



**Testimony of City Harvest
Before the Senate Standing Committee on Agriculture, Labor, and Social Services.**

**Joint – Public Hearing: Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice Alongside
Continuing Inequalities on our Food Systems**

Good afternoon Chairpersons Hinchey, Ramos and Persaud, and members of the Senate’s Standing Committees on Agriculture, Labor and Social Service. It is with appreciation for your leadership and with gravity for the circumstances that we submit our testimony and share our experiences on the impact of COVID-19 on food security in NYC and the need for State leadership to build a pathway to resiliency.

As an organization that has served New Yorkers facing hunger since 1982, even during times of so-called economic prosperity, we know far too well that the COVID-19 crisis has not created new need; instead, it has exposed the need. The COVID-19 Recession has exposed the same racist systems that led BIPOC and immigrant communities to face disproportionately high food insecurity and unemployment rates before, during and after the height of the pandemic; the same racist systems that led BIPOC and immigrant communities to face the brunt of the virus; and the same racist systems that left some BIPOC and immigrant communities behind in the recovery process, including BIPOC farmers up until the American Rescue Plan.

At the intersection of these longstanding inequities lies food justice. We have an opportunity and obligation to think and act boldly as we reset and rebuild our food system by centering the State’s legislative agenda in the needs and assets of community advocates and anti-hunger leaders.

Our testimony shares an overview of the exposed demand for anti-hunger and food access programs over the last year, City Harvest’s emergency response, and a shared vision for food justice and resiliency beyond the COVID-19 Recession. Our primary asks were developed in partnership with the NY COVID-19 Coalition and City Harvest’s policy priorities:

- 1. Supporting community led projects that build food resiliency by supporting legislation like Senator Comrie’s S5732 (food security, empowerment and economic development program)**
- 2. Making Nourish NY a permanent programing and refining the program through a racial equity lens by amending and passing the Surplus Act**

3. **Ensuring that NYS maximizes available options to strengthen SNAP for New Yorkers, including the Restaurant Meal Program and supports for NOEPs.**
4. **Investing in local government strategies that partner with stakeholders to build food equity such as the Mayor's Office of Food Policy's Food Forward Plan.**

Food Insecurity and COVID-19

Established in 1982, **City Harvest** is New York City's largest food rescue organization. Even during times of so-called "economic prosperity," we work diligently to meet the demand for food access programs in partnership with over 2,500 food donors and 400 emergency food programs across the City.

Before the COVID-19 crisis hit New York City, City Harvest was already on pace to provide a record 64 million pounds of donated food to over 1.2 million New Yorkers facing food insecurity and over 2.5 million working-aged adults below the self-sufficiency standard — which means that these individuals did not have adequate income to afford groceries, rent, medical expenses, child care, transportation and an emergency fund to comfortably live in our City. Keep in mind that this was during a time in which unemployment rates were at a record low 4 percent across NYC.

When the first case of COVID-19 was reported in NYC, and then the eventual PAUSE Act necessarily ceased the local economy to protect us from the virus, City Harvest's projections quickly increased. Since March, we went from expecting to rescue 64 million pounds of food to sourcing well over 100 million pounds. We are now anticipating the delivery of over 144 million pounds of donated food to pantries between July 2020 and July 2021. Our emergency food response to the COVID-19 Recession was sparked by a 6-month spike in unemployment, which reached a record high 20 percent in the summer.

One year removed from the start of the pandemic, and we are still trying to assess the extent of its impact on food insecurity. Our most reliable source, Feeding America, has leaned on available unemployment data and poverty projections to present a sobering picture: a 55 percent increase in food insecurity across the City, a 73 percent increase in Queens alone, which was the epicenter of the virus at the beginning and is home to many immigrant communities who were not equitably supported by government relief efforts, a 64 percent increase amongst children, and higher food insecurity rates in predominately Black neighborhoods such as Brownsville, which had the highest food insecurity rates before and after the height of the Pandemic.

