

Testimony Submitted by
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on behalf of
Food Bank For New York City
for the
New York State Senate Health Committee Budget Hearing
February 28, 2023

Thank you to Chair Rivera and all the members of the health committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on the proposed FY2024 budget for New York State. Food Bank has provided free, nutritious, and culturally appropriate meals to New Yorkers for 40 years. We partner with over 800 organizations across the five boroughs including food pantries and soup kitchens, senior centers, shelters, schools and other community and faith-based organizations to provide food assistance, income support services, and nutrition education to New Yorkers of all ages. We also oversee the NYC SNAP task force and are one of the largest providers of free tax prep in the nation.

Food Banks like ours and the food pantries, soup kitchens, and other food assistance providers rely on state programs such as the ***Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program*** (HPNAP) and ***Nourish New York*** to bring nutritious, culturally appropriate, and regionally sourced food to New Yorkers in need, including many who do not qualify for public benefits like SNAP. **In a recent survey, Food Bank For New York City's network of community-based organizations reported that visits to food assistance programs remain up 80% over pre-pandemic levels.**

The SNAP Cliff and the End of Pandemic Food Assistance

New York State should create a grocery benefit that addresses the SNAP Cliff: the end of SNAP Emergency Allotments which starts March 1, 2023

At the height of the pandemic, with the increased food supply from government assistance and private donations, Food Bank supported our more than network partners in serving over 120 million meals per year. Today, many of those pandemic food resources - both public and private support - have ended. At the same time as these supplies of food at food pantries have diminished, **millions of New Yorkers who have relied on SNAP Emergency Allotments will be experiencing a cut to benefits** that have helped keep food on the table. This March, the average SNAP recipient will *lose over \$80 per month* in benefits that pay for food – but many families will see an even steeper decline in their monthly food resources.

The nationwide rise in the cost of living, particularly increased costs for food, have put lower income families at greater risk, forcing hard choices in the face of limited resources. These trends have coincided with the expiration of key federal interventions, including:

- **Nearly 2.9 million SNAP participants** in New York State will lose an average of \$87/month per person beginning in March due to the expiration of SNAP Emergency Allotments.

- The expanded **Child Tax Credit (CTC)** – which cut the child poverty rate by over 40% – **expired at the start of 2022, throwing millions of children back into poverty.**
- Over **726,000 New York students lost access to no-cost school meals** at the start of this school year.

Community Food Program Funding

Food Bank For New York City urges increased support for food pantries and soup kitchens in the next New York State Budget.

Fund the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) at \$63 Million

HPNAP, which is administered by the Department of Health, is one of the most successful anti-poverty and nutrition programs in New York. Through lines of credit at Food Bank For New York City and the United Way, HPNAP enables local emergency food providers to distribute millions of pounds of nutritionally balanced food to New Yorkers experiencing hunger and food insecurity – many of whom are excluded from federal nutrition programs. For over 30 years, the program has helped improve nutrition security for hungry New Yorkers through healthy food procurement, storage and distribution, and operational expenses. HPNAP is a lifeline for the nearly 3 million New Yorkers, including 1.4 million New York City residents, who rely on emergency food programs to keep food on the table.

The current executive budget proposal, released by Governor Hochul earlier this month, rolls back funding of HPNAP to \$34M, a pre-pandemic amount that will not meet the need of food assistance providers throughout the state.

Fund Nourish New York at \$75 Million

Nourish New York, previously administered by the Department of Agriculture and Markets, helps food banks distribute healthy, New York-grown produce across our network. The program helps improve the selection of food at distributions – providing more choice to hungry New Yorkers who often don't have the freedom to choose.

Since 2020, Nourish New York has provided over 70 million pounds of healthy, nutritious food to hungry New Yorkers while generating \$150M in direct benefits for over 4,000 producers across the state. Not only does Nourish New York support hungry New Yorkers with nutritious produce, the program also directly supports producers – from the fishing industry on Long Island to fruit and vegetable growers up north and out west to dairy farmers across the state.

