

Joint Legislative Hearing – Health
Testimony of Feeding New York State
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Feb 28, 2023

There is a broad sense that we have entered the ‘post-covid’ or ‘post-pandemic’ era in the US. What does that mean for hunger in New York?

The good news is that we are no longer in lockdown. Schools and businesses have reopened. Many of the most severe supply chain problems have been resolved. The unemployment numbers are down substantially.

The bad news is that hunger persists at higher levels than before the pandemic. How is that possible?

New York had about 2.2 million hungry people prior to the pandemic. Our Feeding New York network of ten food banks, working with 5,000 partners (food pantries, shelters, soup kitchens, afterschool programs etc) were distributing about 270 million pounds of food annually. Much of this food was donated by New York farmers and grocers; much of it was Federally-supplied; much of it was funded by New York State under the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP).

The pandemic hit New York very hard, with hundreds of thousands of jobs lost almost overnight. Schools closed, and with that closure came a disruption to school-supplied meals. Our distributions soared; in the two hard pandemic years we distributed over 450 million pounds per year, up from 270 m prior. We all recall the lines of people stretching around the block waiting for food; lines of cars in suburban and rural areas demonstrated the high need in those communities.

We were fortunate that the Federal and State governments stepped up and took important steps to reduce the impact of the economic disruption of the pandemic. Farms and the food industry donated more food than ever before.

On the Federal level, child tax credits were enhanced, additional USDA food was supplied, and SNAP benefits were increased.

On the State level, remarkably, HPNAP was not increased until last year. HPNAP is the most important anti-hunger program in the State, and should have been increased immediately upon the start of the pandemic. Instead, it was flat-funded until last year when a long-overdue increase of \$22 M was added by the Legislature.

The Legislature also put the Nourish New York program into law, which enables New York farms to sell their food to food banks and thus get it directly to those in need. Nourish New York was flat-funded this year at \$50M.

These Federal and State interventions worked. They kept hunger at bay; the federal programs ensured that people had additional money to buy groceries, and the State funding enabled us to do a better job meeting the unmet need. Federal dollars shortened the food lines – state dollars allowed us to feed the food line.

This year, it is as if the lessons of the pandemic have disappeared down a memory hole. The Federal interventions have ended or are about to end. Child tax credits have expired, USDA food is simply not available in the quantities we need it, and next month the enhanced SNAP benefits will expire. The typical household in New York will lose about \$150/month in their grocery budget. That is a loss of \$2.5 billion dollars in federal funding that will not be coming into New York's food economy.

The bottom line is that food pantry lines are about to get a lot longer again.

At the same time, our ability to feed the line is being reduced. It is absolutely unconscionable that the proposed State budget cuts \$22 million dollars from HPNAP and nearly a million dollars more from NOEP (the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program that assists households in getting the SNAP benefits for which they are eligible).

It is also shortsighted to flat-fund Nourish NY, which has proven to be an effective tool for ensuring the health of farms as well as the health of hungry people. Over 4,000 New York farms have benefited from this program, while millions of New Yorkers have been able to eat healthy New York-grown food. It is hard to imagine a smarter investment than Nourish New York.

Funding for Nourish New York should be set at \$75 million this fiscal year. Funding for HPNAP should be set at \$63 million to reflect the 11% increase in food costs this past year.

With these funds, we can do a better job feeding the three million New Yorkers who rely on food pantries.

It is vital to remember that the pandemic and the economic dislocation caused by the pandemic are two different things. The pandemic caused terrible suffering; I myself was hospitalized. But it is the economic damage that is exposing our hunger problems. Historically, recessions happen quickly, but the recovery from recessions happens slowly. The recession of 2009 took about a decade from which to recover. There is every reason to believe this recession will take time to resolve also. Do not be fooled by unemployment numbers – most people who use food pantries have always lived in employed households.

Finally, while we all know that there are too many people who are hungry, what you may not know is that we have all the food we need to provide them every missing meal. In New York, we throw out more food than we need to entirely solve this problem. We throw away over 7 billion pounds of food a year in

New York. Working with Feeding America and the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation, this year we were able to rescue over 2 million pounds of that perfectly good food and distribute it to people in need. With the proper tools we can rescue much, much more.

Our friends in the accounting world will tell us all that the budget is finite – that we cannot afford to do all the good things we want to do. That is unquestionably true. I never argue with an auditor.

But the truth is this: every budget is a set of decisions about our priorities. The budget tells us, in the language of money, what is important to us and what is not important. The NY State budget totals well over \$200 billion dollars. We live in the richest, most innovate economy in human history. Our state has always been among the wealthiest in the Union.

No one can say that we cannot afford to provide food to our neighbors. No one can honestly claim we lack the means. No one can declare that we should take perfectly good food and plow it into landfills. No one can make the excuse that we don't know how to feed everyone. Because the truth is that we can afford it; we should not put good food in landfills; we know how to do this job. The only question is whether we have the political will to do the right thing. Only you, our elected representatives, can answer that question. It is the only question: will you do the right thing?