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Testimony prepared by

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for the

Committee on General Welfare

on

Resolution 543-A of 2013

June 25, 2013

on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and thank you, Chairperson Palma and members of the Committee on General Welfare. My name is Triada Stampas and I am the Senior Director of Government Relations at Food Bank For New York City. Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony today to the City Council about Resolution 543-A of 2013, which calls on Congress and the President to preserve funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program).

First, Food Bank For New York City thanks you and your colleagues for your continued attentiveness and advocacy in the face of threats to federal nutrition assistance programs in Congress over the past several years. This City Council's vocal advocacy in opposition to cuts to the federal programs that underpin our nation's safety net against hunger has been an example for local legislatures across the nation.

In addition, Food Bank thanks the City Council for your ongoing efforts to address the issue of hunger and ensure all New Yorkers have access to affordable, nutritious food. The City Council's consistent support for increasing enrollment of eligible households in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and expanding the in-classroom School Breakfast Program, as well as funding to expand the supply of food available at emergency food programs are especially appreciated and needed as the recession has left elevated levels of food poverty that four years of recovery have yet to bring down.

Food Bank For New York City works to end hunger and food poverty by increasing access to nutrition, education and financial empowerment. Approximately 1.5 million New York City residents rely on our programs and services. We distribute food and provide support services to approximately 1,000 emergency and community food programs citywide; manage nutrition education programs for schools and community-based organizations (CBOs); operate income support programs including SNAP outreach & enrollment assistance and one of the largest Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) programs in the country; and conduct research to inform community and government efforts to end hunger in New York City.

Indicators of need in New York – including poverty, food insecurity and unemployment – have remained entrenched at high levels since the start of the recession. Scheduled cuts in SNAP this November – the first across-the-board reduction in benefits in the program's history – and additional SNAP cuts threatened in the Congressional reauthorization of the Farm Bill mean that **the decisions made in Washington, DC this year could deprive vulnerable New Yorkers of millions of meals.**

NEW YORK CITY'S CURRENT ANNUAL MEAL GAP: 235M

Nearly 1.9 million New York City residents (almost one in five) rely on SNAP to keep food on the table, with an average monthly household benefit of nearly \$280 – or more than \$3.4 billion annually.¹

SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against hunger. A federal entitlement program, SNAP now provides food assistance to 47.7 million, or one in seven, Americans.² Available to any household that meets the eligibility criteria (most importantly, income and immigration status), SNAP is *countercyclical*, meaning when the economy shrinks, it has the flexibility to grow to meet rising need. SNAP enrollment in New York City first exceeded 1.8 million residents in December 2010 and has not dropped below that threshold since, evidence that recession has left elevated need in its wake.³

SNAP is highly targeted to reach people in need. A large majority, 85 percent, of SNAP households have income below the poverty level. One in five has no cash income whatsoever; for them, food stamp benefits are their *only* resource to purchase food. Nearly half of SNAP recipients (47 percent) are children.⁴

Despite SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs (like school meals, and the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC) nearly one in three New York

¹ New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). March 2013.

² United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). March 2013.

³ New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA). March 2013.

⁴ *Characteristics of SNAP Households: Fiscal Year 2011*. (September 2012). USDA.

City residents struggles to afford food, and approximately 1.4 million New Yorkers rely on emergency food – evidence that a meal gap remains.

The meal gap represents the translation of a food budget shortfall into a number of meals. Analysis by Feeding America finds an annual meal gap in New York City of 235 million meals.⁵ This is the number of meals that the resources of food-insecure New Yorkers fall short of providing on an annual basis.

