

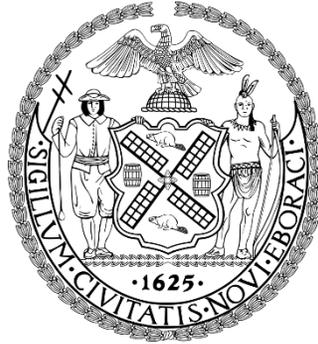
Committee on Aging and Subcommittee on Senior Centers and Food Insecurity Staff

Christopher Pepe, *Senior Legislative Counsel*

Chloë Rivera, *Senior Policy Analyst*

Daniel Kroop, *Senior Financial Analyst*

Jack Storey, *Finance Unit Head*



THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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Andrea Vazquez, *Legislative Director*

Smita Deshmukh, *Deputy Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON SENIOR CENTERS AND FOOD INSECURITY

Hon. Darlene Mealy, *Chair*

COMMITTEE ON AGING

Hon. Crystal Hudson, *Chair*

December 14, 2022

OVERSIGHT: FOOD INSECURITY AND OLDER ADULT CENTERS

I. INTRODUCTION

On December 14, 2022, the Subcommittee on Senior Centers and Food Insecurity, chaired by Council Member Darlene Mealy, and the Committee on Aging, chaired by Council Member Crystal Hudson, will hold a joint oversight hearing on *Food Insecurity and Older Adult Centers*. Witnesses invited to testify include the New York City (“NYC” or “City”) Department for the Aging (DFTA), older adult advocacy groups and organizations, and other interested stakeholders.

II. BACKGROUND

a. *Food Insecurity Among Older Adults*

While most United States (U.S.) households are food secure—they have consistent, reliable access to sufficient and nutritious food for active, healthy living—some households experience food insecurity.¹ That is, at times during the year, some households’ ability to acquire adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources.² Nutritious food is essential to individual development and growth, and is directly related to body and mental and social health, while food insecurity is associated with poor educational and health outcomes, including diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure.³ Moreover, per Feeding America, the combination of poor nutrition and stress can compound and create a cycle of food insecurity and chronic disease as “the time and money needed to respond to these health conditions strains the household budget, leaving little money for essential nutrition and medical care.”⁴

The prevalence of food insecurity is determined by various factors, including household circumstances, the economy, and federal, state and local policies.⁵ According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2021, 10.2 percent of U.S. households were food insecure, compared to 10.5 percent recorded in 2020 and 2019.⁶ Among households with persons aged 65 and older, the rate of food insecurity was below the national average, at 7.1 percent.⁷ However, for households

¹ Aisha Coleman-Jensen, et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2021*, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Sept. 2022), available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/104656/err-309.pdf?v=9010.9>.

² *Id.*

³ Feeding America, *Understand Food Insecurity* (n.d.), available at <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/hunger-health-101/>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Aisha Coleman-Jensen, et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2021*, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Sept. 2022), available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/104656/err-309.pdf?v=9010.9>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

with persons aged 65 and older living alone, the rate of food insecurity was slightly higher at 9.5 percent, representing a 1.2 percent increase from 2020.⁸

According to the NYC Mayor’s Office of Food Policy’s most recent Food Metrics report released in 2021, approximately 12.5 percent (1.4 million) of New Yorkers are food insecure, which is 2.3 percent greater than the national average.⁹ Advocates project that this number may be closer to 1.6 million in 2022.¹⁰ By borough, the rate of food insecurity was above the City average in the Bronx with 16.4 percent of residents, Brooklyn with 13.5 percent and Manhattan with 12.7 percent, compared to 9.7 percent of Queens residents and 8.7 percent of Staten Island residents.¹¹

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate of food insecurity steadily declined in NYC over the past several years.¹² Widespread job loss and the economic repercussions of the pandemic exacerbated access to food and contributed to growing health disparities.¹³ During that time, persistently high rates of food insecurity and hunger, racial and ethnic disparities in diet-related diseases, and low wages and unsafe working conditions for food workers disproportionately harm Black and Latinx communities, immigrants, low-income populations, older adults¹⁴ and

⁸ *Id.* at 17 & 21.

