermarket in a low-income neighborhood served 27,986 people. The higher the concentration of poverty within a neighborhood, the fewer supermarkets there were. In ZIP codes where fewer than 10 percent of households lived below the federal poverty line, there were approximately 2.26 times as many supermarkets per household as there were in ZIP codes where the number of households living below the federal poverty line exceeded 40 percent. In addition, the higher the concentration of white people in a neighborhood, the greater the number of supermarkets.

In neighborhoods without supermarkets, corner stores, bodegas, and convenience stores fill in the gaps. In a study of rural Orangeburg County, South Carolina, researchers identified 77 stores in the county, of which only 16 percent were supermarkets and 10 percent were grocery stores. The remaining 74 percent were convenience stores. Low-fat and nonfat milk, apples, high-fiber bread, eggs, and smoked turkey were available in 75 to 100 percent of supermarkets and grocery stores versus four to 29 percent of convenience stores. Just 28 percent of all stores sold any of the fruits or vegetables included in the survey. Convenience stores also tended to charge more for items than did supermarkets.

A study conducted by the City of New York found that: “The city is vastly underserved by local grocery stores. NYC has the potential to capture approximately \$1 billion in grocery spending lost to suburbs.”

The lack of supermarkets makes a real difference. Areas without a full range of markets are “obesogenic” (obesity producing). Four different studies have demonstrated a positive association between access to food stores and improved dietary choices. A study in four states found that areas with high numbers of supermarkets had lower rates of obesity, while areas with higher numbers of convenience stores had higher levels of obesity. Nationwide, for every

additional supermarket in a census tract, fruit and vegetable consumption increases by as much as 32 percent.

To add insult to injury, low-income Americans often pay more for food, even though they often purchase food of lower quality than that purchased by higher-income Americans. A 2004 USDA study found:

- “Metro (urban) stores with high Food Stamp redemption rates lagged behind other stores in the adoption of progressive supply chain and human resource practices.”
- “Much of the evidence indicates that shopping opportunities for the poor are more limited than they are for higher income consumers and that prices are slightly higher in stores where low-income consumers shop.”
- “Food prices are generally higher in smaller grocery stores than in larger supermarkets and also higher in inner city and rural locations than in suburban locations. Since the poor are more likely to shop in small grocery stores and to live in inner city or rural locations, they often face higher food prices.”

### **The Example of the South Bronx**

The nonprofit organization I manage, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, used computer-mapping technology to demonstrate that, like the rest of the nation, low-income neighborhoods in the city lack access to supermarkets, farmers’ markets, and other sources of fresh produce and nutritious food. Focusing on the high-poverty neighborhoods of the South Bronx, Central Harlem, and Brownsville, Brooklyn, we found that fresh produce and other nutritious foods are often more difficult to access than junk foods and unhealthy restaurant fare.

The South Bronx has long been a symbol of urban decay and poverty. Even before the collapse of the economy, there was severe unemployment in the South Bronx. From 2005 through 2007, the 16th Congressional District of the South Bronx had an official unemployment rate of 13.9 percent. During that same period, fully 35 percent of able-bodied residents between ages 16-65 remained outside of the workforce. Even accounting for parents who voluntarily chose to stay at home to be with young children, the true rate of unemployment and underemployment was massive.

The South Bronx is a perfect example of how the lack of access to affordable, nutritious food has devastating impacts on public health. Community Board District One in the South Bronx has about 90,000 residents, 45 percent of whom are below the poverty line. In 2007, there was not a single supermarket of 2,500 square feet or more (a common minimal square footage to categorize a store as a “supermarket”) in the entire district. Yet convenience stores, bodegas, fast food restaurants, and low-cost sit-down restaurants with limited (mostly unhealthy) menus were plentiful. In just one part of the district, ZIP code 10451, there were three McDonald’s outlets.

