



sanitation

Kathryn Garcia Commissioner

**Testimony of Kathryn Garcia, Commissioner
New York City Department of Sanitation**

Hearing on the FY 2021 Executive Budget

**New York City Council Committees on Finance and
Sanitation & Solid Waste Management**

**Thursday, May 14, 2020
3:30 P.M.**

Good afternoon Chair Dromm, Chair Reynoso, and members of the City Council Committees on Finance and Sanitation & Solid Waste Management. I am Kathryn Garcia, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Sanitation, and I am joined by First Deputy Commissioner Steven Costas, Bridget Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Recycling and Sustainability, and Gregory Anderson, Assistant Commissioner for Policy and External Affairs. I thank you for the opportunity this afternoon to discuss the Department's Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget.

We are in unprecedented times here in New York City. This crisis has taken a devastating toll on our families, our communities and our way of life. I would like to extend my sincere wishes for the continued safety of you and your families and staff, and my deepest condolences to those of you who have lost a family member, friend or colleague to this terrible disease.

Sadly, like many of our sister agencies and partners in government, the Department has also been personally affected by COVID-19. Since the beginning of March, we have had 622 employees test positive for this disease, and hundreds of others who had COVID symptoms. We have also lost six employees – three Sanitation Workers, two Auto Mechanics and a Sanitation Enforcement Agent. In addition, four other DSNY employees have passed away during this time, and their deaths may be COVID-related. Each of them leaves behind friends, family and colleagues, and we mourn their loss.

While the toll of this epidemic has been unimaginable, there are signs of hope. Of our 622 employees who have tested positive, 412 have returned to health and come back to work – 66 percent of the total. And throughout the duration of this crisis, we have continued to provide our essential trash and recycling collection services across the city with only isolated and minor delays. This is a testament to the dedication, courage and commitment of our Sanitation Workers, uniformed officers, trades men and women, and other essential staff. Without them, our public health emergency would be multiplied tenfold. I would like to thank all of them for their efforts during this time. They truly are New York's Strongest.

Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget

New York City has been the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in this country on a scale nearly unimaginable just two months ago. This global pandemic has dramatically upended all

our lives, and the economic fallout is unprecedented. This Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget reflects our new reality. As with all other agencies, the Department has been forced to make some very difficult cuts, to programs and initiatives that I and many of you have fought for, programs that are important to many New Yorkers. But these cuts are necessary to continue core government operations and to devote resources to essential safety, health, and shelter, and food security needs.

The FY21 Executive Budget includes \$1.75 billion expense funding for the Department. Between FY20 and FY21, this plan includes a total of \$106.5 million in savings, including \$45.2 million in FY21. These savings include:

- \$21.1 million due to a one-year suspension of the organics collection program;
- \$9.3 million from the reduction of litter basket service, collection service related to the rat mitigation initiative, syringe collection and other cleaning programs;
- \$3.5 million from the elimination of the curbside e-waste collection program;
- \$3.5 million from one-year reduction in funding for our NYC Compost Project partners;
- \$2.9 million in reduced annual recycling outreach funding for GrowNYC;
- \$2.2 million from a one-year suspension of special waste and household hazardous waste collection programs; and
- \$1.8 million in lower projected costs for the Fresh Kills landfill closure and post-closure maintenance.

The budget also includes \$61.3 million in savings in the current fiscal year, primarily from snow budget savings due to our light winter and landfill closure and lease cost reestimates.

These cuts are painful, and I do not take them lightly. The suspension of curbside organics collection, which took effect on May 4, is particularly difficult. I look forward to a day in the future when we can restore this and other programs and continue to make progress toward our zero waste goals.

Commercial Waste Zones

The impact of COVID-19 on our city's businesses has dramatically affected the private carting industry. Businesses of all types have been affected by the pandemic, including many that have been temporarily shuttered. The ripple effects through our economy have not spared the private carting industry, which now faces significant financial and operational disruption. Many carters report that their collections and accounts have decreased by 50 to 90 percent or more. While there is hope that the City and State may begin to lift some restrictions in the coming weeks and months, the economic toll of this crisis will continue for quite some time.

When I last testified in front of this committee in March, we were on track to issue the Request for Proposals for Commercial Waste Zones in late spring. Unfortunately, that timeline is no longer prudent nor feasible. At this time, the earliest date for the release of the RFP would be in fall 2020, preceded by applicable rulemakings and additional stakeholder engagement.

We need to allow for the business community and the carting industry to begin to recover and stabilize before embarking on this transformative effort that will require bold, forward-looking commitments from our partners in the private sector. We remain firmly committed to implementing this program and fully realizing its benefits for all New Yorkers, but we must take the right precautions to do so successfully.

Feeding New York

Before this crisis, an estimated 1.2 million New Yorkers faced food insecurity, living with the knowledge that their next meal was not guaranteed. As a result of the economic devastation caused by COVID-19, we project that that number – already unfathomably high in a city committed to fairness and justice – may have reached as many as two million. Families are struggling to make ends meet. Many New Yorkers, especially our older neighbors and those with existing health conditions, are stuck in their homes. They are unable to safely shop at the grocery store or eat meals in group settings.

On March 21st, Mayor de Blasio appointed me to the role of COVID-19 Food Czar, tasking me with leading an interagency team of public servants dedicated to one singular goal – *to ensure no New Yorker goes hungry because of this crisis*. We will do everything within the power of City government to keep the crisis of this virus from being followed by a crisis of hunger.

