



2022 New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing  
On Human Services  
February 2, 2022

Testimony of Joel Berg, CEO, Hunger Free America

Good day. I am Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America, a nonprofit direct service and advocacy organization which is headquartered in New York City but works across New York State and the nation. I am honored to testify today on behalf of the approximately 2.19 million state residents who now struggle against hunger.

My message today is simple: even as the pandemic slowly becomes less deadly, we still face a massive hunger and food insecurity crises statewide and we need a massive response from the State that goes way beyond merely nominally increasing funding for emergency food distributions.

The most impactful and cost-effective way for the State to fight hunger is to increase participation in the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamps Program). Doing so would dwarf any other effort. If current caseloads and benefits levels stay stable, federal SNAP spending in New York State this year would be \$8.8 billion, which would equal 176 times the amount of funding (\$50 million) that Governor Hochul has proposed spending on Nourish New York this year. If the State did more to work with nonprofit groups on SNAP outreach and access, and was able to raise the SNAP caseload and SNAP spending by merely five percent, that would equal \$440 million in extra federal spending on food relief, nine times the cost of Nourish NY. It is important to note that, not only is every penny of SNAP benefits paid for by the federal government, but any State money also spent on approved SNAP outreach and enrollment activities – including money sub-granted to nonprofit groups for such purposes – is matched 100 percent by the federal government. For all those reasons, the most cost-effective way for the State to reduce hunger – by far – is to fund efforts to increase enrollment in SNAP and other federally funded nutrition benefits. For example, every State dollar that Hunger Free America spends on SNAP outreach

work generates at least \$60 in federal benefits that fill the grocery carts of struggling new Yorkers.

### **Background on The Current State of Hunger In New York State**

According to raw USDA data analyzed by Hunger Free America, between 2018-2020, 11.3 percent of the New York State's population – equaling 2.179 million people – suffered from food insecurity, including 16.0 percent of all children, 7.9 percent of all employed adults, and 7.2 percent of all older residents. That overall number of people food insecure represented an increase over the 2013-2015 time period when 11.0 percent of the New York State's population – equaling 2.166 million people – were food insecure.

The Utica-Rome Metropolitan Region had the state's highest metropolitan level of food insecurity in 2018-2020, 19.4 percent, followed by the Syracuse region at 14.5 percent, and the Albany-Schenectady-Troy region at 14.3 percent.

Between 2018-2020, 14.0 percent of the New York City's population – equaling 1.164 million people – suffered from food insecurity, unable to afford a sufficient supply of food, including 19.0 percent of all children, 9.0 percent of all employed adults, and 11.0 percent of all older New Yorkers. The overall number of people who were food insecure represented a significant jump over the 2013-2015 time period, when 12.8 percent of the New York City's population – equaling 1.094 million people – were food insecure.

The Bronx remains New York City's hungriest borough in every category with, in 2018 – 2020, more than one in four Bronx residents (25.4 percent) experiencing food insecurity. This includes 35.8 percent of all children, nearly 18 percent of working adults, and more than 21 percent of older residents.

One other way of measuring hunger is the U.S. Census Bureau Pulse Survey, which asks Americans if they “didn't have enough food” over just a seven-day period. According to this data, the number of state residents who did not have enough food rose from 1.69 million in one week in December to 1.98 million in one week in January. Much of that increase is likely due to the expiration of the federal child tax credit expansion, although some of it may be due to the omicron wave.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of state residents eligible for federally funded benefits do not receive them. The best under-participation estimates that we have for SNAP that are official are old (for 2018, pre-pandemic). For technical reasons I would be glad to discuss, I think USDA's estimates, even in 2018, undercounted those who are eligible but did not then receive SNAP. But even if USDA's numbers were correct, that still meant that 1-10 percent overall, 25 percent of working people, and 30 percent of older New York State residents who were eligible for SNAP did not get it. Given the huge spike in unemployment since then, those numbers are surely far higher now.

As for federally funded WIC benefits (for pregnant women and children under five), also in 2018, USDA estimated that whopping 39% of the pregnant women and children under five eligible for WIC statewide did not get it. Unlike SNAP, WIC has no immigration restrictions in the program and has slightly higher income eligibility than SNAP, so this under-participation in WIC is especially harmful.