The New York City Department of Health found that in the South Bronx nearly one in three children in Head Start programs is obese, and almost half are overweight or obese; nearly one in

four public elementary school children is obese, and nearly four in 10 are overweight or obese; about one in six public high school students is obese, and more than one in three are overweight or obese; and one in four adults is obese, and two in three are overweight or obese. Rates of diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and cancer are all far higher than the citywide averages.

### **Family Farmers and Mom-and-Pop Food Stores: An Endangered Species**

Yet as basic as the food and employment problems of low-income neighborhoods and communities are, they embody only one aspect of the nation's fundamentally broken food system. There are a shrinking number of multinational corporations controlling ever-increasing shares of the U.S. food supply. This means that farmers and farm workers receive less profit and income and that there is a consistently increasing risk to our society in having the country's food needs controlled by a handful of companies "too big to fail."

One of the most pronounced trends in modern America – has been the accelerating consolidation and corporate control of the entities that grow, process, transport, and sell our foods. In 1990, 72 percent of all U.S. beef was packed by the top four firms; by 2003, 84 percent of beef was packed by the same four companies. Between 1982 and 2004, the amount of flour milled by the top four companies rose from 40 percent to 63 percent. The percentage of pork packed by the top four firms nearly doubled between 1987 and 2003, raising their control to 63 percent of the market.

With smaller competitors shoved out of the way, massive processors and distributors snare an ever-increasing share of the food economy's dollars, and are free to pay small farmers less and less for their product. In 2007, out of a \$4.00 gallon of milk, dairy farmers received \$1.60; out of a pound of bread that retailed from \$2.49, farmers got 10 cents; out of two pounds of lettuce that retailed for \$1.79, farmers received 28 cents; and out of one pound of sirloin steak that sold for \$7.99, farmers were compensated 94 cents. In 1950, U.S. farmers received 41 percent of the dollars spent on food in the U.S.; by 2006, farmers received only 19 percent of each food dollar.

The future of family farming in America is grim. Average farms were about three times as large in 2002 as in 1835. Small farms tend to make so little income today that these farmers typically receive substantial off-farm income. According to the USDA, American farmers are more than four times as likely to be above the age of 65 as below the age of 34. For households operating limited-resource or retirement farms, more than half of their off-farm income comes from unearned sources -- such as Social Security, pensions, dividends, interest, and rent -- reflecting the advanced age of those operators.

## **The Community Food Security Movement**

In response to those challenges, a new community food security movement has flourished over the past few decades. The movement is based on the understanding that the fortunes of farmers and producers and the fortunes of consumers are intertwined. Food producers need strong consumers in order to remain economically healthy. Consumers need strong food producers to remain physically healthy -- which of course, affects their economic health as well. The problem is that these connections are increasingly frayed.

Community food security work has several objectives: bring new supermarkets and establish farmers' markets in low-income neighborhoods; develop and mentor new farmers; promote nutrition education; launch urban farms; and start food-related small businesses. Generally (but not always) such projects use sustainable and organic growing methods.

The community food security movement also seeks ways through which small agricultural producers can market directly to consumers, cutting out profit-sapping intermediaries. One popular way of doing this is by creating community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms that enable consumers to provide up-front cash to purchase shares of that year's output from the farm. The shareholders then receive a portion of the farm's production each week over the growing season. The arrangement reduces the risk for the farmer and provides fresh, healthy and, sometimes, competitively priced food for the shareholders. Other popular methods of direct marketing -- farmers' markets, farm stands, online sales of farm products -- are gaining popularity nationwide. Much work has also gone into helping farmers directly sell their products to school systems and other large institutions.

My home borough of Brooklyn has long been a hotbed of food activists. The Park Slope Food Coop, located in the heart of the Park Slope, a famously liberal neighborhood of mostly upper-middle-class and upper-class families, was founded in 1973 by a small group of neighbors who wanted to make healthy, affordable food available to the neighborhood. The coop has more than 12,000 members, most of whom work once every four weeks in exchange for a 20–40 percent savings on groceries. Only members may shop at the Coop, but membership is open to all. Using that model as a springboard, activists have recently opened four other co-ops in New York City, and are planning 5-6 more, some in very lower-income neighborhoods, but they are still so new that it is impossible to judge their long-term viability.

