

To the Joint Assembly and Senate, thank you for affording me this opportunity to testify on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities and how we can approach and mitigate systematic inequalities made worse by the Coronavirus disease through enhanced federal funding and appropriate policy initiatives.

My name is Dr. Melony Samuels and I am the Executive Director and Founder of The Campaign Against Hunger; a 21-year-old anti-hunger nonprofit whose mission is to empower vulnerable New Yorkers to live healthier and more productive lives by providing nutritious food, social services, workforce programs, community nutrition education, and urban farming to stir community activism and engagement to alleviate poverty.

We will never be the same as a city. The Covid-19 pandemic is inflicting direct, devastating damage in terms of lives lost. It has pushed our social fabric up to the light and exposed its holes, showing with unrelenting impartiality where and how our systems are broken. That harsh light is creating precious visibility for problems that have long festered, invisible to those not vulnerable to them.

I am talking about hunger. A word foreign to many, but lived by over 1.4 million New Yorkers who, at this moment, do not know where their next meal is coming from. The disproportionate suffering on minority communities is not surprising. For years, we have failed as a city to adequately address the systemic inequalities that perpetuate poverty and hunger within minority communities of color. Band-aid fixes can no longer suffice.

As New Yorkers, we are all part of the problem and the solution. To solve any problem small or structural, it starts with an intention. Do we genuinely intend to bring about lasting change to the inequities and disparities that have long held our communities bound in poverty? Now that COVID-19 has come to our shores will we be committed to building health and remove the shame and stigma of hunger? Are we committed to advancing equity for disenfranchised and underserved communities predisposed to increasing hardships should another crisis occur?

We have been proponents of this vision at TCAH. We serve over 300,000 New Yorkers annually in communities that are and have historically been hardest hit by poverty and hunger. We not only provide nutritious food with dignity, but we also provide the user-friendly tools to catalyze them out of poverty and over-reliance on the ever eroding social safety net. We educate our communities on the importance of eating healthily to combat chronic diseases such as diabetes, prevalent in minority communities of color that put them at a higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. We have invested in health

because it is not just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing. Healthy food saves lives; it makes societies and economies stronger and more sustainable.

My recommendations to mitigate systematic inequalities made worse by COVID-19 include the following:

1. Establish a community-based leadership task force
  - a. Comprised of leaders in hunger, technology, health, the financial sector, and housing solutions
  - b. Participating organizations offer quarterly testimony on the status of feeding programs that are solving hunger in communities
  - c. The task force can make funding requests directly to the legislature
  - d. Eliminate bureaucracy and expedite funding for profits in good standing.
2. Support for nonprofits to hire local unemployed residents to help with safe food distribution so people can work and earn a living.
  1. Creation of a food hub (warehouse space) in the boroughs to store up to 6 months worth of healthy food; implement a rotation system to rapidly mobilize food distribution in the event of a crisis/pandemic
  1. Support for hiring social media support to push out notices of food access to offer 'in the moment' directions or updates.

Again, thank you for this opportunity. I applaud your efforts in taking this step to ask 'what is needed of the people who are doing the work.' I am hopeful for lasting change, and that together, we will work to eradicate hunger and poverty in our great city.