### **Steps the Legislature Should Take to Better Fight Hunger:**

- **Increase funding to nonprofit groups that increase access to government food benefits.** The most impactful and cost-effective way for the State to fight hunger is to increase participation in the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamps Program). Doing so would dwarf any other effort. If current caseloads and benefits levels stay stable, federal SNAP spending in New York State this year would be \$8.8 billion, which would equal 176 times the amount of funding (\$50 million) that Governor Hochul has proposed spending on Nourish New York this year. If the State did more to work with nonprofit groups on SNAP outreach and access, and was able to raise the SNAP caseload and SNAP spending by merely five percent, that would equal \$440 million in extra federal spending on food relief, nine times the cost of Nourish NY. It is important to note that, not only is every penny of SNAP benefits paid for by the federal government, but any State money also spent on approved SNAP outreach and enrollment activities – including money sub-granted to nonprofit groups for such purposes – is matched 100 percent by the federal government. For all those reasons, the most cost-effective way for the State to reduce hunger – by far – in to fund efforts to increase enrollment in SNAP and other federally funded nutrition benefits.
- **Fund pilot projects to enable the state government to work collaboratively with New York City and a few target counties to make it easier for eligible New Yorkers to apply for multiple food benefits online, as a first step toward doing so for all anti-poverty benefits.** At a bare minimum, the SNAP program (run by OTDA) should have a joint application with the WIC program (run by DOH). Such an effort is a top priority of New York City Mayor Adams.
- **End the sub-minimum wage for tipped food service workers.** Currently, workers in the food service industry are guaranteed minimum wages of between \$8.35 to \$10 per hour, depending on where they live in the state. When tips do not provide much more than that (as they often do not) these workers and their families live in poverty. Because so many workers have left or are leaving the industry because of lessened tips and increased hostility and harassment during the pandemic, hundreds of restaurants in the state are raising wages voluntarily; but those forward-thinking restaurants say that they are at a disadvantage if they do it alone, which is why they want the state to set a level playing field with the uniform, higher wage.
- **Enact and fund a SNAP-like program, to be funded by the State, to give extra grocery funds to immigrants and working poor New Yorkers who are ineligible for**

**federal SNAP benefits.** California recently started such a program:

<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-07-13/california-takes-a-nibble-at-offering-food-stamps-to-undocumented-immigrants>

- **Enact and fund free school lunch for all students, with state funds supplementing federal funds, as California also recently enacted:**  
<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-07-13/california-takes-a-nibble-at-offering-food-stamps-to-undocumented-immigrants>
- **Enact, fund, and implement a government-wide “Assets Empowerment/Middle Class Wealth Generation Agenda” to dramatically increase economic opportunity and mobility by enabling more families to transition from *owing* non-productive debts interest to *owning* assets such as first homes and small businesses.**

### **Administrative Steps the Hochul Administration Should Take to Better Fight Hunger:**

#### **Government-Wide:**

- **The governor should direct key state agencies to work collaboratively with the City of New York and a few pilot counties on projects to make it easier for eligible New Yorkers to apply for multiple food benefits online, as a first step toward doing so for all anti-poverty benefits.** At a bare minimum, the SNAP program (run by OTDA) should have a joint application with the WIC program (run by DOH).
- **The Governor should appoint the new OTDA Commissioner to co-chair (along with the existing chair, the Commissioner of AG and Markets) the State Council on Hunger and Food Policy and empower it to create and implement a comprehensive plan for the State to fight hunger, improve nutrition, and aide NYS farmers and small-scale food processors.**
- **Create a permanent structure within the governor’s office – perhaps a state “Food Czar” – to coordinate these issues.**
- **Launch a statewide, multi-agency communications and outreach effort to enroll more eligible New Yorkers in federally funded nutrition assistance programs, including SNAP, WIC, P-EBT, school breakfasts, and summer meals.** She could also combine this effort with vaccine outreach and/or rental assistance outreach.
- **Direct the NYS Wage Board to end the sub-minimum wage for tipped food service workers.** The governor of New York has unilateral power to instruct the state Department of Labor to guarantee food service workers the same minimum wage as for most workers, as the previous governor did for car wash and nail salon workers.