Five years ago, Brooklyn resident Doug Cullen started an organic snack bar called Luminous Kitchens. He started selling his bars to a small number of yoga studios and gourmet delis in the New York City area, but has recently started selling through Whole Food stores, and hopes to soon branch out to the rest of the Northeast. Cullen has never taken out a loan and has paid for each expansion solely out of sales. Having recently reached about \$48,000 in annual sales, Cullen finally earns enough money to work at his business as his only job. He says he is "just scraping by, but that's a good just scraping by" because he works for himself and is doing what he wants to do with his life. Even though he's making little money for himself, Cullen pays his few part-time employees \$12 per hour, nearly double the minimum wage, for essentially unskilled work. When asked why he pays his workers far more than required by market conditions, he said: "I'm paying more because, morally, I want this business to do right by

everyone involved, including all the workers.” He does admit, however, that his snack bars (retailing from \$2.15 to \$3.50) are unaffordable to many people, and that his business model only works because he is able to sell them at high-end establishments.

In Brooklyn’s Greenpoint neighborhood, community residents covered a 6,000-square-foot warehouse roof with 200,000 pounds of a soil-and-compost mix specially designed to be light. In order to be more productive, they added 1,000 earthworms to the soil. The roof has 16 four-foot-wide beds, irrigated by rain (which also aids the city by reducing the strain on the city’s sewer system). The rooftop plot grows herbs, flowers, and vegetables, including corn, salad greens, radishes, and peppers, which the community has started selling to local restaurants.

Entrepreneurs in Brooklyn have even started a concern called BK Farmyards, which is asking homeowner to provide backyards and developments to provide not-yet-built upon land, upon which Brooklyn BK will set up and maintain gardens that they will then harvest for both home use and commercial sales.

The New York City Coalition Against Hunger, in conjunction with other nonprofit partners including the Hunger Action Network of New York State and Just Food, runs a Family-Share CSA program that brings fresh, organic produce into three low-income neighborhoods: West Harlem, Long Island City in Queens, and Flatbush in Brooklyn. In conjunction with this effort, a program funded by the State Health Department and administered by the United Way of New York City gives out additional produce from the CSA to soup kitchens and food pantries in those same areas. Families who earn more than \$50,000 annually pay a slightly higher price to help subsidize the program. Families earning \$35,000-\$50,000 pay the actual cost of the produce. Families with incomes of \$35,000 or less receive food for sharply reduced rates, and are able to further reduce their costs by using SNAP (formerly know as Food Stamp) benefits and by volunteering extra hours with the CSA.

My organization estimates that every five dollars spent in the Family Shares program buys three pounds of mixed produce. In terms of stark economics, it may not be the most cost-effective way to buy fresh, even organic, produce. However, not only does the Coalition provide fresh, healthy food available in underserved neighborhoods, but the project helps small, environmentally sustainable farmers stay in business, provides nutrition education, and strengthens communities by bringing together neighbors across racial and economic lines. Frankly, more sophisticated evaluation measures are needed to determine the comprehensive social benefits of the project.

Larger-scale community food projects usually have a mix of government and private funding. One of the largest and most innovative (and probably the most famous) community food security groups in the nation is Growing Power in Milwaukee. The project is led by Will Allen, a charismatic, African-American former professional basketball player and corporate executive who recently won a \$500,000 MacArthur “genius grant.” Growing Power has six greenhouses and eight hoop houses for greens, herbs, and vegetables; pens for goats, ducks, and turkeys; a chicken coop and beehives; and a system for raising tilapia and perch. There is an advanced composting operation -- a virtual worm farm -- and a laboratory experimenting with turning food waste into both fertilizer and methane gas for energy.



The group has a staff of about three dozen full-time workers and an additional 2,000 residents help out as volunteers. They produce about \$500,000 worth of affordable produce, meat, and fish annually, some of which they give away or sell at a discount to low-income residents, and some of which is sold at a higher mark-up to food co-ops, at an on-site store, and to local restaurants. Funded by sales and grants, Growing Power has expanded its operations in Milwaukee and also begun work in Chicago.