⁹ NYC Mayor’s Office of Food Policy, *Food Metrics Report 2021* (December 2021), 13, available at <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Metrics-Report-2021.pdf>.

¹⁰ Food Bank for New York City, *Research and Reports*, <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/research-reports/> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

¹¹ *Supra* note 9.

¹² NYC Mayor’s Office of Food Policy, *Food Metrics Report 2021* (December 2021), 13, available at <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/foodpolicy/downloads/pdf/Food-Metrics-Report-2021.pdf>.

¹³ Food Bank for New York City, *Unmasking Hunger: 2020-2021 Annual Impact Report* (n.d.), available at https://fbnyc.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FBNYC_Annual-Impact-Report_20-21_web-1.pdf.

¹⁴ Fraser KT, et al., *Increasing Community and Public Control and Ownership of New York City’s Food System: Policy Recommendations for a Stronger, Healthier, More Just, and Sustainable Food System in NYC*, New York Food 2025, a collaboration of The Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center; The Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College Columbia University; and, The CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute (Mar. 2022), available at <https://sph.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/brief7-20220315.pdf>.

LGBTQIA+ individuals.¹⁵ As a result, the number of food insecure individuals in NYC is projected to increase by more than 44 percent, which translates to nearly 1.6 million (18.6 percent of) New Yorkers.¹⁶

Prior to the pandemic, one in 10 older New Yorkers reported food insecurity, but a 2021 study by Food Bank for New York City found that number to have increased to one-in-five.¹⁷ According to a study published by United Neighborhood Houses, among NYC residents aged 60 and older, older adults of color are five to six times more likely than their white counterparts to experience food insecurity: “19 percent of Black older adults and a similar share of their Hispanic counterparts reported that their household did not have enough food to eat in the past seven days,” compared to four percent of white older adults.¹⁸

III. OVERVIEW OF MEAL PROVISION AND SUPPORT SERVICES

a. Older Adult Centers

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, older adult centers (“OACs”) funded by DFTA served almost 30,000 individuals daily¹⁹ at nearly 250 sites citywide.²⁰ There are now more than 300 OACs and affiliated sites operating in the five boroughs.²¹ OACs “are spaces of community, of learning, of supports, of health and well-being, and spaces where people can build a life of meaning

¹⁵ Thom File & Joey Marshall, *LGBT Community Harder Hit by Economic Impact of Pandemic*, U.S. Census Bureau (Aug. 11, 2021), available at <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/lgbt-community-harder-hit-by-economic-impact-of-pandemic.html>.

¹⁶ Food Bank for New York City, Research and Reports: Fast Facts (n.d.), available at <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/research-reports/>.

¹⁷ Food Bank for New York City, *Fighting More Than Covid-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic* (Jun. 2020), available at https://www.foodbanknyc.org/wp-content/uploads/Fighting-More-Than-Covid-19_Research-Report_Food-Bank-For-New-York-City_6.09.20_web.pdf.

¹⁸ Irene Lew, *Settlement Houses on the Frontlines of Alleviating Food Insecurity*, United Neighborhood Houses (Oct. 2022), available at [https://uploads.prod01.oregon.platform-os.com/instances/542/assets/\(FINAL\)%20105%20-%20Food%20Insecurity%20Report%20-%20AS%20%20.pdf?updated=1664983862](https://uploads.prod01.oregon.platform-os.com/instances/542/assets/(FINAL)%20105%20-%20Food%20Insecurity%20Report%20-%20AS%20%20.pdf?updated=1664983862).

¹⁹ Office of Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli, *Congregate Meal Services for the Elderly*, Jan. 2018, available at <http://osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093018/sga-2018-16n5.pdf> at p. 1.