Emergency food is our last line of defense against hunger. When cash, benefits and the generosity of family and friends have been exhausted, the emergency food network of food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters is the resource of last resort for those struggling to keep food on the table. Approximately 37 million Americans rely on emergency food at some point over the course of the year.⁶

In New York City, more than 1.4 million residents rely on the network of approximately 800 food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters across the five boroughs that provide emergency food to neighbors in need. This network, which relies heavily on unpaid volunteers to do its work, is already struggling to meet heightened levels of need that have persisted past the end of the recession.⁷ Since the start of the recession, 250 food pantries and soup kitchens across the five boroughs have closed their doors,⁸ leaving those remaining to confront elevated need. In the past year alone, more than three quarters of food pantries and soup kitchens have seen an increase in the number of visitors; unfortunately, nearly two thirds have reported running short of food to meet the need.⁹

Given these statistics, it should come as little surprise that the efforts of the emergency food network fall short of completely providing for the needs of food-impooverished New Yorkers. Indeed, after the last soup kitchen meal is served and the last pantry bag distributed, an annual meal gap of between 70 and 100 million meals remains.¹⁰

If the first line of defense is weakened, the last line will not hold. Approximately half of those relying on emergency food in New York City already receive SNAP.¹¹ In a city where food costs are considerably higher than average – and where competing costs of living, like rent and utilities, are higher than average as well – monthly SNAP benefits often fall short. Indeed, among participants at food pantries and soup kitchens who receive SNAP, 84 percent report their benefits do not last past the third week of the month.¹² When SNAP benefits are reduced, it is expected to drive higher need at food pantries and soup kitchens – both among those already turning to emergency food for help, and for those who may find themselves in need of emergency food as a result of their reduced allotment.

While current efforts by emergency food providers narrow a 235 million meal gap to approximately 100 million, looming SNAP cuts coming from Washington could suddenly and drastically widen that gap beyond the point our city's current emergency food system can hope to address.

⁵ *Map the Meals Gap*. (2013). Feeding America.

⁶ Feeding America.

⁷ By economists' definitions, the recession, which began in December 2007, ended in June 2009.

⁸ *Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens Today*. (2012). Food Bank For New York City.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Food Bank For New York City estimate based on FEEDNYC data.

¹¹ *Hunger Safety Net 2007*. (2007). Food Bank For New York City.

¹² *Ibid.*

NOVEMBER 1, 2010: 60M MEALS LOST

Regardless of what is decided in the Farm Bill, this November, sweeping cuts to SNAP benefits will take effect, resulting in the estimated **loss of 60 million meals** for New York City residents. The cuts will affect every SNAP recipient, reducing household benefit amounts by approximately 10 percent, an estimated annual loss in New York State of more than \$200 million.¹³ A household of three will lose, on average, \$20-25 per month in SNAP benefits.

These cuts are the result of a deal struck in December 2010 in order to pay for a \$0.06 per meal increase in federal school lunch reimbursements as part of the "Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act." While the White House promised to work with Congress to restore the funds before the cuts could take effect, the promise has yet to be fulfilled and November is fast approaching.

THE FARM BILL: UP TO 131 ADDITIONAL MEALS LOST

The Farm Bill, reauthorized by Congress every five years, represents our nation's most significant investment to prevent hunger. Title IV, the Nutrition Title, constitutes more than 70 percent of the spending in the Farm Bill and includes two key programs: SNAP and the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Reauthorization negotiations provide an opportunity to strengthen anti-hunger programs; instead, leaders in both the Senate and the House of Representatives have promoted bills that would cut SNAP and worsen hunger in New York City. *Any* cuts to SNAP will deprive low-income individuals and families of much-needed food assistance and force more vulnerable New Yorkers into an emergency food network ill-equipped and under-resourced to meet additional need.

IN THE SENATE

The Senate Farm Bill, the Agriculture Reform, Food and Jobs Act of 2013 (S. 954), passed earlier this month, contains a \$4.1 billion cut to SNAP benefits over ten years. This cut would affect residents of federally subsidized housing in 15 states, including New York.

In New York City, 190,000 households would experience a decrease in SNAP benefits as a result of this cut.¹⁴ They include residents of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) housing developments – where the average household income is approximately \$23,000¹⁵ – and those who receive federal Section 8 vouchers. The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance estimates conservatively that the loss of federal benefits across the state would be at least \$150 million per year. New York City households affected by this cut would lose \$90 to \$130 per month.