Legislating for Food Resiliency and Food Justice

After nearly four decades of working hard to support pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and other forms of emergency feeding programs across the City, it continues to be clear that food banks simply cannot end hunger alone. As we work hard to feed the line through our operations, we also advocate to shorten the line through anti-hunger policies.

Before and during the height of the Pandemic, City Harvest worked with allies in FeedingNYS (the coalition of NYS food banks) and members of the NY COVID-19 Food Coalition (a group of over 40 food policy experts and community advocates across the City) to identify a number of key budget and legislative priorities to build food security. We thank the State legislature and allies in the Department of Agriculture and Markets for ensuring that many of our asks and more were reflected in the State budget. This includes \$50 million for Nourish NY, protecting HPNAP, supports for restaurants and small businesses, rental assistance from the federal government, and incredible innovations such as the excluded worker's fund, all of which intersect with food justice by addressing the root issues and barriers that disproportionately drive BIPOC communities to emergency food programs at twice the rate of White New Yorkers. But now that the dust has settled from the State budget, we know that we can do more to build a food justice agenda in State government.

- 1. Support community led projects that build food resiliency by supporting legislation like Senator Comrie's S5732 (food security, empowerment and economic development program):** First and foremost, it is critical that solutions to hunger are centered in community-led efforts. There is no need to reinvent the wheel in this area. For the past few years, Senator Leroy Comrie has introduced legislation to create a State version of the USDA-NIFA Community Food Project. If the State were to make a serious effort to support this bill, then community groups and residents who have the expertise and energy but lack the financial resources could create wealth generating food security models such as food cooperatives or CSAs supported by community gardens.
- 2. Make Nourish NY permanent and refine the program through a racial equity lens by amending and passing the Surplus Act.** City Harvest has accessed a little over \$1 million through the Nourish NY program. Despite the smaller allocation, we hold the values and quality of the program in high regard. The food quality, the often hard-to-procure proteins and kosher dairy products, and the opportunity to work with a pool of local farmers who also benefit from the program has made it a center piece of our State advocacy. We thank our allies in the Senate Agriculture Committee, Senate Social Service Committee and Assembly Agriculture Committee for keeping us abreast and collecting our input to make the case for continuing Nourish NY. However, Nourish NY is far too important to be funded sporadically or insufficiently. We continue to advocate for the program to not only be made permanent through the Surplus Act, but to also go farther and intentionally seek out BIPOC farmers and address barriers to their ability to participate in the program.
- 3. Ensure that NYS maximizes available options to strengthen SNAP for New Yorkers, including the Restaurant Meal Program and supports for NOEPs:**
 - a. For every meal a food bank provides, SNAP provides access to nine. SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against hunger, and continues to efficaciously and efficiently provide families with the agency to access food where they want and

warehouse space that invests in innovative programming and operations that are centered in community input. However, while we have secured a warehouse in Sunset Park, we are still facing a challenging timeline and capital campaign to be able to expeditiously retrofit the warehouse and move our operation in a timely manner. City Harvest is fortunate to have a community of caring New Yorkers that are donating to our capital campaign, but we are working hard to catch up to our goal without disrupting our services in the process.

We are asking for the State's support and partnership as we continue a herculean relocation and invite additional support for our efforts to build programs and infrastructure in our warehouse that reflects community input on food justice centered programming.

Conclusion

Thank you for holding today's hearing and allowing City Harvest and the anti-hunger community to share our experience on COVID-19 and food insecurity. We thank the City for its hard work during these uncertain times and for collaborating with food banks throughout the Pandemic. We are optimistic that our policymakers will invest in programs and legislation that is rooted in an equitable recovery and in building resiliency for all New Yorkers. City Harvest will remain vigilant in our work to provide food for families today and in our advocacy for legislation that builds resiliency beyond COVID-19 and we remain committed to working with you on policy solutions that help New Yorkers become more food secure.

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