- **Further streamline and speed up the State’s contracting and payment procedures with anti-hunger and other nonprofit groups working under State contracts.**
- **Enact and implement a government-wide “Assets Empowerment/Middle Class Wealth Generation Agenda” to dramatically increase economic opportunity and mobility by enabling more families to transition from *owing* non-productive debts interest to *owning* assets such as first homes and small businesses.** While extra funding from the Legislature would be helpful in this regard, the Hochul Administration can start much of this work with existing funding.

#### **OTDA:**

- Accelerate the application to USDA, and the program roll-out, for the SNAP Restaurant Meals program, recently signed into law by Governor Hochul. Work with nonprofit groups to conduct outreach to New Yorkers who are homeless, have disabilities, and are elderly to help enroll them in SNAP and use their benefits, if they choose to do so, at participating restaurants.
- Publicize easier SNAP applications, and shorter SNAP re-certification periods, for seniors and people with disabilities.
- Increase State funding for nonprofits to conduct SNAP outreach through the NOEP program.
- Better fight college student hunger by promoting college student SNAP enrollment, in close collaboration with SUNY and CUNY.
- Accelerate OTDA approval for nonprofits to use telephonic signatures for SNAP applications.
- Accelerate OTDA efforts to enable SNAP recipients to digitally redeem their SNAP benefits (through a system like Apple Wallet or Google Pay) instead of using EBT cards, which have more stigma and are often lost in the mail.

#### **AG and Markets:**

- Provide more technical assistance and equipment to farmers markets and individual farmers to help them accept SNAP and WIC online.
- Do more to promote gleaning on farms and food donations by farmers by providing farmers with more information (including details of legal liability protections) and technical assistance, and by using NYS Commission on National and Community Service to recruit volunteers for gleaning activities.
- Provide more technical assistance and funding to CSAs and discount produce box programs in low-income communities/neighborhoods.

- Merge the “Nourish NY” program with the DOH HPNAP program,
- Develop a neighborhood-level “food access index” that incorporates both food prices and physical availability of food.
- Better coordinate the varied SNAP/WIC incentives program that operate at farmers markets.
- Improve, and more carefully enforce, food labeling laws, to make the true nutritional content of foods even clearer.
- Provide increased technical assistance and seed money for urban and suburban farms and gardens.
- Work with Cornell Cooperative Extension to better promote the New York State Grown & Certified program.

**DOH:**

- Restore and increase state funding for the WIC Help NY program, which funds nonprofits to boost the enrollment of pregnant mothers and children under five in WIC. It is important to note that WIC is one of the few federally funded food benefit programs legally available for undocumented immigrants.
- Provide technical assistance, funding, and policy support to WIC clinics to enable them to serve more families remotely by video and/or phone, instead of requiring them to come to WIC clinics in-person to receive service.
- Boost State funding for the HPNAP program – which provides foods to food pantries, soup kitchens, and food banks statewide – and use some of that funding to ensure that all agencies receiving such food also engage in SNAP and WIC outreach work.
- Create a nutrition education smart phone app tied to market UPC codes for individual products. Perhaps Cornell Cooperative Extension could help with this
- Expand nutrition education programs and make them more hands-on and culturally sensitive, using demonstrations with foods that are affordable and available in the neighborhoods where the nutrition education is provided.
- Include healthy food as an eligible expense in Medicaid in the current 1115 Waiver that is being discussed. California and a number of other states are already doing so in some form: <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/food-policy-snapshot-medically-tailored-meals-california-medicaid/>

- Work with AG and Markets to help more hospitals purchase their food from NYS farmers and food processors.
- Combine food program outreach with vaccine outreach.