All such efforts, which both battle obesity and create jobs, need more support from government, as I will detail below.

### **Trans Fat Ban, Calorie labeling, and the Sugared Beverage Tax**

In general, I believe that New York City's proposed ban on most trans fats in food service establishments is a sensible approach that should be expanded to the rest of the state.

Not only are trans-fats seriously damaging to coronary health, New Yorkers are rarely made aware when they are included in foods they are served. Directing the State's restaurants to eliminate them over time is a common sense approach that will increase the life-spans of all New Yorkers – low-income, wealthy, and middle-class alike.

I caution, however, that efforts to ban trans fats need to be part of an even broader effort to reduce fat intake and calories overall.

According to the *Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter*, "Trans fat is no worse for your health than saturated fat." However, as is often the case, many credible experts take a different view. Many experts I respect believe that trans fats are indeed appreciably worse than other fats. But I think such a debate over the relative harms of different kinds of fats is distracting from the more important public health issues. It is clear the State needs a comprehensive plan to decrease the use of both trans and saturated fat while increasing the consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. This is surely not an easy goal, since many New Yorkers – myself included – relish the taste of fat-laden fries, pizza, ribs, and cheeseburgers, but given that the risks are literally life and death, we must surely make the effort.

When the food industry opposes such bans, it usually says that a better response is to improve consumer education. Yet when New York City implemented a requirement that restaurants, which previously provided some sort of nutrition information go one step further and list calorie counts on their menus next to each item, the restaurant industry unsuccessfully tried to block it in court. It is entirely hypocritical for the industry to expect consumers to take more personal responsibility so long as it actively blocks efforts to give people the nutritional information necessary to exercise such responsibility. People can only eat more responsibly when they have both the money *and* nutritional information.

We also urge the State to work with the Federal government to insist upon much more accurate and helpful nutrition labeling for all foods. I illustrate the need for better labeling by describing three bags of pretzels that I purchased within a two block radius of my office. Each bag appears to the naked eye to be of a similar size to the others. Yet one claims to be five servings, another claims to be two servings, and another claims to be one serving. I doubt that most consumers

know to look at the portion sizes, and then times multiply the caloric and fat contents of each by the number of supposed portion sizes. I also doubt that the bag that is supposed to be five portions ever lasts five meals before it is finished. By the way, for the record, none of these bags had trans fats ... but all of them were *delicious*.

There have been a growing number of proposals to place a so-called “fat tax” on junk food. While well intentioned, such policies would be a big mistake— both patronizing and a waste of time and money. With billions of dollars at stake, the battle to define junk food would be epic, with nutrition experts pitted against food-industry lobbyists, slugging it out one food item at a time. Are Raisinets junk food or fruit? Junk food, you say? Then how about a caramel apple? What about a Fig Newton? Banana chocolate chip muffins? There would be protracted battles every year as new products are introduced and as the ingredients of existing products changed, requiring a massive government bureaucracy to continuously make such determinations.

If such a concept is just applied just to sugary drinks, it would still face similar problems. Would it only apply to “added sugars” or include any juices or milks with natural sugars? Would it include chocolate milks or other flavored milks? How about sports drinks? At what level of sugar would the tax kick-in?

Given that the wealthiest Americans spend three times as much money on food as the lowest income Americans, the reality is that a soda tax will only negatively impact low and middle income families. For example, a local supermarket just advertised a 67.6 oz bottle of generic soda for 79 cents. If Governor Paterson’s soda tax (one penny per ounce or \$1.28 per gallon) went into effect, that would add 67 cents to the bottle, nearing doubling its price. The average food stamp benefit now in New York City equals only \$1.90 per person per meal. For low-income families that want even an occasional soda, the new tax could place yet another hardship in their lives. It makes no sense to increase the costs for low-income families to buy less healthy foods unless the State simultaneously gives the more ability to obtain more nutritious foods, which the Governor’s proposal does not.

