

Testimony by the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)
Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup
Kitchens
Before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare
September 21, 2020

Chair Levin, Council Members, and staff, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee on General Welfare on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration. My name is Abby Biberman, and I am Senior Supervising Attorney of the Public Assistance and SNAP Practice in the Public Benefits Unit at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). NYLAG uses the power of the law to help New Yorkers in need combat social and economic injustice. We address emerging and urgent legal needs with comprehensive, free civil legal services, impact litigation, policy advocacy, and community education. NYLAG serves immigrants, seniors, the homebound, families facing foreclosure, renters facing eviction, low-income consumers, those in need of government assistance, children in need of special education, survivors of intimate partner violence, people with disabilities, patients with chronic illness or disease, low-wage workers, veterans, low-income members of the LGBTQ community, Holocaust survivors, as well as others in need of free civil legal services.

The Public Assistance and SNAP Practice is a team of dedicated attorneys and paralegals who represent clients having trouble accessing or maintaining Public Assistance and SNAP benefits, in addition to homeless shelter advocacy. We represent clients at Administrative Fair Hearings; conduct advocacy with the Department of Social Services,

Job and SNAP centers; and bring impact litigation to ensure that our clients are obtaining and maintaining an adequate level of benefits and shelter services.

In the end of 2019, pursuant to Local Law 169, NYLAG, along with a group of other organizations, made recommendations to the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to address issues regarding operations, policies, and procedures at Job and SNAP Centers. In fact, we had a meeting scheduled for Tuesday, March 10, just a few days before the city shut down, to give our responses to HRA's published report.¹ Advocates and HRA quickly pivoted as a group to figure out how HRA was going to continue to provide benefits to our clients and address an inevitable influx, all while providing their services almost entirely remotely to minimize center traffic and protect their staff and clients. Thus began what became daily (now weekly) phone calls with HRA and advocates. We are grateful for the open lines of communications over the past six months. While many of the changes during COVID have tremendously helped our clients, there are some areas that still need improvement.

HRA's continued and expanded use of ACCESSHRA has been beneficial for many of our clients, as well as NYLAG advocates who use the provider portal. HRA swiftly rolled out the expansion of ACCESSHRA from SNAP-only to include Cash Assistance (CA) applications just as centers were closing. This allowed clients with internet access to apply for both benefits from home, as well as Medicaid, if it was connected to a CA or SNAP application. Although unrelated to SNAP administration, we would like to see further expansion of ACCESSHRA for rental assistance programs as well.

HRA must increase Infoline's capacity

¹ https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/LL169_HRA_AUDIT.pdf

NYLAG clients have also benefited from SNAP signature² and interview waivers³ granted by the federal government. Our clients have also benefited immensely from the SNAP Emergency Allotments, bringing every SNAP household up to the maximum benefit level.⁴

The signature waiver has made it possible for our clients without internet access to complete the SNAP application over the phone. These are clients who, pre-COVID, might have gone into a center, or had a friend assist them, to obtain a paper application. They may have obtained in-person assistance filling out the application from an HRA employee or a community-based organization. They might have then submitted a signed application along with documents in-person at their local center. When Job and SNAP Centers closed, this option was no longer available, and these clients were, quite often, literally left out in the cold with no access to benefits. Assuming a person in need could leave their home safely, where could they obtain a paper application? How would they fill in multiple pages of tiny print with confusing questions? How would they mail it in without postage? How would they make copies of necessary documents and submit them? Advocates coordinated our efforts and suggested to HRA more ways to distribute paper applications and, for example, locked boxes outside of closed centers for HRA to accept them. This would get applications into the hands of clients and allow for submission in one's own neighborhood, without requiring the use of transportation. We think distribution of the applications

² Extended to December 31, 2020 with sub-regulatory guidance 20 TA/DC090 *available at* <https://otda.ny.gov/policy/gis/2020/20DC090.pdf>

³ Core Verification and Interview Adjustment approved through December 31, 2020 *available at* <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP%20-%20NY%20-%20COV-191%20-%20Core%20Verification%20and%20Interview%20Adjustment%20-%20Approval.pdf>

⁴ SNAP Emergency Allotment approved by FNS through September 2020 with sub-regulatory guidance 20 TA/DC088, *available at* <https://otda.ny.gov/policy/gis/2020/20DC088.pdf>

improved, but HRA was never able to find a way to accept the applications in places other than the limited number of open Job and SNAP Centers. Most centers still remain closed with no plans to reopen. The signature waiver was a step in the right direction. With a signature waiver, a client could call Infoline or Constituent Services (if homebound), have someone read the entire application to them over the phone, enter their information, and preserve the date for HRA to begin processing it and issuing expedited SNAP benefits right away. The disadvantage of this option is that it causes more traffic on Infoline, a phone number that many clients rely on for most questions related to their benefits, especially now that they cannot call or visit SNAP Centers. The Safety Net Project at the Urban Justice Center recently published a report on Infoline that provides an in-depth look at client experiences and problems.⁵ Clients need to be able to complete SNAP applications over the phone, and the signature waiver allows for that, but Infoline does not have the capacity to handle all of the clients who need this assistance.

The interview waiver has allowed HRA to approve applications without an interview where certain eligibility documents were submitted. For example, an applicant using ACCESSHRA could submit the application and upload their documents online. By providing just a Social Security Number to verify identity, an applicant could have expedited SNAP benefits in a matter of days, and ongoing benefits within the normal timeline, but without the administrative burdens of an interview. This has helped to streamline the process and we hope that this waiver can remain in place.

⁵ Failing Phones: City Infoline Leaves New Yorkers in Need Without Help, August 2020, *available at* <https://snp.urbanjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/08/HRA-Infoline-Report.pdf>

Attention and resources must be allocated to processing upcoming recertifications

Federal waivers allowed HRA to extend recertification periods through August 2020, which allowed the agency to pivot their work to applications, rather than processing recertifications. Starting this month, HRA has been tasked with both assisting new clients and processing recertifications for existing clients. We are concerned that there will be a number of clients who are not able to recertify for benefits because they do not have access to the internet, are not able to reach someone via Infoline, or are not able to fill out the paper recertification and mail it on their own. There is no signature waiver for recertifications.

One NYLAG client was connected to our office this summer because he was extremely anxious about the recertification packet he had received in the mail, which stated that his case was set to expire on September 30. Although there was an extension at the time, we did not know if it would be granted through September (and it was not). This client does not have internet access, so ACCESSHRA was not an option. Each year, he brings his paperwork to a local community-based organization where they sit down with him and his documents, go through each question, and help him sign and submit his recertification. Due to COVID restrictions, his community-based organization was not able to meet with him in-person. Infoline with the signature waiver was not an option, because he was recertifying, not applying for benefits. We eventually found a workable solution, and I assisted him by submitting documents his social worker already had on file directly to HRA. He needed an attorney and social worker assisting him to ensure this his SNAP benefits would not discontinue. As I was preparing this testimony, he called to tell me his benefits were approved, but due to a budgeting error, he is getting a lower and

incorrect SNAP amount. I conducted advocacy and may need to represent the client at a Fair Hearing to correct this budgeting error. His situation is not unique. Clients are at risk of losing their benefits each month because there are no longer extensions for recertifications.

Our homeless and clients who are seniors are the least likely to have access to the internet to complete applications and recertifications online. Even clients who can complete paperwork online will be at risk of losing benefits, because HRA will now be processing new applications, recertifications for clients whose benefits are set to expire now, and recertifications for clients whose benefits were set to expire in March-August, when certification periods were extended by six months. This is an increased administrative burden from the past six months and will undoubtedly lead to more errors and more closed cases. Further, if a SNAP recipient administratively appeals a closing due to failure to recertify, they are not entitled to what is known as “Aid to Continue,” which means that they will be without SNAP benefits until the resolution of the fair hearing unless they reapply for benefits.

HRA must reopen SNAP and Job Centers

HRA’s reliance on ACCESSHRA and Infoline is causing too many clients to fall through the cracks. Many of NYLAG’s most vulnerable clients, including seniors and the homeless, are not able not able to utilize these platforms, and need centers in their neighborhoods in order to apply for and recertify their benefits.

NYLAG is grateful for the opportunities we have had to work with HRA to improve the administration of SNAP benefits. We recognize the heavy lift to process applications for so many new clients in need. We testify today to highlight the positive changes,

support expansion of waivers and practices that we think had an impact, and to shed light on some areas where we have concerns.

We thank the Committee on General Welfare for the work it has done to assist vulnerable New Yorkers and we hope we can be a resource for you going forward.

Respectfully submitted,

New York Legal Assistance Group

Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare**Hearing on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP
Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens
Monday, September 21, 2020**

September 23, 2020

Chairperson Levin and distinguished members of the Committee on General Welfare:

The New York State Health Foundation (NYSHealth) appreciates the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP administration, food pantries, and soup kitchens in New York City.

As of mid-September 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than 19,000 and sickened 235,000 New York City residents.¹ A dire consequence of the resulting economic recession is the impact on food security. Mass losses in employment in the City have curtailed New Yorkers' ability to afford food. Stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures have also cut off reliable pathways to food access, such as meals provided in community settings (e.g., houses of worship, senior centers). Many New Yorkers have been forced to choose between their need for food and their own sense of safety, given the risks of contracting or spreading COVID-19 while accessing food during the pandemic. In these extraordinary circumstances, funding programs and supporting sound policies to improve food security are more vital than ever before.

NYSHealth's Work to Improve Food Security

NYSHealth is a private, independent foundation that works to improve the health of all New Yorkers, especially the most vulnerable. Our work has provided us with in-depth knowledge of food insecurity's widespread ramifications for the health of children, families, and the communities they live in. In particular, our *Building Healthy Communities* program supports expanding access to nutritious, affordable foods.

Since 2014, we have invested millions of dollars to improve food security across the State. NYSHealth has supported the creation of more than 85 new healthy food access points like farmers markets, mobile markets, and grocery and corner stores; supported the establishment of regional food hubs in New York City and the North Country; expanded access to and demand for nutritious, affordable foods, including nutrition incentive programs that encourage Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) use; and partnered with the Mayor's Office on its Building Healthy Communities initiative. NYSHealth's support to Community Food Advocates also helped secure universal free school lunch for New York City's 1.1 million public school children.