It is estimated this bill will result in the loss of 69-99 million meals in New York City in its first year alone, **increasing New York City's meal gap to as much as 394 million meals.**

¹³ "SNAP Benefits Will Be Cut for All Participants in November 2013." Dean, Stacy and Dottie Rosenbaum. (2013). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

¹⁴ According to analysis by OTDA. Across New York State, approximately 275,000 households would be affected.

¹⁵ NYCHA Facts.

This loss would not only harm vulnerable New Yorkers, it would have a broader economic impact as the buying power for food in many communities would be significantly decreased. It is estimated that every billion dollars cut from SNAP benefits results in the loss of more than 13,000 jobs.¹⁶

In addition, during floor debate, a harmful amendment offered by Senator David Vitter of Louisiana passed by voice vote. This amendment would permanently bar certain ex-felons from receiving SNAP and if they have any income, would also reduce their family members' benefits.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

The House Agriculture Committee's more extreme Federal Agriculture Reform and Risk Management Act (FARRM), H.R. 1947, which included \$20.5 billion in proposed SNAP cuts and other harmful provisions, failed to pass a vote of the House last week. While this is a temporary victory for the millions of food-insecure Americans who rely on SNAP, threats to SNAP remain a real and imminent threat.

These cuts in FARRM included those prescribed by the Senate, as well as elimination of benefits targeted to certain working families and seniors. Nationally, approximately two million SNAP recipients would lose benefits entirely. As a result of the loss of SNAP, more than 200,000 children will lose access to free school meals.

In New York City, these cuts would collectively result in the estimated loss of 100-131 million meals in New York City, increasing the meal gap to as much as 426 million meals — **nearly double today's meal gap.**

During floor debate, an amendment offered by Representative James McGovern of Massachusetts to fully restore SNAP funding regrettably failed by a vote of 188-234. Nevertheless, I am pleased to report that every member of the New York City Congressional delegation voted for its passage.

Two harmful SNAP amendments did pass: one that would allow states to test SNAP applicants for drugs; and one that would impose new work requirements for SNAP recipients and reward states when recipients failed to comply by awarding states half the savings from any reduction in their SNAP caseloads.

During the final vote, 11 of New York City's 12-member Congressional delegation voted against these draconian cuts. Only Congressman Michael Grimm voted for it.

It should be noted that both bills contain added funding for TEFAP and for community food security projects – and in both bills, the increase in meals from these programs is utterly dwarfed by the loss to SNAP.

RESOLUTION 543-A OF 2013

Resolution 543-A of 2013 sends an important message that no level of SNAP cuts is acceptable – an important message for Washington to hear right now. While the Farm Bill process is temporarily stalled and the way forward still undetermined, a number of scenarios for passage exist – and many include the potential for SNAP cuts.

¹⁶ Center for American Progress.

With the failure of the House bill, however, there is a growing momentum against cutting the vital food resources one in seven Americans depends on. Now is the time for decision-makers in Washington – including the White House – to hear strong voices in support of the position that SNAP cuts at any level are unacceptable.

SUMMARY

While the way forward is currently unclear, cuts to SNAP remain a real and imminent threat. Food Bank For New York City thanks the City Council for considering Resolution 543-A today and supports its passage. Food Bank also encourages the City Council to offer this Resolution as a template for other local legislatures to adopt. There is so much at stake for urban residents across the country in this federal Farm Bill.

Further, because looming cuts to SNAP happening outside the Farm Bill process will have profound repercussions on services supported by State and City funding – and will only be compounded by any additional cuts in the Farm Bill – Food Bank For New York City encourages the City Council to work with relevant parties in federal and state government, as well as in the nonprofit community, in order to better understand the impact of these cuts and best prepare our city to withstand them.