Moreover, micromanaging the lives of poor people—or anybody, for that matter—is patronizing and usually backfires. After all, when the nation banned alcohol, that only increased alcohol consumption. Besides, unlike artificial trans fats or cigarettes (which are bad for you no matter the amount), occasional sugary drinks, as part of overall balanced diet, can be just fine for you. While I rarely drink non-diet soda anymore, I still have an occasional Coke with Chinese food, which I think is a particularly delicious combination. Even the health food writer Michael Pollan admits eating an occasional meal with his children at McDonald’s, including a sugared soda, as a rare guilty pleasure. Do we really want to send the message that non-poor people can enjoy such guilty pleasures whenever we want, that but low-income New Yorkers can’t?

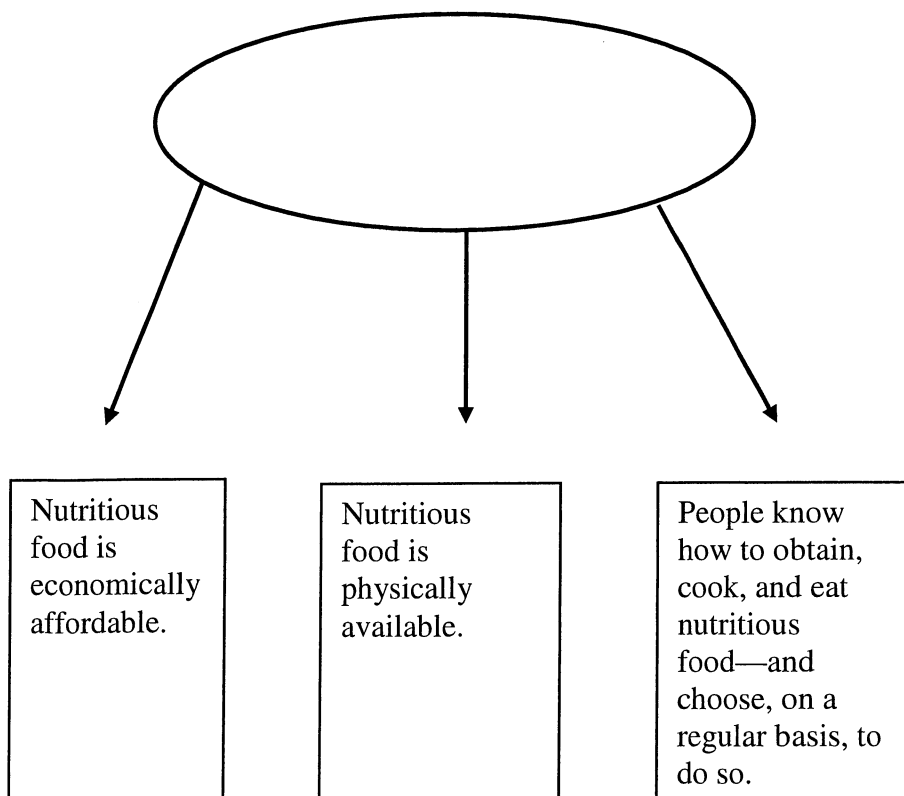
The soda tax idea is based on a faulty understanding of nutrition science and human behavior. It assumes that if we just eliminate a few “bad foods” from our diets, we will all be healthier. That’s bunk. Good nutrition and healthy weight are all about balance, and adopting improved eating habits for a lifetime. Decades ago, weight loss programs such as Weight Watchers outright banned certain foods, and gave participants strict guidelines for how much of certain healthy

(but usually horribly tasting) food they had to eat. People on such programs would often lose weight rapidly, but then gain it all back rapidly. In contrast, the most effective weight control programs today use points systems in which no food is “banned,” but in which, if participants have a high calorie food one time, they simply have to make up for it by eating fewer points in the rest of the week. Such an approach is far more in line with actual human nature and thus allows people to change their entire lifestyles for life, still enjoying occasional guilty pleasures while improving eating habits for life. But most importantly, people can only eat healthier food if it is affordable and available. Thus, even if the State did mandate calorie counts, ban trans fat, and add taxes to sugary sodas, unless healthier food is made more affordable and physically available, I believe they would have only limited impact in reducing obesity.