¹ New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. "COVID-19 Data." Accessed September 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data.page>

Since March 2020, NYSHealth has committed an additional \$5 million to support COVID-19 response efforts, with a significant proportion of these dollars being directed toward organizations that ensure New Yorkers have the healthy food they need. This includes an assessment by three of New York’s leading independent food policy research centers (the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education, and Policy; the City University of New York Urban Food Policy Institute; and the New York City Food Policy Institute at Hunter College) that will monitor and assess the response to COVID-19 by New York City’s food system. As the pandemic unfolds, both new threats and opportunities will emerge. It is important to start now to assess, monitor, and compile evidence about what works and what doesn’t. This research will help policymakers and advocates to effectively and equitably implement new programs and policies that chart safe paths to restoring food security and the regional food economy.

Using several recently developed City, regional, and State food plans as a starting point, the collaborative will explore how existing and new COVID-19-related programs contribute to achieving goals such as: reducing food insecurity, ensuring access to healthy affordable food, restoring the local and regional food economy, and protecting food workers. In fact, the collaborative will be holding a public forum on September 30th to present actions that public officials and agencies, civil society groups, and others can take to minimize the harms and maximize the opportunities to address the underlying problems the pandemic has exacerbated.²

NYSHealth grantees that connect New Yorkers to a range of benefits and services tell us that their clients are overwhelmingly requesting food ahead of any other need. Federal data confirm this trend; according to Hunger Free America, SNAP enrollment in New York City in April 2020 increased by nearly 69,000 people—the largest one-month jump ever.³

NYSHealth regularly collaborates with the New York City Mayor’s Office and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on efforts to improve food security across the City. NYSHealth applauds the City’s continued recognition and focus on the role that access to healthy food plays in maintaining good health and preventing disease, *especially* in response to COVID-19. The City has worked rapidly to launch new initiatives to ensure that New Yorkers have access to food, as well as to support businesses and farms in supplying and distributing food across the State. The GetFoodNYC Covid-19 Emergency Food Distribution Program, for example, has distributed millions of meals throughout the City since April. Additionally, the Mayor’s Taskforce on Racial Inclusion & Equity recently announced new food access programs in neighborhoods that have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic.

New Data on New Yorkers’ Food Scarcity During COVID-19

At this critical juncture, NYSHealth would like to provide the Committee with new data that sheds light on the growing and stark food insecurity challenges facing New Yorkers. Although this is a State-level analysis, it can support the City in its continued efforts to design programs and target resources, as well as provide data when working with State and federal partners.

² Event information is available at : <https://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/events/2020/9/30/webinar-ny-food-2020-visions-research-and-recommendations-for-food-systems-during-covid-19-and-beyond>.

³ Hunger Free America. “In April, NYC had largest one-month actual increase in SNAP food aid participation in modern history.” Press Release. June 10, 2020. <https://www.hungerfreeamerica.org/blog/april-nyc-had-largest-one-month-actual-increase-snap-food-aid-participation-modern-history>

The data presented here are from an upcoming NYSHealth analysis based on the COVID-19 Household Pulse Survey, which is administered by the U.S. Census Bureau in collaboration with multiple federal agencies. The survey provided near real-time data on household experiences, including with food scarcity, during the coronavirus pandemic from April 23, 2020, until July 21, 2020. The survey makes it possible to produce estimates by state, including by race and ethnicity, age groups, and income categories. It also assesses the degree to which New Yorkers accessed free meals and groceries, where they did so, and whether they used federal stimulus checks for food-related expenses. Further information about the survey is available on the Census Bureau website.⁴

Below are key findings from the NYSHealth analysis of the COVID-19 Household Pulse Survey data for New York State. Many of the findings highlight the increasing food scarcity rate, which is defined as the percentage of the adult population in households that either sometimes or often did not have enough to eat in the last seven days. The analysis also indicates how different groups of New Yorkers are accessing free meals and groceries and from which access points.

Food Scarcity

- From April through June, approximately 1 in 10 New Yorkers reported household food scarcity in the prior week. There was an uptick in food scarcity in July, when the rate surpassed 12% (see *Exhibit 1* on page 6). The food scarcity rate in New York State was generally consistent with the national rate, but higher than those reported in neighboring states.
- A larger proportion of households with children experienced food scarcity than households without children.
- There are stark disparities in food scarcity by race and ethnicity. Between 17% and 25% of Hispanic New Yorkers and 15% and 22% of Black New Yorkers experienced household food scarcity over the survey period. These percentages were three to four times higher than among white New Yorkers (see *Exhibit 1* on page 6).
- Food scarcity is increasingly affecting households that did not struggle to access food prior to the pandemic. In April, nearly one-quarter of adults in households with food scarcity reported being food sufficient prior to the pandemic; but by July, that figure had risen to more than one-third of respondents.⁵
- Mass losses in employment have likely contributed to increases in food scarcity. Nearly 60% of New Yorkers reported in July that they or someone in their household had lost employment income since the start of the pandemic. In July, the rate of food scarcity was higher (more than 17%) for those who reported lost household employment income during the pandemic in comparison to those who did not (5%) (see *Exhibit 2* on page 7).
- The federal Economic Impact Payments—known as stimulus checks—did not appear to make much difference in the food scarcity rate for those who reported lost employment income (see *Exhibit 2* on page 7). This raises concern that benefit

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. “Household Pulse Survey.” Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products/household-pulse-survey.html>.

⁵ Food sufficiency prior to the pandemic is defined as a household having enough of the kinds of food wanted or having enough food, but not always the kind wanted, before March 13, 2020.

programs such as stimulus checks and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance may not be enough to keep some New Yorkers food sufficient.

Free Meal & Grocery Use

- In July, nearly 11% of New Yorkers reported that their households were accessing free meals or groceries (see *Exhibit 3* on page 8). School programs and food pantries were the most used access points overall (see *Exhibit 4* on page 9).
- Hispanic and Black adults were consistently more likely to report that their households accessed free meals or groceries in the prior week over the survey period, compared to white and Asian adults (see *Exhibit 3* on page 8).
- There were differences in where people accessed free food and groceries by race and ethnicity. In July, Black New Yorkers were most likely to identify friends/family/neighbors and pantries as their household access points for free food and groceries. Meanwhile, Hispanic and white New Yorkers were most likely to identify school programs and pantries, and Asian New Yorkers were most likely to identify school programs (see *Exhibit 5* on page 10).
- By July, young adult and middle-aged New Yorkers reported their households accessed free food and groceries through school programs and pantries more than any other source. Home delivery was cited most frequently by elderly adults (see *Exhibit 6* on page 11).

In summary, food scarcity in New York is high relative to other states and increased during the coronavirus pandemic. An increasing share of food-scarce New Yorkers are newly food scarce, and therefore may require enhanced outreach and support in enrolling in food assistance programs for the first time. The dramatic disparities in food scarcity by race and ethnicity also indicate that current food assistance programs are not sufficiently addressing the needs of communities of color. Finally, the popularity of schools and pantries as access points for free food and groceries can potentially inform the design of food assistance programs.

Moving Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended almost every aspect of New York City's food system. As the implications of increased food insecurity continue to evolve, we offer the following recommendations:

- Expand policy solutions that make it easier and more convenient for New Yorkers to access food, including:
 - Supporting public education campaigns that increase awareness of and enrollment in The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and SNAP, using trusted messengers;
 - Making nutrition incentive programs (e.g., New York City's Health Bucks or Double Up Food Bucks, which can double the value of federal food benefits, such as SNAP, at participating markets and grocery stores) available for use in more supermarkets; and
 - Supporting citywide expansion of the Good Food Purchasing Program and the creation of regional food plans, building upon NYC's recent codification of the Office of Food Policy and requirement for a 10-Year Food Plan, to better understand and strengthen our food systems.

- Work with partners at the State level to maximize currently available flexibility in nutrition benefits programs, including SNAP and WIC. The City should advocate for the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the State Department of Health to continue to leverage opportunities, including extended re-certification timelines for benefits, removal of barriers to enrollment (e.g., SNAP enrollment interviews), and expansion of the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot. Early results from the pilot program showed that adoption of online grocery shopping has the potential to improve healthy food access for low-income consumers. This past summer, the State legislature passed a bill that would expand the online purchasing pilot, and it is awaiting delivery to the Governor.⁶
- Support New York federal elected officials in advocating for the extension of Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer and WIC COVID-19 waivers past September, which would require congressional action. Additionally, support New York federal elected officials in maintaining the continued extension of SNAP emergency allotments.
- Minimize hurdles for community-based organizations and human services agencies working on the frontlines by quickly addressing contracting and payment delays that impede their abilities to retain staff and deploy resources.
- While immediate attention must focus on meeting the food access needs of New Yorkers during the pandemic, the City should continue to implement long-term sustainable solutions for an equitable and just food system, including the City Council’s support to codify the Good Food Purchasing Program through legislation.
- Collect and assess data to understand the depth of the crisis across the City. NYSHealth plans to share our full analysis described above with the Committee via email upon the report’s publication. We are available to discuss performing additional analyses that may be helpful to the Committee. A second phase of the Census Bureau survey began in mid-August and will collect data through the end of October.⁷ We plan to publish an updated analysis of food scarcity that will include this second time period.

NYSHealth is grateful for the shared recognition among stakeholders of the role that healthy food access plays in contributing to healthy people, as well as promoting vibrant neighborhoods and stronger local economies. We look forward to continuing our partnerships with the City and other anti-hunger organizations that are working to lift up food security programs that we know work, and that support the health of New Yorkers and the New York City economy.