²⁰ DFTA, “Older Adult Centers,” available at <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/dfta/services/senior-centers.page>.

²¹ *Id.*

and purpose.”²² OACs play a vital role in meal provision for older adults, offering “healthy and nutritious” meals at no cost that strive to be representative of the communities served by each OAC.²³ According to DFTA, meals served at OACs are certified by registered dietitians to ensure they are nutritious and meet dietary guidelines and standards.²⁴ Some centers also offer breakfast, dinner and grab-and-go options.²⁵ Centers also host workshops and trainings on nutrition and healthy cooking to help older adults make decisions regarding their health and diet.²⁶

Prior to the pandemic, many older adults relied on OAC meals for more than half of their daily nutritional intake.²⁷ In June 2021, OACs received guidance from DOHMH to reopen for in-person programming, including meals. Since then, over 2.7 million congregate and grab-and-go meals have been served at OACs.²⁸ On March 21, 2022, DFTA notified providers that OAC capacity restrictions were lifted and programming could resume at 100 percent capacity.²⁹

In addition, some OACs provide case assistance services where staff can provide information on benefits or entitlements, such as food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).³⁰ Centers may also refer older adults to benefits access and assistance programs or to DFTA’s Aging Connect service.³¹

²² United Neighborhood Houses, “Response to DFTA’s Older Adult Center (formerly Senior Centers) Concept Paper,” available at <https://bklyner.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bklyner/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Older-Adult-Center-Concept-Paper-Feedback-UNH-Oct-20201.pdf> at p. 2.

²³ *Supra* note 19.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ LiveOn-NY, *Testimony Before the New York City Council Committee on Aging* (Sep. 21, 2021), available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562a3197e4b0493d4ffd3105/t/6148c0f6993f891460db6af6/1632157942506/LiveOn+NY+Aging+Testimony+FINAL+9.20.21.pdf> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

²⁸ Testimony of DFTA Comm’r Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez before the N.Y.C. Council Cmt’ee on Aging and Subcmt’ee on Senior Centers and Food Insecurity (Apr. 6, 2022).

²⁹ DFTA Email to Providers, Subject: DFTA Contract Providers - Updated DOHMH Guidance: Capacity Limits, Mar. 21, 2022.

³⁰ See e.g. BronxWorks, *Older Adult Centers*, <https://bronxworks.org/our-services/services-for-older-adults/older-adult-centers/> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

³¹ *Id.*

b. DFTA’s Home Delivered Meals Program

To help combat older adult food insecurity, DFTA offers older adults a variety of ways in which to receive meals. Those who are unable to attend older adult centers can receive meals through DFTA’s Home Delivered Meals (“HDM”) program,³² so long as they meet certain qualifications, discussed in more detail below.

The Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program was signed into law in 1972, establishing the first federal program to improve the food security of older adults.³³ The OAA Senior Nutrition Program administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Community Living (ACL) continues to fund local agencies and organizations that help older adults aged 60 and over access healthy meals and other resources, including meals delivered directly to their homes.³⁴ DFTA operates the Home Delivered Meals (HDM) program through a network of contracted (and subcontracted) community-based organizations (“providers”) and commercial caterers.³⁵ To receive home-delivered meals, an older adult must receive authorization from a DFTA-funded case management organization following an assessment.³⁶ Older adults with a disability or diminished mobility that makes it difficult for them to shop for food or prepare their meals are eligible for the HDM program.³⁷ Nonprofit providers, which include four settlement houses who are lead contractors, deliver a daily nutritious meal five

³² *In-Home Services*, NYC Department for the Aging, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dfta/services/in-home-services.page>; see also *Free Meals Delivered Directly to NYC Seniors Through Senior Centers and DFTA*, EastNewYork, Mar. 31, 2020, available at <https://eastnewyork.com/free-meals-delivered-directly-to-nyc-seniors-through-senior-centers-and-dfta/>.