### **A Serious, Comprehensive Food Policy/Anti-Obesity/Anti-Hunger Agenda**

As the chart below demonstrates, for a community to have good nutrition, three things need to happen: food must be affordable; food must be physically available; and individuals and families must have enough education to know how to eat better and regularly choose to perform the extra work necessary to do so. If you don’t have all three legs of this table, the table will collapse. Yet all too often projects only focus on one of the three. Many provide nutrition education, lecturing people that they should eat better, but neither make food more available nor more affordable and are therefore destined to fail. Sometimes, food is brought into low-income neighborhoods, but at prices too high for most people to afford. That won’t work either.

### **The Three Legs of Good Community Nutrition**



The *only* way to succeed is to focus on all three aspects of this problem at once, as well as to promote strong regional food systems and bolster community food security.

### **A Federal Anti-Hunger/Obesity Agenda**

The President and Congress should work together to:

**1) Enable more family heads to obtain the good jobs and good wages necessary to purchase all the nutritious food their children need.**

- a) Launch a targeted job-creation strategy in the urban neighborhoods and rural communities with the highest rates of child food insecurity/hunger.
- b) Launch a federal Good Food, Good Jobs initiative. As I argued in detail in a recent paper for the Progressive Policy Institute, such an initiative, modeled after the "green jobs" concept, would create jobs through projects and businesses that bring healthier food to low-income areas.
- c) Increase the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.
- d) Raise the federal minimum wage.
- e) Ensure that health care reform makes health care both more affordable and more available for low and middle-income families.

**2) Expand the federal nutrition safety net to cover more people and pay for more nutritious foods, while dramatically reducing bureaucracy and paperwork.**

A top priority for any plan to end hunger in America should be to simplify and better coordinate federal nutrition assistance programs.

The nation should combine the existing Food Stamp Program with most of the existing other federal nutrition assistance programs. My colleague Tom Freedman has suggested that such a new program could be called the "American Family Food, Opportunity, and Responsibility" (AFFORD) program. More low-income Americans would be eligible for this program than the existing, separate, programs – and eligibility determination and application processes would be dramatically simplified. Under current federal law, families must earn below 130 percent of the poverty line to get food stamp benefits and free school meals, but they must live below 185 percent of the poverty line to obtain WIC benefits and reduced-price school meals. These conflicting guidelines result in both increased government bureaucracy at the federal, state, and local levels and decreased access to food. Eligibility for all these programs under the new AFFORD program should be set at 185 percent of the poverty line. There should be one short, universal federal application for AFFORD benefits, which Americans could complete easily online or during an office visit. Not only would this reduce government paperwork and

bureaucracy, it would dramatically increase the amount of nutrition provided to low-income families, particularly working families

**3) Enact Child Nutrition Reauthorization Bill that directly moves the nation towards the goal of ending child hunger by 2015.**

The final bill should have the following elements:

- a) Set a goal of cutting food insecurity among U.S. children in half by 2013 and ending it by 2015.
- b) Provide the funding and the guidance necessary to enable most American elementary and secondary schools to provide every student with free school breakfasts (regardless of their family income) in the first-period classroom.
- c) Provide the funding to enable every school in America to provide free lunches to all their students, regardless of family income (by making school meals universal in this way, the country can decrease government expenditures on paperwork now used to make income eligibility determinations and instead use that money to improve the nutrition of children).
- d) Increase reimbursements to school districts that provide healthier foods, particularly for districts buying from local and regional farmers.
- e) Make the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition assistance program an entitlement available to any low-income parent or child who needs it – and fund nutritional improvements in the WIC food package.
- f) Increase reimbursements for both government and non-profit agencies that sponsor after-school and summer meals for children.
- h) Create a pilot program to reward states for reducing child hunger and food insecurity.