**Testimony of Lisa Levy, Director of Policy, Advocacy & Organizing, New York City
Coalition Against Hunger**

Before the New City Council General Welfare Committee

**In Support of Proposed Resolution 543-A- Calling on the United States House of
Representatives and the United States Senate to Pass and the President to Sign a Farm Bill
that Preserves Funding for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program**

June 25, 2013

Good afternoon. I'm Lisa Levy, Policy, Advocacy and Organizing Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. My testimony today is on behalf of the more than 1,100 soup kitchens and food pantries in New York City, and the more than 1.4 million New York City residents who, even before Sandy hit, lived in homes that couldn't afford sufficient food.

The New York City Coalition Against Hunger endorses Proposed Resolution Number 543-A, supporting sufficient funding for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program and thanks the New York City Council members, Speaker, and this Committee, for their continued attention to this important issue.

According to the federal food insecurity data, in 2009-2011, an estimated average of 1.42 million, or approximately 17 percent of New Yorkers, were "food insecure," which means that they either go hungry or struggle to ration food. That number, which represents one in six New Yorkers, also includes children and seniors over the age of 60. This number is a 300,000 person increase (27 percent) from 2006 – 2008 when there were approximately 1.12 million food insecure New Yorkers. In 2009-2011, nearly 474,000 children in New York City lived in food insecure households; households that did not have an adequate food supply throughout the year. This number represents 25 percent, or one in four, of the city's children and is a 31 percent increase from 2006-2008, when 363,000, or one in five, New York City children lived in food insecure homes. In 2006-2008 there were more than 130,000 food insecure seniors over the age of 60. That number increased by 30,000 between 2009-2011, bringing the total to 163,183, or 11 percent of the senior population, up from 10.2 percent.

Without the reauthorization of the 2009 Federal Recovery Act, SNAP beneficiaries in New York will lose another 60 million meals as of November 1, 2013, a so-called 'hunger cliff.' While state funding for pantries and kitchens increased slightly this year, it did not come close to making up for the federal cuts, and city funding stayed flat. As a result, fully 63 percent of the city's pantries and kitchens lacked enough food to meet the growing demand. 56 percent were forced to ration food by reducing portion size, limiting their hours of operation and/or by turning away hungry New Yorkers.

These cuts are in addition to sequestration, which has also taken its toll on New Yorkers, who have lost funding for programs including Meals on Wheels, Head Start, funding for rental assistance, and AmeriCorps, which provides vital assistance to soup kitchens and pantries, as well as NYCCA. If cuts to SNAP similar to those defeated in the House are successfully passed, New Yorkers could lose as many as 132 million meals.

Even without the new cuts, 50 million Americans, including 17 million children already live in households defined by the federal government as food insecure. It should surprise nobody that more Americans need federal nutrition assistance now than ever before.

In some parts of this country we have situations of drought and wildfires, but nowhere do you have anyone arguing to withhold funding to fight fires, especially when these fires threaten the homes in some of the most Conservative districts. Similarly, we must provide funding during this economic downturn when many look to government to assist them in their hour of need, by providing federal aid to fight hunger, especially as the problem persists in every congressional district.

The Senate has passed a farm bill proposing \$4.1 billion in cuts from SNAP, while the House recently voted down their version with far greater cuts. While many voted against these bills because the cuts were too high, far too many did not support them claiming that the cuts did not go far enough, giving the false impression that they are merely reducing waste, fraud and abuse. That's simply not true. The cuts from SNAP are taking food away from hungry working parents, seniors, and children. They are slashing programs that, if expanded, could end hunger in America.

Not only will tens of millions of Americans suffer from the reductions, but the cuts will imperil the country's overall economy and national security. No superpower in the history of the world has remained a superpower if it has failed to feed its own people. The time is long overdue for all Americans to have access to nutritious, affordable food.

The stakes are too high for continued political grandstanding. The hunger games must stop now.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. 543-A

in favor in opposition

Date: 6/25/13

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Triada Stamps

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I represent: Food Bank For NYC

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Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Lisa Levy

Address: _____

I represent: NYC Coalition Against Hunger

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