**SED:**

- Increase participation statewide in federally funded school breakfast programs by seriously enforcing – and providing technical assistance and limited funding to support implementation of – the recently enacted state law to require breakfast be served in first period classrooms. This would also help fight the pandemic by increasing the social distancing of students by preventing them from needing to go into cafeterias for breakfast.
- Provide more technical assistance to increase the participation of children – and include more nonprofit groups to participate in the provision of—federally-funded summer meals. Enable more nonprofit soup kitchens to participate in this program.
- Provide more technical assistance to school districts, counties, cities, towns, villages, tribal governments and nonprofit groups to increase participation of children in federally funded after-school supper and after-school snack programs.
- Improve – and make more culturally sensitive – nutrition education curriculum used by schools statewide.
- Work with AG and Markets to help more school districts purchase their food from NYS farmers and food processors.
- Mandate that schools serve breakfasts and lunches at reasonable hours.

**OCFS:**

- Work with SED in increasing use of the federally funded summer meals program by children.
- Work with SED in increasing use of the federally funded after-school suppers and after-school snacks by children.
- Work with AG and Markets to help more residential juvenile detention facilities to purchase their food from NYS farmers and food processors.

**Commission on National and Community Service:**

- Direct more federal AmeriCorps national service funds under the State’s control to programs fighting hunger and improving nutrition.

- Promote the use of more skills-based, professional volunteers to aid hunger organizations.
- Develop a state anti-hunger service/volunteerism handbook.

#### **DCCS:**

- Work with AG and Markets to help more jails and prisons to purchase their food from NYS farmers and food processors.
- Increase the use of farms at prisons to both feed prisoners and provide surplus produce to local feeding charities.

#### **DOL:**

- Finalize long-delayed program to provide federal funds to select nonprofit groups to hire displaced workers to fight hunger.
- When New Yorkers apply for unemployment compensation, inform them how they may be eligible for SNAP and WIC.
- Target more job trainings funds to food-related professions.

#### **EDC and DSB:**

- Launch a State “Good Jobs, Food Jobs” initiative by working together to provide more technical assistance and seed money to more food-related start-up companies (especially those focused on food processing), and particularly those owned by women and people of color.
- Ensure that food-related enterprises are a principal component of every economic development and business expansion plan in the state.
- Work together with OTDA to provide technical assistance to restaurants to help them participate in the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program.
- Work together with OTDA to provide technical assistance to small food retailers to help them participate in the SNAP online purchasing program.

#### **DEC:**

- Work with AG & Markets to develop a comprehensive food waste reduction plan for the state.



- Further encourage the City of New York and counties to implement effective composting programs for organic waste.

**Office for the Aging:**

- Work with the City of New York and counties to develop and implement a comprehensive plan to help more older New Yorker access SNAP, senior center meals, and home delivered meals.
- Work with OTDA to roll out and publicize easier SNAP applications, and shorter SNAP re-certification periods, for seniors.
- Work with the Commission on National and Community Service to engage more older New Yorkers in national service and volunteerism activities.
- Provide funding and technical assistance to help more meals on wheels programs deliver meals that are better tailored to the nutritional needs of each recipient.

**DFS:**

- Help more low-income New Yorkers access free or low-cost banking services, ideally tied (through technology) to any benefits programs and tax refunds that provide cash.

**DTF:**

- Better promote how low-income people can access all state, local and federal tax credits for which they are eligible.
- Inform low- and moderate-income taxpayers how they may be eligible for certain food and anti-poverty benefits.

**DCP:**

- Better enforce the legal requirement that retailers exclude food products from sales taxes.

**Office for New Americans:**

- Launch communications and outreach campaign to inform immigrants about, and sign them up for, benefits and tax credits for which they are eligible.

**OEM:**

- Work with the City of New York, Counties, and OTDA to far more effectively build food access (including access to Disaster SNAP) into disaster planning.

**Office of Mental Health:**

- Better help New Yorkers suffering from mental illness to access food benefits and services.

**Office for People With Developmental Disabilities**

- Better help New Yorkers with developmental disabilities to access food benefits and services.

**SUNY and CUNY:**

- Work with OTDA to better fight college student hunger by promoting college student SNAP enrollment.
- Ensure that all campus food pantries are also helping enroll eligible students in SNAP and WIC.
- Create more community farms and gardens on campuses.
- Dedicate more work-study slots to anti-hunger work for the campuses themselves and for local nonprofit groups.
- Ensure that more food stores on campuses accept SNAP and WIC benefits.