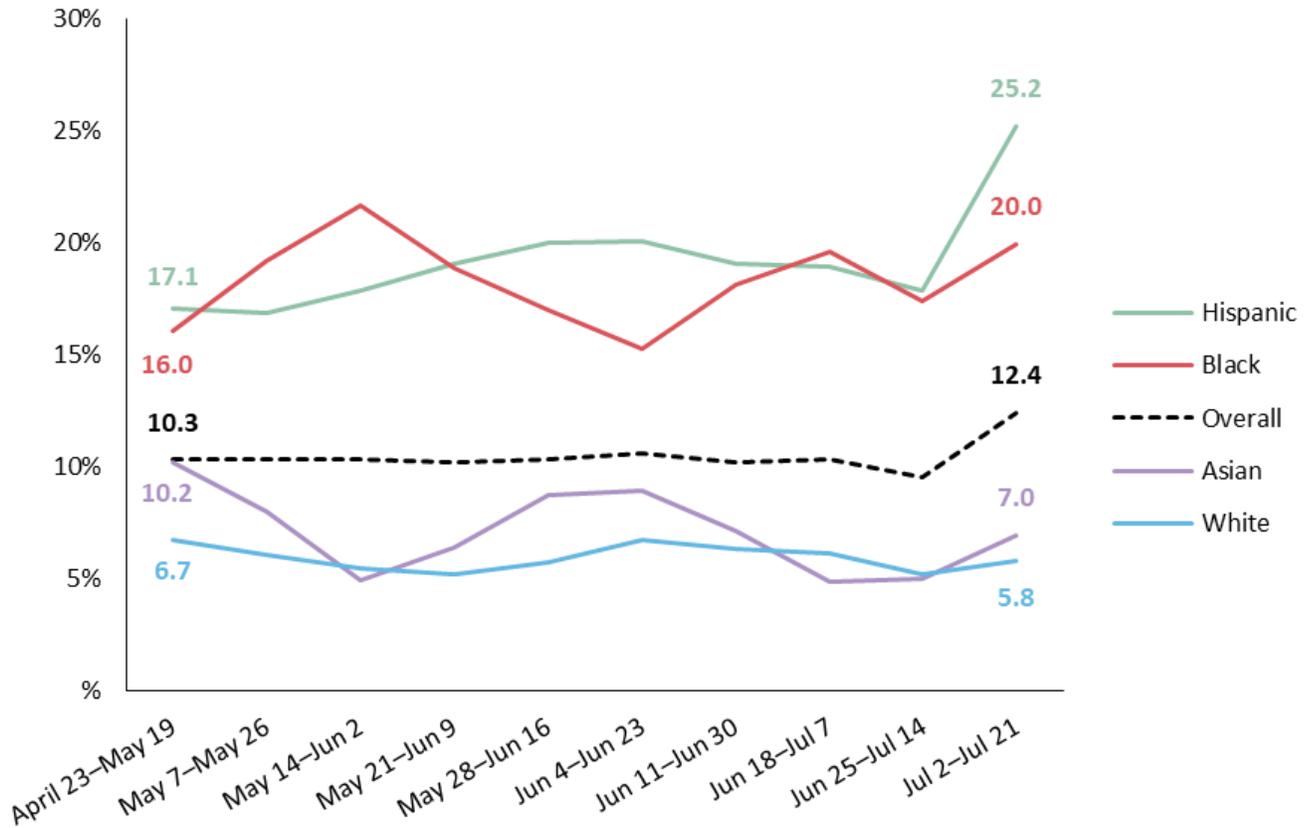
⁶ S. 8247A, 2020 Leg., 2019-2020 Sess. (N.Y. 2020).

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. “Household Pulse Survey – Phase 2.” Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products/household-pulse-survey.html>

Appendix - Data Tables and Graphs

Exhibit 1. Food Scarcity in New York State

Percentage of adults in New York households where there was either sometimes or often not enough to eat in the last seven days.

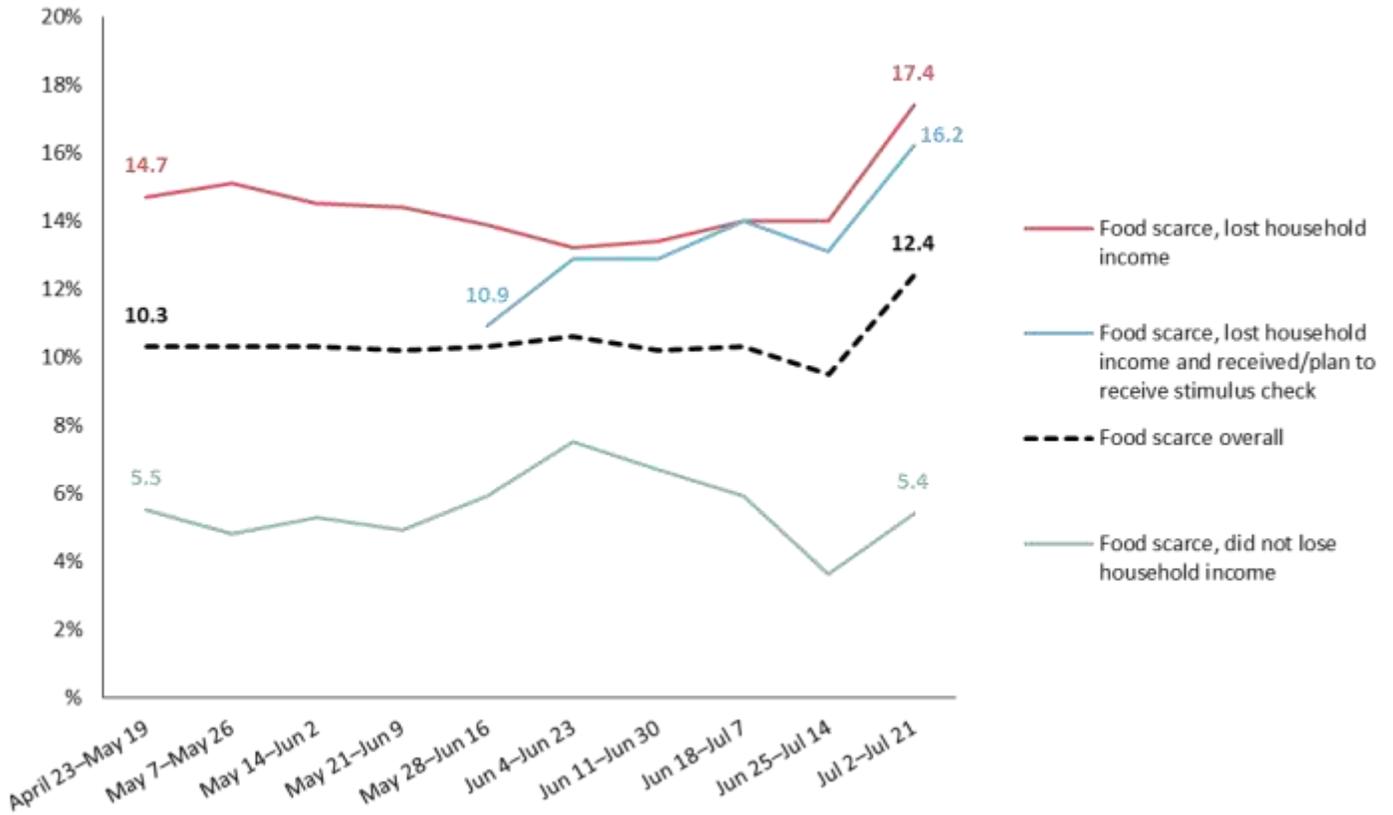


Note: For overall rate, all adults who responded to food scarcity question are included in the denominator. For rates by race/ethnicity, age, income, and state categories, only adults in each respective category who responded to food scarcity question are included in the denominator. Rates are calculated across a three-week period.

Source: NYSHealth analysis of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey. U.S. Census Bureau. “Household Pulse Survey Public Use File.” Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/datasets.html>

Exhibit 2. Food Scarcity by Household Employment Income Loss

Percentage of adults in New York that lost/did not lose household employment income since March 13, 2020 who reported household food scarcity in the last seven days.

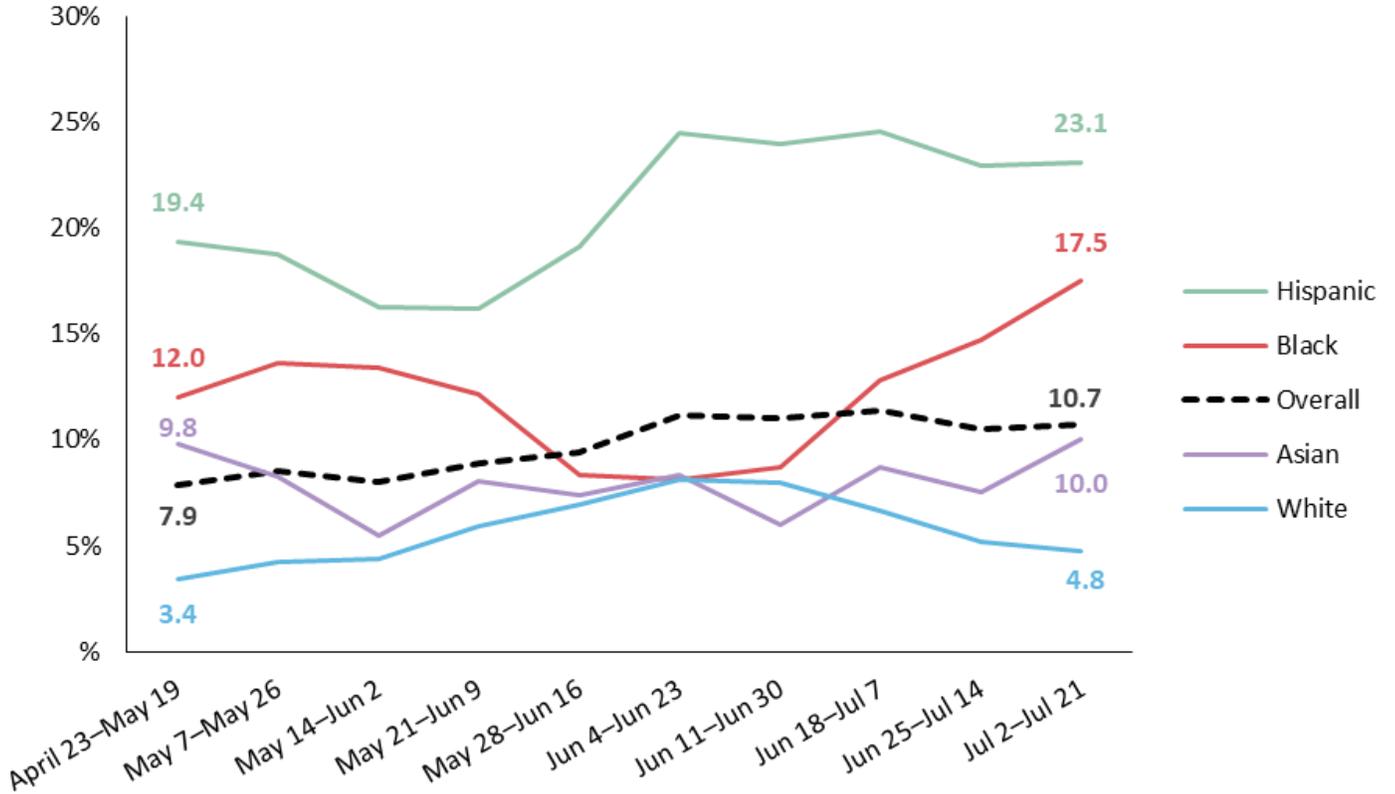


Note: For overall rate, all adults who responded to food scarcity question are included in the denominator. For rates by household employment income loss/no loss, all adults who responded that they did/did not experience a household employment income loss are included in the denominator. For rates by household employment income loss and Economic Impact Payment (stimulus check) receipt, all adults who responded that they experienced a household employment income loss and that they or someone in their household received or plan to receive a stimulus check are included in the denominator. Stimulus check data are available beginning the week of May 28, 2020. Rates are calculated across a three-week period.