³³ U.S. Dep’t of Agriculture, *OAA Nutrition Programs Fact Sheet*, available at https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/news%202017-03/OAA-Nutrition_Programs_Fact_Sheet.pdf

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ United Neighborhood Houses, “Investing in Home Delivered Meals for Older Adults in New York City” (May 2022), available at <https://uploads.prod01.oregon.platform-os.com/instances/542/assets/HDM%20Brief%20-%20Final.pdf?updated=1654025329> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

days a week to these homebound older adults while ensuring that HDM participants receive case management, regular in-person wellness checks, and contact from drivers who are trained on how to work with older adults.³⁸

HDM providers have been impacted by rising raw food and transportation costs due to inflation and supply chain shortages.³⁹ Raw food costs have risen by at least 7 percent since 2021.⁴⁰ To help address this, the FY 2023 Budget included additional funding to support increased contract reimbursement rates for the HDM program, with \$2.3 million added for FY22 and \$9.4 million added for FY23 and beyond – to bring rates up to \$11.78 per meal.⁴¹

Following a September 2022 hearing held by the Committee on Aging, DFTA reported that it provided 3,365,391 home-delivered meals to older adults between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021. This number increased to 4,142,814 meals delivered between July 1, 2021 and June 30, 2022.⁴²

c. *Other Food Assistance Available to Older New Yorkers*

i. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is the cornerstone of the nation’s safety net and nutrition assistance programs, providing assistance to millions of eligible low-income people.⁴³ Benefit levels for SNAP are based on criteria including, but not limited to,

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ LiveOn-NY, *Adopted FY 2023 City Budget Recap*, <https://www.liveon-ny.org/news/2022/4/12/fy23-city-budget-recap> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

⁴² DFTA, “response to #9A: Home Delivered Meals by ZIP Code,” *provided via e-mail to New York City Council Committee on Aging on 11/14/2022*.

⁴³ Center on Budget and Policy and Policy Priorities, “SNAP is Effective and Efficient,” *available at* <http://www.cbpp.org/research/snap-is-effective-and-efficient> (last visited Dec. 7, 2022).

household size and income levels.⁴⁴ On average, SNAP households received \$240 a month in fiscal years 2019 and 2020, prior to the pandemic.⁴⁵ The average SNAP benefit per person is about \$186 a month, which is an average of \$6.10 per person, per day.⁴⁶

SNAP provides assistance to recipients by offering monthly electronic benefits that can be used to purchase food at authorized stores.⁴⁷ According to research, approximately 600,000 older adults in New York State maintain good health and nutrition through the SNAP program. In fact, New York provides SNAP benefits to more older adults than any other state.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, advocates estimate that almost 200,000 older adults in New York State may be eligible for SNAP benefits, but are not receiving such benefits.⁴⁹

As of October 2022, 1,687,963 people were receiving SNAP benefits in NYC, representing an increase of approximately 17,000 recipients since November 2021 and an increase of almost 200,000 recipients since October 2019.⁵⁰ This increase could plausibly be attributed to a reported 36% increase in food insecurity in NYC since the beginning of the pandemic.⁵¹

Older adults and people with disabilities who have no earned income and live in households where all adults are 60 and over and/or disabled may qualify for the Elderly Simplified Application

⁴⁴ Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)” available at <https://otda.ny.gov/programs/snap/> (last visited Feb. 7, 2019).

⁴⁵ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “A Quick Guide to SNAP Eligibility and Benefits,” (Oct. 4, 2022) available at <http://www.cbpp.org/research/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits> (last visited Dec. 7, 2022).

⁴⁶ *Id*

⁴⁷ *Supra* note 16, Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

⁴⁸ Hunger Solutions New York, *SNAP and Seniors* (Aug. 17, 2020), available at <https://hungersolutionsny.org/snap-and-seniors/> (last visited Dec. 7, 2022).