A month ago, we released “Feeding New York,” our plan to keep our city fed and safeguard the supply chain during this public health emergency. In total, the City is investing more than \$170 million over the next several months in this unprecedented effort. Through the programs we have established to-date, we are now distributing over a million meals each day, and we intend to continue to grow these operations as long as the need persists.

In partnership with the Department of Education and the dedicated staff at the Office of School Food and Nutrition, all New Yorkers young and old can pick up free meals at more than 500 NYC schools. All adults and children can pick up multiple meals at one time, and all New Yorkers are eligible with no registration or ID required. Every site has vegetarian and halal options available, and kosher meals are available at 18 sites across all five boroughs. To find the nearest location, text FOOD or COMIDA to 877-877 or go to nyc.gov/getfood to view an interactive map.

For the most vulnerable among us, who cannot go out to get food, have no one to go out for them, and cannot afford private delivery services, we have created the Emergency Food Home Delivery program. This is a massive effort that relies on hundreds of City staff and thousands of TLC-licensed taxi and for-hire-vehicle drivers to deliver hundreds of thousands of meals every day. I want to say thank you to our agency partners at Parks, NYCEM, TLC, DEP, DOT, and other agencies for their commitment, as well as to the drivers and National Guard members who have made this tremendous effort possible. New Yorkers can visit nyc.gov/getfood or call 311 and say “Get Food” to sign up for recurring deliveries.

This program now includes the more than 59,000 seniors who were enrolled in the DFTA Direct meal delivery program, which was developed in response to COVID-19 as a replacement for the congregate meals usually offered at senior centers. These seniors are now receiving two deliveries per week of nine meals each, as opposed to the prior system of one delivery per week containing five meals.

From the perspective of an older New Yorker in need, this transition has happened automatically. We have established an “Authorized Enroller” program, training close to 1,000 senior center staff on how to use our portal to order meals for clients, manage recurring orders, and update account information.

DFTA's Case Managed Home Delivered Meals Program, which existed prior to COVID-19 and provides one meal a day to recipients, is not being affected by this change and continues to be managed by DFTA.

We have also worked to strengthen the City's existing network of food pantries and community-based providers. My team estimates that as many as 35 percent of the City's food pantries may have closed during this crisis. Many are smaller pantries which may have only been open one day per week before the crisis, and often were staffed by volunteers who were themselves COVID-vulnerable. This is a tremendous loss for communities, and we are taking steps to fill the gap. Thanks to the leadership of this Council, we have allocated \$25 million in funding to support these organizations. In addition, in more than a dozen cases, City staff have gone directly to work at pantries to help them stay open. We also are working with GrowNYC to distribute thousands of Fresh Food Boxes to neighborhood pantries.

I want to thank everyone who has stepped up to contribute. Individuals and communities have come together to support each other, donating time, food, money and supplies. New Yorkers have always been there for their neighbors in times of need, and this is no different. In particular, I want to thank the philanthropic community, which has contributed millions in funding to feeding programs and food pantries across the city.

Dozens of our colleagues at the Department have stepped up to support the effort to feed New Yorkers in need, including outreach staff, attorneys, contract specialists, and operational managers. DSNY is well-positioned to support these efforts, given the complex logistics and operations involved. No one knows how to mobilize staff and resources to move products in New York City better than Sanitation. We have also quickly established contracts with 30 vendors to provide food to New Yorkers in need, and are currently requesting information from non-profit providers via a new Request for Information (RFI) at nyc.gov/nonprofits – we hope to receive responses from many of the community-based organizations across the city, and we plan to continue to expand our operations to meet any level of need that may arise, for as long as necessary. This is an all-hands-on-deck effort.

Thus far, I have spoken primarily about our work in feeding New Yorkers. There is another equally important facet to this operation: our steps to secure and maintain New York City's fragile supply chain. While we are not currently facing shortages in food supply, our system is experiencing strains. We are heavily reliant on a regional and national supply chain that is beyond our control. We are doing what we can to help the supply chain have time to adjust to new needs – before this crisis, for example, many of us never realized that New York was a city full of home bakers.

In normal times, 40 percent of food coming into the city went to restaurants – many of which are now closed. We created nyc.gov/FoodSupplyMatch, a new web platform to help suppliers with excess product find buyers, to prevent the waste seen in other parts of the country. To support our essential workers in the trucking industry, we've created two City-run temporary rest areas, one in Staten Island and one in the Bronx, allowing them to meet their federally-mandated rest requirements even though many private motels, hotels, or truck stops are closed.

And, to prepare for potential disruptions to the food supply, we are beginning efforts to establish a strategic reserve of 18 million shelf-stable meals here in the City.

We will continue to work with our colleagues at other agencies and OMB to assess the costs associated with this effort and ensure that adequate funding is available to keep food flowing

into the City and to the homes of those in need. The Executive Plan includes \$75 million in funding in FY20 and FY21 to support these efforts.

Conclusion

Lastly, I want to turn back to the topic of sanitation. In the face of this pandemic, we must take steps to protect ourselves and each other. Wearing masks and gloves is part of our new normal, and as a New Yorker, I am proud of how quickly my fellow New Yorkers have adopted these practices. But as Sanitation Commissioner, I am disgusted by the number of masks and gloves seen littering our streets and sidewalks. For the safety of our Sanitation Workers, for the safety of our neighbors, and for the sake of common decency, I ask all New Yorkers to dispose of these products properly. Do not toss them on the ground or leave them on top of trash bags left out for collection. I ask our elected officials, community leaders and the press to join me in this plea.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on these important topics. Thank you for your continuing support for this Department and our essential workers as we keep New York City healthy, safe, and clean during this unprecedented crisis. I am now happy to respond to your questions.