Source: NYSHealth analysis of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey. U.S. Census Bureau. "Household Pulse Survey Public Use File." Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/datasets.html>

Exhibit 3. Free Meals & Groceries

Percentage of adults in New York households that received a free meal or groceries in the last seven days.

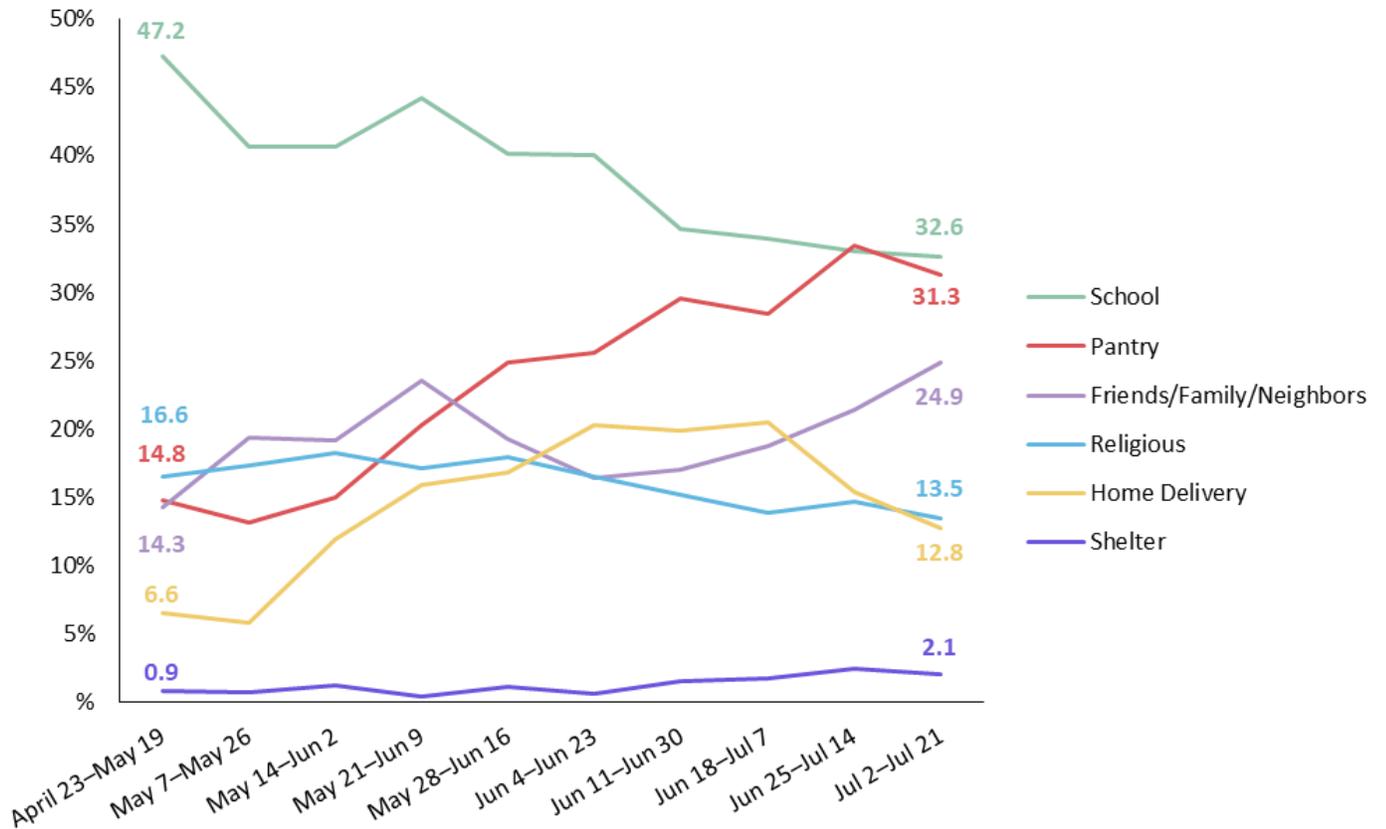


Note: For overall rate, all adults who responded to free meal and grocery question are included in the denominator. For rates by race/ethnicity, age, income, and state categories, only adults in each respective category who responded to free meal and grocery question are included in the denominator. Rates are calculated across a three-week period.

Source: NYSHHealth analysis of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey. U.S. Census Bureau. “Household Pulse Survey Public Use File.” Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/datasets.html>

Exhibit 4. Free Food Access Points

Percentage of adults in New York households that accessed free meals or groceries in the last seven days at a particular food access point (categories not exclusive).

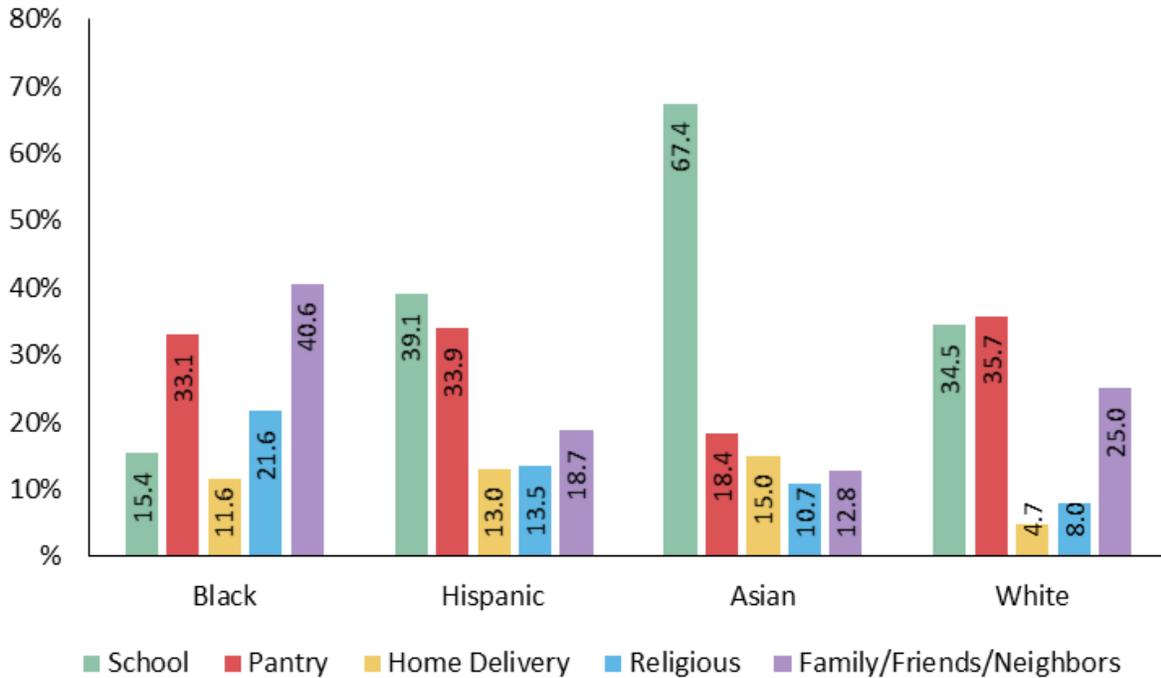


Note: All adults who responded that their household accessed a free meal or groceries in the preceding seven days are included in the denominator. Respondents could select multiple answers for where they or someone in their household accessed a free meal or groceries. Not all access sites are included because of low counts. Some school programs offered free meals via delivery, so some home delivery responses might be part of a school program. Responses for shelters may be artificially low, because the populations that most use shelters may have been less likely to have had access to a cellphone or email to be part of the survey sample. Rates are calculated across a three-week period.

Source: NYSHealth analysis of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey. U.S. Census Bureau. “Household Pulse Survey Public Use File.” Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/datasets.html>

Exhibit 5. Free Food Access Points, by Race/Ethnicity, July 2–21, 2020

Percentage of adults in New York households that accessed free meals or groceries in last 7 days that used a particular food access point (categories not exclusive).

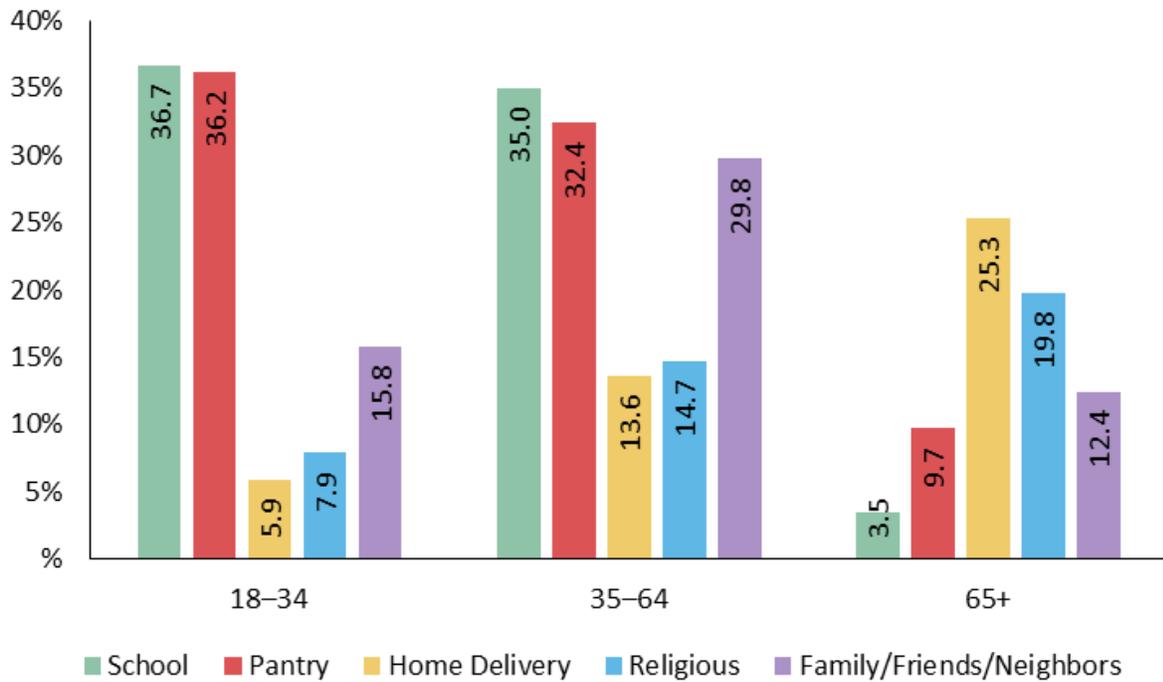


Note: Adults in each respective race or ethnicity category who responded that their household accessed a free meal or groceries in the preceding 7 days are included in the denominator. Respondents could select multiple answers for where their household accessed a free meal or groceries. Not all access sites are included due to low counts. Some school programs offered free meals via delivery, so some home delivery responses might be part of a school program. Rates are calculated across a three-week period.