**4) President Obama should empower Secretary Vilsack to improve the coordination of anti-hunger, food security, and anti-obesity efforts across federal departmental lines.**

As the Secretary aptly put it in an interview on domestic hunger he recently gave to CNN: “We need a comprehensive effort involving not just my department but lots of departments of government and state governments.” Here are some very specific ways other federal agencies could help:

- a) The Department of Health and Human Services could do more to incorporate proper nutrition into efforts to bolster preventive health care.
- b) The Department of Education should include in the list of items for which schools are held accountable the number and quality of school lunches, school breakfasts, summer meals, and after-school snacks served by the schools.

c) The Departments of Interior and Veterans Affairs should make excess federal land available for community gardening and farming projects.

d) The Small Business Administration should provide more targeted start-up assistance to food-related small businesses.

#### **5) Reward states that take innovative anti-hunger steps.**

Another way to fight hunger is to reward states that succeed in reducing their rates of hunger and food insecurity. Given that federal law places most of the authority for actually administering federal nutrition assistance programs with the states, their role is crucial. Currently, the federal government monetarily punishes states for food stamp “error rates,” or the number of paperwork mistakes that states make. In recent years, the USDA has also given some limited rewards for states that improve food stamps access, but, still, the funding is based mostly on measuring the success of administrative processes, not necessarily on how well the states do in reducing hunger.

a) Create a special program to reward states that do the best job in actually reducing hunger and food insecurity, moving beyond bonuses for mere process improvements.

b) Every three years, the USDA could provide monetary bonuses up to ten million dollars each to ten states, with the amount of money provided being proportional to the size of their populations. Five of the states would be those that had the greatest reduction in the three-year averages for their USDA-measured food insecurity rates.

c) Because food insecurity is often dependent on factors other than food programs (such as poverty), the other five awards would be given to states that had the most success in reducing food insecurity relative to their poverty line.

d) Special additional bonus could be awarded to any state that demonstrates it has ended child hunger. States would then be required to use those bonuses to expand and improve existing anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs.

Such incentives would draw attention to truly effective anti-hunger programs, which would serve as models for other states. The program would focus on quantifying success with published numbers every year, and sharing research on what works.

The President should encourage more Governors to join with USDA and the nonprofit group Share Our Strength to implement state plans to slash child hunger. Governors can make great progress in this regard by better utilizing existing federal nutrition assistance funding.

#### **6) Provide non-profit anti-hunger groups the resources they need to both innovate and fill in the gaps.**

a) Create the Beyond the Soup Kitchen Grants Program as proposed in the Anti-Hunger Empowerment Act of 2007 (HR206).

b) Overhaul procedures for running programs and awarding funds by modernizing federal grant, cooperative agreement, contracting, and financial management procedures in order to meet the unique needs of nonprofit groups. Government grant management systems should be revamped to emphasize tracking performance.

## **7) Launch a Communications Campaign: “We Made It on SNAP”**

Partially because of stigma against participation, according to USDA, about one-third of the Americans eligible to receive SNAP benefits currently don’t receive them. Given that Obama is the first President in history to have lived in a family that received food stamp (now SNAP) benefits, he is uniquely positioned to lead an effort to dramatically reduce that stigma. I suggest that you invite to the White House prominent Americans (entertainers, sports stars, elected officials, Nobel Prize winners, etc.) who also grew up in families that needed food stamps, to stress how accepting help enables families to prosper in the long run.

## **A New York State Anti-Hunger/Anti-Obesity Agenda**

The State should accelerate and expand state efforts to break-down access barriers that reduce the ability of low-income families to use federal nutrition assistance benefits that bring additional federal dollars into the state. According to the latest USDA report, fully 31% of the people in the state that are eligible for food stamp benefits – entirely funded by the federal government -- still don’t get them. That means that at least 1.5 million people statewide are eligible for this vital nutrition assistance but aren’t getting it. If all those people received benefits, that would bring more than \$2.5 billion extra federal entitlement dollars into the state’s economy annually.