Invest in Community Based Organizations Serving Migrants

In addition, NYC has been rising to meet the needs of the unexpected influx of tens of thousands of migrants to the city, and are in need of not only food assistance, but legal services, housing, clothing and other basic needs. The Governor's executive budget proposal offers \$1B to be split between the federal, state, and city budget to address this need, but recent testimony by NYC Comptroller Brad Lander estimated the cost to NYC at \$4B over the next two years. While the Governor's budget begins to address community food need, more resources will be needed ensure all New Yorkers have the food they need.

Leveraging State Funding for Federal Nutrition Programs

In addition to funding community food assistance, New York State should use the FY2023-2024 budget to leverage federal nutrition programs. State funding has significant power to bring federal support into our New York communities and support our local economies.

Fund Universal School Meals at \$200 Million

New York State should require all schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or school breakfast program to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to the student.

In New York City, schools began offering cost-free meals to all students in 2017. Food Bank For New York City's member network of 800 community-based organizations throughout the five boroughs saw the impact this change had on families. Through our school-based nutrition programs, such as Cookshop, we saw the positive impact this had on children. And with the flexibility offered during the public health emergency, all students in New York State were given access to this important nutrition program. Now, with the expiration of pandemic assistance at the beginning of this school year, over 700,000 children throughout New York State no longer have access to cost-free meals at school.

This loss impacts families already struggling to make ends meet, many who don't qualify for assistance due to federal poverty measures. It impacts children in rural communities, where schools don't meet the population requirements for federal assistance, and it reintroduces barriers to access and stigma to families who would otherwise qualify.

School meals provide relief for struggling families, help close the achievement gap and support regional food growers and providers. We know how effective this program is. Households with children attending schools that provide free meals for all are 3 times less likely to experience food insecurity. **Free school meals save families an estimated \$140 per child in grocery spending each month.** Access to healthy meals at school supports learning, boosts test scores, and improves attendance and classroom behavior. Funding school meals allows schools to purchase local sourced food, supporting our regional food providers and economy. It eliminates school meal debt, a significant burden not only for families but also for school district budgets. Every dollar invested in school meals provides \$2 in health, equity, environmental, and economic benefits.

Fund the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) at at least \$4.2 Million

While food assistance is the backstop against hunger, the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is our nation's first line of defense protecting families from food poverty. SNAP typically provides more meals in two months than NYC's emergency food network provides in one year. SNAP is an effective counter-cyclical program: if household income declines, SNAP steps up to provide grocery assistance. As New Yorkers continue to deal

with the economic fallout of COVID, the need to provide benefit access assistance has spiked. Food Bank's own SNAP assistance call center has seen a 300% to 600% increase in daily call volume since the start of the pandemic.

New York's **Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP)**, administered by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), reduces hunger by increasing participation among eligible residents in SNAP and other federal nutrition programs, and helps to maximize federal matching funds coming into the state. Funded since 1987, NOEP (managed by Hunger Solutions New York) is a unique model that combines statewide activities with community-based services. NOEP is New York State's flagship program to ensure that all who are eligible receive 100% federally-funded SNAP benefits as well as other federally-funded child nutrition assistance benefits to which families are referred (school meal programs, Summer Food Service Program, and WIC).

At the community level, NOEP manages a network of community-based organizations that are skilled at conducting SNAP outreach and provides free and confidential SNAP application assistance to food-insecure New Yorkers. NOEP services are available in all counties, either in-person or remote, including all 5 boroughs of NYC. At the state level, NOEP provides information, education and technical assistance to organizations that serve potentially-eligible individuals and families. Investments in outreach and assistance come back exponentially supporting not only people in need but also food retailers and producers throughout our region, strengthening the food system for all of us.

Investment in this critical service brings a significant return on investment, bringing federal SNAP dollars to New Yorkers in need, and to local grocers and regional food system.

Conclusion

New York is still recovering from the economic fallout of the pandemic. People experiencing food insecurity are losing support and resources while their need remains high. As you work with your colleagues, we ask that you fully fund these vital programs in the next budget so New Yorkers have the resources they need to not only survive, but to thrive.