Source: NYSHealth analysis of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey. U.S. Census Bureau. “Household Pulse Survey Public Use File.” Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/datasets.html>

Exhibit 6. Free Food Access Points, by Age, July 2–21, 2020

Percentage of adults in New York households that accessed free meals or groceries in last 7 days that used a particular food access point (categories not exclusive).



Note: Adults in each respective age category who responded that their household accessed a free meal or groceries in the preceding 7 days are included in the denominator. Respondents could select multiple answers for where their household accessed a free meal or groceries. Not all access sites are included due to low counts. Some school programs offered free meals via delivery, so some home delivery responses might be part of a school program. Rates are calculated across a three-week period.

Source: NYSHealth analysis of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey. U.S. Census Bureau. “Household Pulse Survey Public Use File.” Accessed September 2020. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/datasets.html>



**Testimony of Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America,
Before a Hearing of New York City Council General Welfare Committee
On “Oversight: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP
Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens”**

September 21, 2020

How the Pandemic Worsened New York City’s Previous Hunger Crisis

I am Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America, a nationwide anti-hunger advocacy and direct service organization headquartered in New York City. I offer this testimony on behalf of the approximately two million New York City residents now struggling against hunger.

I greatly thank Chair Levin and the entire committee for holding this vital hearing.

Some in the media and in public office have implied that the pandemic and its accompanying economic collapse *created* the poverty and hunger crises. They focus almost exclusively on the plight of those *newly* poor and hungry, as if the multitudes who were impoverished and hungry before these crises just did not matter. That is a misleading and troubling narrative.

To understand how we are doing with the pandemic, it’s vital to understand where we were *before* the pandemic. The reality is that in 2018, when the overall economy was theoretically in great shape, New York City faced hunger and poverty crises, primarily because too many people were working but earned too little to pay for the high costs of housing, utilities, child care, health care, education, clothing, gas, MetroCards, and, yes, food.

Between 2005-2008 and 2015-2017, per household in New York City went from an average of under \$4,000 per month to more than \$5,000 per month. It’s no wonder that local hunger stayed sky-high.

According to Hunger Free America’s analysis of federal data, while the number of people living in food insecure households — unable to afford an adequate supply of food — decreased by nearly 27 percent from 2013 to 2018 during the long recovery from the previous recession — declining from 1.42 million people in 2013-2015 to 1.04 million in 2016-2018, in 2018, one in eight city residents still struggled against hunger.

While food insecurity among working adults declined, most likely due to minimum wage increases, they faced a “working hungry epidemic” with 300,718 adults working, but still struggling against hunger.

The Bronx remained, per capita, New York City’s hungriest borough in every category, with more than one in five Bronx residents (23.1 percent) experiencing food insecurity. That included 30.5 percent of all children, nearly 15 percent of working adults, and more than 20 percent of older residents (ages 60+).

Brooklyn contained the highest number of individuals living in food insecure households, reaching 377,475 people in the 2016-18 time period. This number included 12.6 percent of children, 8.6 percent of employed adults, and 11.4 percent of older residents (ages 60+).

Hunger Free America’s data has also shown that New York City emergency food programs fed 10 percent more people in 2019 than in 2018. In Brooklyn, a soaring 65 percent of emergency food program respondents reported an increase in the overall number of people served compared to 2018. Additionally, nearly 29 percent of organizations reported having to turn people away due to a lack of resources. Nearly 29 percent of respondents reported witnessing an increase in immigrants utilizing their services as a result of disenrollment from the SNAP program. Many respondents also commented on the effects of the Trump Administration’s “Public Charge” rule, with more than one-third of respondents having reported encountering immigrants who are afraid to utilize food programs out of fear that it may impact their immigration status.

That was all when the economy was still theoretically in “great shape.”

Then the pandemic hit and the economy collapsed. Many of the 595,842 New York City Public School students who received free and reduced-price lunches daily – and most of the 265,977 students who relied upon school breakfasts – stopped receiving them when schools shut down. New York State lost a million jobs. Tens of thousands of older New Yorkers lost senior center meals when those closed. While food pantries and soup kitchens, many of which are run by older New Yorkers, provide far less food than government safety net programs – even in the best of times – they too were harmed by the pandemic and forced to shut down.

At the same time, as a result of both market forces and illegal price gouging, New York’s food prices soared. Families who relied on meager wages and/or federal nutrition benefits, as well as food charities, found that their food-buying dollars bought less.

The only factors that truly ameliorated these crises were the federal nutrition safety net programs, both new and existing.

The biggest boost in federal aid, by far, came from the Families First Act, championed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who convinced the Senate and the White House to support it. This bill created the Pandemic-EBT program, which will eventually give the families of up to 2 million children in closed schools statewide up to \$800 million in extra purchasing power, which includes 1.1 million children in New York City that will receive \$400 million in funding.

The bill also increased benefits in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – formerly called the Food Stamp Program – for all families not receiving the maximum allotment. It also increased funding for both the WIC program (which provides nutritional supplements to pregnant women and children under five) and alternative school meals’ distribution programs, and it funded more food for food banks, soup kitchens, and food pantries.

New York City also took extra measures such as distributing grab-and-go meals for kids and parents and launching a massive home-delivery meals program, which delivered up to a million meals per day.

By far, the biggest influx of food in the state was due to the increase in SNAP, both because of the Congressional boost in benefit sizes for some, and because more people entered the program.

In February of 2020, 1.481 million city residents received SNAP, receiving \$218 million to fill their grocery carts. By June of 2020, 1.677 million city residents received SNAP, receiving \$395 million in benefits. That means there was a 185,839-person (12 percent) increase in people receiving the benefits, and a \$177 million (81 percent) increase in monthly benefits, just over the course of four months. This SNAP increase dwarfed every other type of food aid, both governmental and charitable.

In contrast, outside of New York City, the caseload statewide increased by 5 percent and the spending increased by 47 percent. It’s clear New York City HRA did an excellent job relative to the rest of the state in making it easier for eligible people to access benefits.

Yet many fell through the cracks.

Census data found that, in April-May 2020, a staggering 22.9 percent of New York State residents faced food insecurity, unable to afford enough food. That means that overall hunger doubled during the pandemic. This staggering hunger crisis afflicts suburban, rural, and urban New York alike. I recently visited rural Allegheny County, Rochester, and Buffalo and found that the hunger crisis in all three places remained unabated.

Child hunger soared. In April, 38 percent of parents in New York City reported cutting the size of meals or skipping meals for their children because they did not have enough money for food – double the previous rate – according to a study by Hunger Free America. The study also found that, among NYC adults, 34 percent skipped meals or cut portions because they lacked enough money for food. That’s nearly three and a half times the adult hunger rate of 2018.

In August, The Education Trust–New York found in a poll that half of New York City public school parents say they have skipped or reduced their family’s meals as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and even more parents are concerned about their child’s food access when school begins.

It’s obvious that our hunger crisis is far from over.

Urgent Need for Senate Republicans and President Trump to Act

On May 16, 2020 – as of today, 127 days ago – the U.S. House of Representatives passed the HEROES Act, which included a massive increase in food aid.

The bill included a 15 percent increase in benefits for SNAP. That hike would increase the average SNAP benefit nationwide by about 20 cents per meal, from the current level of \$1.34 per meal to \$1.54 per meal. That would have provided another \$800 million to hungry families statewide over 16 months.

The HEROES ACT also:

- Boosts the minimum monthly SNAP benefit from the current level of \$16 to \$30.
- Puts on hold Trump Administration rules to slash SNAP.
- Extends the length of time that the Pandemic-EBT Program – which increases the food purchasing power of families with kids in closed schools – stays in effect.
- Extends the Pandemic-EBT Program to include younger children who normally would be going to daycare programs.
- Allows people to temporarily buy hot foods with SNAP at retail outlets that already accept SNAP.
- Increases funding for WIC nutritional supplements for pregnant women and small children.
- Increases funding for school meals departments within school districts.
- Provides more food and funding to food distribution charities.

In response, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, speaking on a conservative radio program, derided the bill as “blue state bailouts,” despite the massive amount of food and money that it would provide to his home state of Kentucky, as well as to other states that usually vote Republican.

Let’s be clear: this delay in food aid may lead to even more Americans unnecessarily dying. The opposition of Congressional Republicans and President Trump to increasing domestic food support during the worst health and hunger crises in modern times is not only morally outrageous and economically self-defeating, but it is also, frankly, dumb politics. Once the American people learn about this food aid hold up, they will be incensed. That is why we urge the state legislature – especially Republicans in it – to help us ramp up pressure on Senate Republicans to pass this food assistance immediately.

New York City Must Do Much More to Fight Hunger and Poverty

The only way to end hunger in the U.S. is to help Americans better afford food, both by raising wages and ensuring a federal nutrition assistance safety net that is adequately-funded and easy to-access, including benefits such as: SNAP (formerly known as food stamps); Meals on Wheels and senior center meals for older Americans; WIC for pregnant women and infants; and school

breakfasts, lunches, and summer meals for children. New Yorkers also need to be able to easily access affordable childcare, housing, and health care.

1) The State should much more aggressively work to increase SNAP and WIC participation, including by increasing state outreach funding.

At current caseload levels, the SNAP program will spend at least \$7 billion – yes billion with a *b* – in federal dollars in the State over the next year. Just a 10 percent additional increase in participation would bring another \$700 million into the state. Those numbers dwarf the initial \$25 million in State spending on Nourish New York.

Yet the Governor has promoted Nourish New York far more than SNAP. Not only that, the State originally tried to eliminate the major source of SNAP outreach dollars and is currently slated to eliminate the main source of WIC outreach funding. I know the state faces a fiscal crisis; even putting aside, for the moment, the reality that the fiscal crisis could be significantly reduced if the State ensured that the wealthiest state residents paid their fair share of taxes, failing to fully fund SNAP and WIC outreach will cost the state far more in federal dollars than it will ever save it.

2) The City should renew its funding for SNAP and WIC outreach.