The same USDA report found that, among working families, nearly half of eligible families do not receive food stamps. That provides even more evidence of the need to expand and accelerate the state’s Working Families Food Stamps Initiative, by:

- Ending the inefficient and discriminatory practice of finger imaging, already successfully eliminated in the rest of the state, in New York City.
- Rapidly increasing the inclusion of non-state funds in NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) SNAP outreach plan, thereby increasing mandatory federal matching funds.
- Using categorical eligibility to increase the income levels to make more working poor families eligible for food stamp benefits.
- Ensuring that New York City and the counties do a better job of meeting the 30 day federal deadline for food stamp determinations and processing.

Additionally, launch an initiative to increase the participation of low-income students in federal-funded school breakfast programs. According to the Food Research and Action Center, only 37.8% of students statewide receiving free and reduced price lunches are receiving school breakfasts. If that ratio were increased to only 60%, not only would that dramatically reduce child hunger and food insecurity, that would bring in an additional 53 million federal school breakfast dollars.

## **A Food Security Policy Agenda at the Federal and State levels**

In food security issues as with hunger issues, in order for fundamental change to occur, government must be a key player. In the late 1990s, when Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman launched the USDA Community Food Security Initiative, and placed me in charge of it, most community food security adherents were highly skeptical, worrying that we were simply trying to co-op the movement for nefarious ends. Although the program was discontinued under the Bush Administration, we were able to give out million of dollars in Community Food Project grants each year to aid food security efforts, name Coordinators of Community Food Security in all fifty states, boost community gardens, and ramp technical assistance efforts to such projects.

- a) President Obama should re-launch such an initiative immediately and work with Congress to give it serious resources. The President and Congress should also work together to more fully integrate these efforts with the USDA nutrition assistance programs. One way to accomplish this would be to dramatically expand the ability for WIC and food stamp participants to use their benefits at farm stands, farmers' markets, CSAs, and street vendors that sell fruit and vegetables.
- b) New York State should create a serious community food security initiative modeled on the federal one.
- c) The State government should shift procurement rules to increase the purchase of products from these enterprises and small farmers for school meals and other government nutrition assistance programs, as well as for jails, military facilities, hospitals, concession stands in public parks, and other venues and programs.
- d) The State, along with local governments, should use a combination of tax breaks, grants, land swaps, and other innovative efforts to preserve farmland. Localities must preserve existing and set aside new land for urban farms, gardens, and farmers' markets. Localities should require all large real estate development projects to include plans for food, including rooftop gardens and greenhouses, affordable supermarkets (staffed by living-wage employees), and farmers' markets.
- e) The State should expand its effort to encourage the establishment of new supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods and prevent existing food stores from going out of business.
- f) Recently, New York became the first state to enable coupons for the regular WIC Program (which recently included fresh fruits and vegetables in its food basket for the first time) to be used at farmers' markets. This important advance should be more widely promoted by the State.

## **Personal and Family Responsibility**

Once food is affordable and available and people are properly educated on how to obtain and prepare it in a time-efficient manner with equipment they already have in their homes, I think it's



perfectly fair to focus on the need for parents (including even the lowest- income parents) to take personal responsibility for feeding themselves and their children more nutritiously. If society does its job, so should parents.

While it is society's responsibility to fix the problem, parents of all incomes must be held accountable too—to the extent that they are economically able to do so. When it comes to pure junk foods, more parents have to learn to “just say no” (or at least, “not until you’ve had your vegetables”) to their children. Parents themselves also need to eat better in front of their kids, both to live longer and to be better role models. Even if families have to struggle mightily to provide their children healthier foods—whether by scrimping limited funds or taking a bus a few blocks further—few endeavors are more important. Even though it is a sacrifice, it is one worth making for their children's future.

Still, individuals and families can only be expected to take those steps when government has done its job, making the healthiest food more affordable and available.

**Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify.**