⁴⁹ Hunger Solutions New York, *SNAP & Seniors Professional Network*, <https://hungersolutionsny.org/federal-nutrition-programs/snap/snap-and-seniors/> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

⁵⁰ NYC Human Resources Administration, HRA Monthly Fact Sheet, (Oct. 2022 and Nov. 2021) available at <https://www.nyc.gov/site/hra/about/facts.page> (last visited Feb. 7, 2019).

⁵¹ City Harvest, *Hunger In NYC*, <https://www.cityharvest.org/food-insecurity/> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

Project (ESAP). Participants receiving SNAP under ESAP benefit for a simplified application, a longer certification period, and fewer recertification requirements.⁵²

New York State also provides the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) for older adults aged 60 or up.⁵³ This program allows older adults or their representatives to pick up a food package on a monthly basis that can include cheese, milk, rice, pasta, cereal, canned vegetables, fruits, meats, and more.⁵⁴ The program also provides additional benefits for the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables at farmer's markets.⁵⁵

ii. Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens

Food pantries distribute food packages containing canned and other non-perishable food items which are to be prepared and eaten at home.⁵⁶ More than one meal per individual is provided in the food package.⁵⁷ Soup kitchens serve meals to individuals at a single location or through other direct distribution, such as van distribution of meals to houseless individuals in parks and other public places.⁵⁸ Typically, one meal per individual is served.⁵⁹ Food Bank for New York City, the major hunger-relief organization working against hunger in NYC, serves more than 121 million free meals each year in NYC.⁶⁰ Older adult centers may refer older adults to food pantries for supplemental food assistance.⁶¹

⁵² *Supra* note 41.

⁵³ ACCESS NYC, *Healthy food packages for seniors*, <https://access.nyc.gov/programs/commodity-supplemental-food-program-csfp/> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ NYC.gov, *Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens*, <https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-02740> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Supra* note 10.

⁶¹ *See e.g.*, BronxWorks, *Food Pantries*, <https://bronxworks.org/our-services/benefits-and-other-assistance/food-pantries/> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

In 2021, in light of increasing food prices, rent, and unemployment, the percentage of first-time food pantry visitors increased by 93%.⁶² This surge is expected to continue into 2022.⁶³

CONCLUSION

With the end of the federally funded Recovery Meals program launched during the pandemic,⁶⁴ many older adults need to identify alternative food supports and meal services that are the best fit for them, whether it is receiving meals from the HDM program, visiting an OAC for in-person or grab-and-go meals, using a food pantry, and/or signing up for SNAP. HDM providers have expressed concerns about inadequate funding to handle the anticipated influx of older adults who will transition from Recovery Meals to the HDM program.⁶⁵ It is crucial that DFTA assist older adults in navigating this continued transition.

At this hearing, the Subcommittee on Senior Centers and Food Insecurity and the Committee on Aging will examine food insecurity among older New Yorkers and identify how DFTA and the City's meal programs for older adults are working to address this issue. With food insecurity for older adults still an acute and growing problem in the City, and with the impacts of the highest inflation levels in at least 40 years⁶⁶, the City must ensure that older adults can access affordable and nutritious food they need in a safe, efficient, and dignified way.

⁶² Food Bank for New York City, *Food Bank for new York City Annual Impact Report Highlights Path Toward Stronger Crisis Response* (Jul. 12, 2022), <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/2021-impact-report/#:~:text=July%2012%2C%202022%2C%20New%20York,rent%2C%20and%20unemployment%20numbers%20soared> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

⁶³ Chau Lam, *Food banks, pantries in high demand as inflation surges ahead of pandemic's third year*, GOTHAMIST (Mar. 2, 2022), <https://gothamist.com/news/food-banks-pantries-high-demand-inflation-surges-ahead-pandemics-third-year> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

⁶⁴ NYC 311, *60+ Recovery Meals Service*, <https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-03461> (last visited Dec. 8, 2022).

⁶⁵ *Supra* note 39.

⁶⁶ *Supra* note 63.