Out of the City's \$170 million anti-hunger initiative in response to the pandemic, a small percentage went to fund SNAP and WIC outreach, including \$500,000 to Hunger Free America, which expires this November. The need we are seeing will clearly last for years, so City Council should help renew this funding, which could leverage hundreds of millions in federal benefits.

3) The City must continue its grab-and-go and home delivered meals programs.

The vast hunger need has not gone away and neither should these vital programs

4) The Governor should immediately direct OTDA to keep his promise to make it easier for community college students to be eligible for SNAP.

Campus food pantries should be the last – not the first – resort in fighting college student hunger. Since food pantry funding almost always comes out of limited, discretionary funding sources, any additional food and funds that would go to a college food pantry would likely come out of budgets for other vital efforts. Moreover, even the best food pantries and soup kitchens nationwide are not a great solution for hunger. They are humiliating, often have limited supplies of food and offer recipients little or no choice. College students who live in dorms may not always have proper facilities to use that food and those who commute would be forced to carry heavy food objects long distances.

Thus, when it comes to student hunger, New York State and City should focus first and foremost on making it easier for students to get SNAP benefits, which can be used at virtually any food store and most farmers markets. Thus, in expanding SNAP for college students, the State should use the widest interpretation of state flexibility in this regard, as already implemented by Massachusetts.

- 5) **The State should request that USDA allow it to enroll in the SNAP Restaurant Meals Programs, allowing SNAP recipients who have disabilities, who are over 60, and who are homeless to be able to use SNAP at select restaurants.**
- 6) **The State should work with USDA to enable farmers markets, corner stores, and small grocery stores to accept SNAP online**
- 7) **The State and City should aggressively work together to universally implement the new law requiring that all high-needs schools in the state serve breakfast in the classroom.**

According to a report by the Food Research Action Center, during the 2018-2019 school year, only 52.4 percent of children who received school lunch statewide received school breakfasts, giving NYS the 36th worst participation rate in the nation. New York City still has the worst breakfast participation rate out of any big city in the country, with only about half of the kids that get lunch getting breakfast. Especially given that all the breakfasts are funded by the federal government, rapid school breakfast is the smartest, most cost-effective way to reduce child hunger statewide and citywide. Given the need for social distancing in a time of pandemic, serving breakfasts in classrooms – rather than crowded cafeterias – makes more sense than ever.

- 8) **The State and City should together implement a state-level H.O.P.E. pilot project, to make it easier to combine the increased use of digital technology with policy improvements to simplify the lives and boost the long-term self-sufficiency of our lowest-income residents by making it easier for families to obtain and use benefits and manage their finances digitally.**
- 9) **The State should end the sub-minimum wage for tipped workers and make overall minimum wages automatic as the cost-of-living increases.**
- 10) **The State and City should do more to create jobs in food, particularly by bolstering regional food processing.**

Taken together, these steps would dramatically reduce hunger across New York City. Thanks again for focusing on this vital issue.

**Testimony of Natosha McCray for the City Council of
New York Cities' General Welfare Committee hearing on
the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP
Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchen held on
September 21th, 2020**

My name is Natosha McCray, I live in the Bronx with my 2 children. I am a member of Hunger Free America's Food Action Board to help advocate for the needs low income families in New York City, and I wanted to come to this hearing to tell you how the city has been doing in helping us get food. During this quarantine, you may have wondered, "what has life been like for a single woman with school age children, who is unable to work because of the pandemic, who lives with high risk household members also affected by Covid19?". Well I'm here to tell you about it.

When Covid first started, it took months before my unemployment benefits hit my bank account. I was getting \$509 a month in SNAP and that was not nearly enough to cover the increase in food costs while my children have been home. It has been especially hard for my children, with schools closed for 3 and a half months. We used the school grab and go sites and that helped us supplement some meals, but what they had was literally the same meals day in and day out; sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly, turkey sandwiches or beef and baloney. Even worse, at the beginning of the pandemic we would go to the schools and they would tell us they had no more food available. The Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program was a great help to get my children food, but there were also issues with that. I received benefits for my teenage son directly to my EBT card, but my daughter, who was in preschool, didn't get any benefits despite being in a "Pre-K for All" program. The expansion of P-EBT and SNAP are important because low income families need healthy food options and help buying things at the supermarket. Eggs, milk, cheese and meat products have been severely overpriced, and I tried using the online SNAP shopping and that too was a nightmare.

I was happy to see that the House passed the HEROES Act back in May but have been really disappointed and frustrated that the Senate hasn't passed it too. Through my work with Hunger Free America I know that there would have been a permanent increase to my SNAP and an expansion of the P-EBT program which would really help me get food for my children. Another problem is, why do people need to go to so many different offices and go through so much trouble to get these programs? I feel like I always have to give all the details about my family and finances just for a little bit of help. It feels like people who need help are criminalized and penalized for needing assistance the government provides. They are a form of income and resources, but it feels like the government makes it as hard as possible to get those services and it feels shaming for people like myself. A better job needs to be done to help give assistance expeditiously and without shame and guilt.

If we are all American then we should all be treated equally, including when services are needed. The widening separation of the poor and the rich just continues to show how much

further we have to go until that becomes a reality. It doesn't work for me that someone in a higher income bracket can get government assistance in the blink of an eye, while I am left waiting weeks to months to find out if I qualify to receive benefits that I know I'm entitled to. I believe there should be a system for these food benefits that requires less paperwork, some type of software that can let people know what benefits they qualify for once a city agency gets that information. The process should be automatic, once an agency has the right info then the person should seamlessly have access to the benefits they qualify for. For example, WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, free school meals, rental and utility assistance, they should all be the same application since they ask for the same information, which would save wasteful paperwork. It would also save people time by avoiding so many appointments they can't afford to miss work for. There should also be one card available for students to take advantage of all NYC activities, other states do this and it works. NYC can integrate their I.T. and software systems to better serve the 21st century. We shouldn't be stuck in the 70's, New York must adapt and allow people to have their dignity back!

These are just some of the reasons why I would like to see the HOPE bill that was introduced by Senator Gillibrand pass, so that I can just send in one application and get all the benefits I qualify for, I don't think that's too much to ask for. Even if Congress doesn't take action, the City should do everything it can to make this a reality. I understand that nobody was ready for what the pandemic brought, but it highlighted what is broken in our city and the suffering that impacts people who are historically disenfranchised when things go wrong. The Bronx is considered one of the poorest districts nationwide; I am a resident of the Bronx and I rally behind those who fight for inclusion in getting assistance, especially for families like my own who need a boost during this pandemic. Children and caretakers alike need as much support as they can get during this time. These programs are not a hand-out, but a hand-up to those in need. Please pass the food aid in the Heroes Act, expand the programs that so many families like mine use to get the support and resources that we need. Thank you.

Lift and Support Points

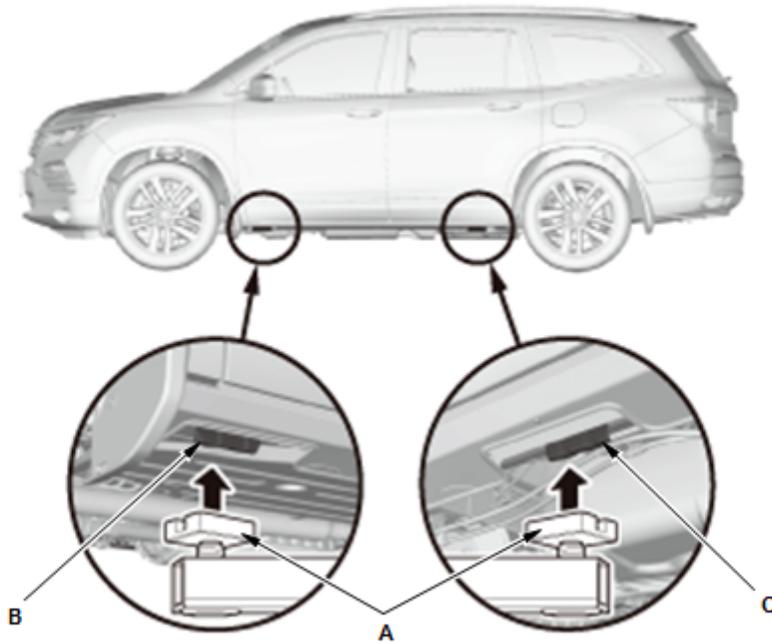
NOTE: If you are going to remove heavy components such as suspension or the fuel tank from the rear of the vehicle, first support the front of the vehicle with tall safety stands. When substantial weight is removed from the rear of the vehicle, the center of gravity can change, causing the vehicle to tip forward on the lift.

Vehicle Lift

1. Position the lift pads (A) under the vehicle's front support points (B) and rear support points (C).

NOTICE

Be sure the lift pads are properly placed to avoid damaging the vehicle.



2. Raise the lift a few inches, and rock the vehicle gently to be sure it is firmly supported.
3. Raise the lift to its full height, and inspect the vehicle support points for solid contact with the lift pads.

Safety Stands

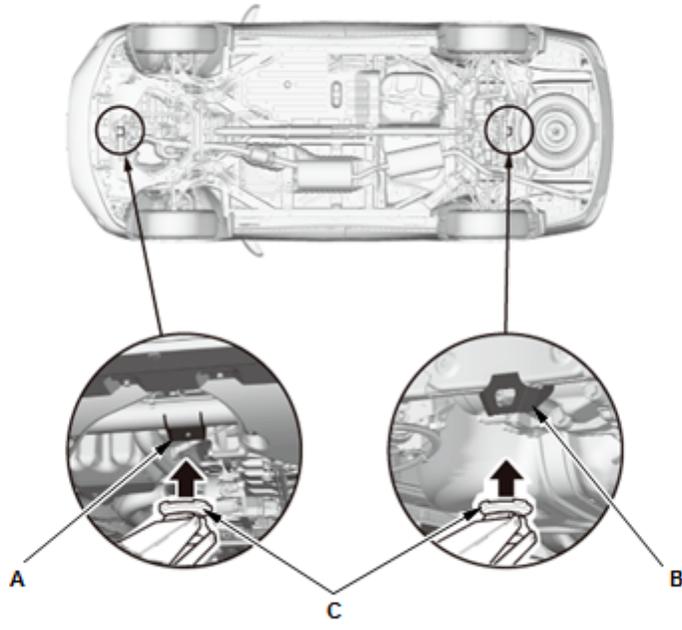
To support the vehicle on safety stands, use the same support points as for a vehicle lift. Always use safety stands when working on or under any vehicle that is supported only by a jack.

Floor Jack

1. When lifting the front of the vehicle, set the parking brake. When lifting the rear of the vehicle, shift the transmission to P position/mode.
2. Block the wheels that are not being lifted.
3. Position the floor jack under the front jacking bracket (A) or the rear jacking bracket (B). Center the jacking bracket on the jack lift platform (C), and jack up the vehicle high enough to fit the safety stands under it.

NOTICE

Be sure the floor jack is properly placed to avoid damaging the vehicle.



4. Position the safety stands under the support points, and adjust them so the vehicle is level side-to-side.

5. Lower the vehicle onto the stands.



NEW YORK

**Testimony for the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare on
the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries,
and Soup Kitchens**

**September 21, 2020
Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York**

INTRODUCTION

Good morning Chair Levin and members of the Committee on General Welfare of the New York City Council. My name is Rachel Sabella and I am the Director of No Kid Hungry New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP administration, food pantries, and soup kitchens.

First, we thank the City Council for your steadfast commitment to protect New Yorkers from food insecurity, especially in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The City Council has long been a leader in this arena—from supporting Breakfast in the Classroom to the expansion of universal school meals to leading the charge for increased, baselined funding for food pantries and soup kitchens to creating food and hygiene pantries in New York City public schools and now being key partners in the “Feeding New York” plan—more than ever, we are grateful to count you as our partner in this work.

No Kid Hungry New York is a campaign of Share Our Strength, a national anti-hunger organization dedicated to ending hunger and poverty. Using proven, practical strategies, our No Kid Hungry campaign builds public-private partnerships with the goal of ensuring children have access to the healthy food they need, every day. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, No Kid Hungry has provided emergency grants across all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico to help school districts, food banks and other community organizations feed kids during this crisis. In addition to our grant-making, we have advocated for policies to address the unique barriers and unprecedented level of need brought on by this crisis—including national child nutrition waivers that offer flexibility to meal providers, expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and a new program called Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT)—while offering strategic assistance to hundreds of local organizations. No Kid Hungry also launched a text line to help families locate meals and worked closely with New York City to customize the service to reflect specific offerings from the Department of Education.

Since 2011, our No Kid Hungry New York campaign has helped connect millions of children across the state with school breakfast and summer meals.

For additional information: contact Rachel Sabella, Director of No Kid Hungry New York, at rsabella@strength.org.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUNGER AND POVERTY IN NEW YORK CITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all parts of our lives as New Yorkers. More than 1.5 million New Yorkers are unemployed as of July of this year, leading to one of the worst unemployment crises in the state's history.¹ For many of our city's children and families, the pandemic and its economic consequences has had a disastrous impact on food security. Prior to the pandemic, 1 in 6 children in New York State were food insecure, and now 1 in 4 children could face food insecurity this year.² Recent OTDA data shows that 1.9 million households or 1.66 million individuals participated in SNAP in New York City in June 2020, which is nearly 125,000 more participants than June 2019³. We fear a decade of progress in the fight against child food insecurity may have been eliminated in a few short months.

Here's what food insecurity looks like: In some families, the pantry is completely empty. In others, mom or dad skips dinner a few nights a week so the kids can have something to eat in the evening. Many families are making impossible decisions between paying their ConEd bill or buying groceries. All of these scenarios have a profound effect on kids and families.

When kids don't get the consistent nutrition they need each day and throughout the year, it's harder for them to grow up healthy, happy, and strong. Consistent access to nutrition is linked to cognitive and physical development, test scores and long-term health and education outcomes. With the economic impacts of COVID-19 reverberating across the city, an entire generation is at stake.

HOW NEW YORK ADDRESSED CHILDHOOD HUNGER DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the food security of kids and families in every neighborhood across the city. As part of our pandemic response, No Kid Hungry New York has distributed over \$1 million dollars to 45 community-based organizations and school districts across the state, with many grants directed to community organizations in New York City in addition to support P-EBT and Grab and Go Meals awareness campaigns for various New York City agencies. These grants, distributed from March through June, have reached food insecure children and families in neighborhoods across all five boroughs. Grants provided funding for equipment purchases, packaging, staffing, transportation, promotion and food items to keep kids and families from experiencing food insecurity. I would like to share with you some of the stories of how our grantees helped communities across New York City.

In Brooklyn, The Campaign Against Hunger used grant funding to provide weekend meals to homeless children to ensure they had food on days that school meals were not available. And in Manhattan, the Chinese-American Planning Council used grant funding to serve meals to children of essential healthcare and city service workers, helping to alleviate the financial strain caused by the pandemic and xenophobia. We also granted to both Food Bank For New York City and City Harvest to help expand their robust food distribution efforts across the five boroughs.

¹<https://labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/pruistat.shtm#:~:text=New%20York%20City's%20unemployment%20rate,to%201%2C527%2C800%20in%20July%202020>

² Gundersen, C., M. Hake, A. Dewey, E. Engelhard (2020). The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity v1 [Data file and FAQ]. Available from Feeding America: research@feedingamerica.org.

³ <https://otda.ny.gov/resources/caseload/2019/2019-06-stats.pdf>

Sadly, we know that COVID-19 has disproportionately harmed vulnerable populations across New York City. In particular, the pandemic has caused cascading hardship for many survivors of domestic violence as they contend with lost wages, court closures, and increased trauma around social isolation. To help survivors manage these challenges, the organizations Sanctuary for Families and Womankind used grant funding to provide grocery supplies for abuse survivors and their children.

Knowing the deep connection between New York City and Puerto Rico, I wanted to acknowledge the organizations working tirelessly to ensure children have regular access to food in Puerto Rico. In Carolina, Banco de Alimentos de Puerto Rico used grant funding to replenish its Children's Emergency Meal Program, ensuring kids get the food they need. Red por los Derechos de la Niñez y Juventud de Puerto Rico put grant funds toward a program that provided nutritious meals for kids during the COVID-19 crisis. No Kid Hungry also supports effort undertaken by the Salvation Army in Puerto Rico to address childhood hunger.

New York has taken important steps to maximize the SNAP waivers and flexibilities allowed under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and subsequent federal laws and USDA regulatory flexibilities. By doing so, many vulnerable children and families are able to access vital food assistance from SNAP and avert the consequences of food insecurity. Notably, NY has taken advantage of SNAP waivers and flexibilities to support vulnerable families and children and reduce the administrative burden on the SNAP administering agency, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), by:

- Proactively requesting USDA to approve emergency allotment of the maximum SNAP benefit level for eligible families. NY is approved for the month of September to provide the emergency allotment (EA). The state is eligible for month-to-month approval of the EA as long as the pandemic declaration and economic hardship persist.
- Continuing to operate its online SNAP purchasing pilot operation within the context of the pandemic. NY is the first state to be approved for an online SNAP purchasing pilot in 2019.
- Proactively requesting USDA to approve waivers related to SNAP benefits application and issuance requirements and processes such as an extension of the certification period by six months, adjustment of interview requirements, adoption of telephonic signature requirements, and a waiver of interview requirements for benefit applications and renewals.

These waivers provide program flexibilities that allow more individuals to access SNAP benefits.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Among the critical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity is one of the most widespread and solvable. As families continue to struggle financially, the indispensable role nutrition programs play in the lives of Americans has never been more evident. New York City has taken tremendous steps to address hunger, but here are some additional recommendations New York City agencies and specifically the Human Resources Administration can take to address the issue.

Encourage State and Federal Lawmakers to Prioritize SNAP Expansion and Improvements.

SNAP is one of the most effective and efficient ways to ensure that kids and families have the support they need to purchase food. It serves as a lifeline for many families, and helps to ensure that those who have fallen on hard times are able to access the nutrition they need to get back on their feet.

At the State level, we encourage New York City to support Assembly Bill 8764 which is currently before the State Senate. This legislation would establish a Restaurant Meals Program (RMP), which is a federal option available to all states through SNAP, in New York. Traditionally, SNAP assistance can only be used to purchase non-prepared grocery items. Through the RMP, this bill would allow homeless, disabled, and/or elderly residents to use their SNAP benefits to purchase hot or prepared food at approved restaurants and retailers. By making prepared food easier to access through SNAP, vulnerable populations in New York City would have more regular access to nutritious meals. In addition, SNAP funds spent at local restaurants would help struggling businesses stay afloat during this challenging time.

We also encourage you to support efforts by both the New York State Assembly and the New York State Senate to codify the online SNAP purchasing pilot program. New York was the first state authorized to implement this pilot in 2019. The program will help SNAP participating households to be able to access food without compromising their health and well-being amid the pandemic. In addition to helping families to access food in a socially distanced manner during this pandemic, the program would also address a range of other long-standing access barriers to SNAP such as lack of transportation and the core issue of stigma (especially at grocery checkouts), which is one of the major reasons many eligible families are reluctant to participate in the program.

SNAP expansion is also being considered at the Federal level in the next relief bill. We urge the Administration and the City Council to advocate for improvements to SNAP, including a 15 percent across-the-board increase and raising the minimum amount from \$16 to \$30. A modest increase in SNAP funds can help families continue to feed their children and themselves during this crisis. As referenced earlier, SNAP waivers and flexibilities were critical steps to make it simpler for eligible individuals to access SNAP benefits. We urge the Human Resources Administration to continue to work closely with OTDA to ensure New York State is applying for all federal waivers and flexibilities in regards to SNAP and other nutrition programs. Further, we urge the Administration and the New York City Council to engage the New York City Congressional Delegation in efforts to expand and extend critical waivers.

Inform Eligible Families about SNAP and Other Resources. With record unemployment numbers in New York City and across the country, safety net programs are more important than ever. Many families are struggling to put food on the table while balancing rent, health care costs, and other unavoidable expenses. Thankfully, federal programs like SNAP, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and P-EBT exist to help families get back on their feet during hard times. However, these programs only work when people can access them. With many New Yorkers qualifying for benefits for the first time and fear still associated with participation in some programs due to immigration status, there is a clear need for outreach efforts to inform communities about these programs and help eligible families enroll in them. These programs are important tools to help families in New York City weather this crisis, and investing in robust outreach campaigns, including interagency outreach campaigns, will help families keep their children healthy and fed.

Strengthen the Emergency Food Network. We urge the Administration and the New York City Council to continue to add funding and support for the emergency food network in New York City. Food pantries and soup kitchens are the last line of defense against hunger for many families. As the pandemic continues, emergency food providers across the city have been forced to close their doors. Now, food providers that have been able to stay open are facing a double whammy of increased need and fewer food providers to help meet the need. While New York City's infection rates have fallen dramatically, we know the crisis is far from over. We urge New York City to continue to prioritize support for food purchasing for food pantries and soup kitchen as well as financial support to increase staffing, storage and other operational support.

Leverage Available Federal Resources to Help Provide Food Assistance. As the economic ramifications of the pandemic continue to affect New York City, we urge the Administration to explore every opportunity to keep kids and families from going hungry. For instance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is issuing grants through the Public Assistance Grant Program in response to the pandemic. State, local, and tribal governments are eligible for these Public Assistance grants during a disaster or emergency to cover qualifying costs, including those associated with the purchase and distribution of food, not covered by other federal programs. There may be opportunities for the Administration to leverage these grants or other programs to support initiatives that provide food assistance in New York City.

CONCLUSION

New York City is facing a time of unprecedented challenges and devastating loss. Despite the vast challenges that the pandemic has brought, we have seen New York City residents come together in solidarity with one another. In order to rebuild stronger and help struggling New Yorkers, it is essential that we all continue to work together to help the City rise again. As you address the many obstacles ahead of us, I urge the Administration and the New York City Council to continue to prioritize programs that ensure no New Yorker faces hunger. No Kid Hungry New York stands at the ready to work with the Council and our fellow New Yorkers to ensure all children and families have access to the food they need to thrive.



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Testimony prepared by Nicholas Buess

on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

for the

New York City Council Committee on General Welfare

on

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens

September 21, 2020

Thank you, Chair Levin and members of the City Council, for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Food Bank For New York City. My name is Nicholas Buess and I am the Associate Director for Mobilization and Policy at Food Bank For New York City. Our organization partners with nearly 1,000 member charities across the five boroughs including food pantries and soup kitchens, shelters, senior centers, schools and other providers of emergency food, income support services, and nutrition education to New Yorkers in need.

About Food Bank For New York City

Food Bank's food distribution program provided nearly **80 million free meals** for New Yorkers in need in FY20 alone. This work would not be possible without the support of the City Council and partnership with many City administrative agencies. Food Bank is the distribution partner for New York City's Emergency Food Assistance Program (**EFAP**) which is the City's baseline support for food pantries and soup kitchens, providing food to over 500 direct service organizations. Additionally, the City Council **Food Pantries Initiatives** supports over 200 emergency food providers across the five boroughs, as well as 25 school-based food pantries which in addition to food provide essential personal hygiene products. The Council's **Food Access and Benefits** initiative is key funding for our income support services, helping New Yorkers apply and recertify for SNAP, providing free tax assistance, and building the capacity of our emergency food network to offer expanded benefits outreach and assistance. Combined, these **income support services put nearly \$38 million** into the pockets of low-income New Yorkers last year. Food Bank's nutrition education programs support New York City public school teachers to provide curriculums, training and supplies that **empower nearly 23,000 children, teens and adults in the past year alone to sustain a healthy diet on a limited budget.**



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Emergency Food Service Faces the Pandemic

Rising Need

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic, New Yorkers experienced a **Meal Gap of over 185 million meals**. The Meal Gap is New York City's measure for food hardship, and is the difference, measured in meals, between a household being food-insecure and food-secure. Today, as workers have lost wages and unemployment has topped 20% (a five-fold increase from the previous year), the need for food assistance has grown and more New Yorker rely on SNAP, emergency food, and other programs such as the City's home delivery program GetFood, grab-and-go meals at public schools, and Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT), the federal grocery benefit for families with children who qualify for free school meals, for daily nutrition.

COVID's impact on food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City was immediate. **By April, 75% of the food pantries and soup kitchens reported increased food need** since just months earlier, and more than **half of pantries reported running out of food**. Many parts of the network saw the average number of people served double, and our own direct service location – **The Community Kitchen of West Harlem – served nearly three times as many people compared to the same time period in 2019**. Many New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity for the first-time utilized Food Bank's food program locator to help navigate the emergency food network, which has been accessed over 1 million times since March.

Expanding Service

As the pandemic put added strains on New Yorker households, it also strained the emergency food network, which relies heavily on charity and volunteer service. At the height of the pandemic during the NY PAUSE order, **over a third of emergency food programs were forced to make difficult decisions to suspend service**. Agencies that continue to serve quickly shifted their distribution to protect themselves and their clients, and Food Bank stepped up to support expand distributions at agencies that were able to continue service. Central to this expansion effort was activating key **Community Response Partners** - agencies in each borough with the capacity to extended hours of service and offer innovative distributions such as drive-through or appointment-based pickup.

Food Bank has also worked to support non-traditional food distribution such as at NYCHA developments to reach New Yorkers with limited mobility during the NY PAUSE order, and create pop-up distributions at locations including Lincoln Center, Yankee Stadium, Barclay's Center, New York Hall of Science, and Snug Harbor on Staten Island. Distributions at these iconic locations provide access to New Yorkers who may not otherwise know about the emergency food network. **We are grateful to City Council members who have helped publicize these events** as well as the continued outreach and assistance to connect constituents with food resources.

Our Warehouse staff based in the Hunts Point Cooperative Market continued the essential work of food distribution, and has served over **30 million meals since the start of the pandemic**. Resilient and dedicated, many network programs have now reopened, although approximately



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16% of food programs within our network continue to suspend service due to concerns for the health and safety of volunteers and staff.

Strengthening Nutrition Programs for New Yorkers

Addressing SNAP Sufficiency

While emergency food 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 providing 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 more New Yorkers face lost wages, 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.**

We are grateful that New York City and State have worked in coordination to take essential actions that allow program flexibility to maximize SNAP and other federal assistance for New Yorkers in need. We applaud the Human Resources Administration (HRA) for this work as well as their partnership with the Department of Education (DOE) for their citywide outreach efforts for P-EBT. But even as more people have qualified for these benefits, and as benefit levels have increased temporarily, **the cost of meals continues to rise, averaging over \$4/meal across NYC and surpassing \$6/meal in Manhattan** – double the national average, which means grocery budgets are still falling short. By the end of this calendar year, New Yorkers are facing a one-two punch of not only the potential loss or reduction of federal nutrition assistance programs like P-EBT and SNAP, but also time-limited emergency food resources like Trade Mitigation and the Farmers to Families Food Box programs.

Federal Nutrition Assistance

In May, the House of Representatives passed the HEROES Act which included key anti-hunger priorities to help address this benefit insufficiency including a **15% increase in household SNAP benefits, raising minimum benefit levels from \$16 to \$30 per month, and halting any new rule changes that make benefits harder to get and keep.** The HEROES Act also includes new funding for TEFAP, the federal funding for food banks for purchasing commodity food from farmers and for the storage and distribution of that food.

Disappointedly, the Senate Majority Leader put forth a separate legislation package that neglected to include any of these anti-hunger protections. While that measure did not pass the Senate, New Yorkers cannot wait out a federal stalemate and New York City must continue to lead to protect our neighbors from hunger.



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New York City's Commitment

Thanks to the leadership of Speaker Corey Johnson, the City Council took swift action to establish **emergency funding for food pantries and soup kitchens** which is now providing food and essential operational support to the network. Food Bank is working closely with other membership organizations and the Mayor's Office of Food Policy to administer these funds, and is responsible for coordinating with one third of the direct service organizations receiving support. These awards have been instrumental to supporting the increased operations costs of the network in the immediate term, but as funds will be fully dispersed by the end of October, the network will need additional investments for continued service. In the FY21 City Budget, New York also committed to significant additional funding for the Pandemic Food Reserve Emergency Distribution (P-FRED) program. **This City's plan for long-term hunger relief should include ongoing expanded funding for food and infrastructure costs of emergency food distribution** through the city-wide program EFAP and continued coordination with not-for-profit organizations who have the experience and community connection to address community need.

Addressing hunger in the wake of COVID-19 will be a marathon, not a sprint. The pandemic has precipitated a long-term crisis that will require a long-term response through funding for emergency food providers, improved access to benefits, and continued advocacy to ensure and expand New Yorker's access to federal nutrition programs. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. We are confident that our continued partnership will be essential for New York's response and recovery from COVID-19.

###

NEW YORK COVID-19 FOOD COALITION

Testimony Submitted by
Gabrielle Blavatsky, Policy Director of Equity Advocates
On behalf of the NY COVID-19 Food Coalition
Before the NYC Council Committee on General Welfare

Oversight Hearing on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on
SNAP Administration, Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens

September 21, 2020

My name is Gabrielle Blavatsky and I am the Co-Founder and Policy Director of Equity Advocates. Thank you to Chairman Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee for holding today's oversight hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Equity Advocates works to ensure all New Yorkers have access to healthy, affordable food by building the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address the underlying causes of food inequity through policy and systems change. We partner with New York-based organizations working to alleviate hunger and poverty, providing them with the tools they need to be more civically engaged—including policy education, advocacy training and coalition building services.

New York was the first American epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic. This crisis is causing major disruptions to our food system and is exacerbating poverty and food inequity across the state. A [poll released on September 9th](#) from National Public Radio found that in New York City, more than half of households have reported serious financial problems during the pandemic, compared with 46% of households nationally. This survey also found that the crisis is further exacerbating the wealth, income and food security divide between racial and ethnic groups, with 62% of Black households and 73% of Latino Households reporting serious problems paying major bills and or buying food since March.¹ These numbers are guaranteed to climb over the next few months given that the City's unemployment rate is close to 20%, a rate not seen since the Great Depression.

As a result, our city's emergency food providers including food banks and soup kitchens are experiencing unprecedented demand for their services. According to a June report from the Food Bank for New York City, 75% of food pantries and soup kitchens surveyed reported serving more New Yorkers in April 2020 than in the months leading up to COVID-19, with nearly one-third (31%) reporting their number of visitors more than doubling². The pandemic has also

¹ Neel, Joe. "NPR Poll: Financial Pain From Coronavirus Pandemic 'Much, Much Worse' Than Expected". Sept 9, 2020. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/09/909669760/npr-poll-financial-pain-from-coronavirus-pandemic-much-much-worse-than-expected?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social

² Food Bank for NYC. Hunger Report: Food Bank Releases Update on Food Insecurity During Covid-19. June 9, 2020. <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/update-on-food-insecurity-during-covid-19/>

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NEW YORK COVID-19 FOOD COALITION

led to an increase in SNAP participation as well, with the NY State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance reporting in June an 6.7% in SNAP participation from this time last year.³

In response, Equity Advocates organized the New York Covid-19 Food Coalition: a diverse multi-sector group of close to 40 food system stakeholders including frontline nonprofits and CBOs. The mission of this coalition is to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to today's crisis, but also address the vulnerabilities and injustices of the current food system. Our coalition promotes equity, collaboration, and inclusion in COVID-19 responses to ensure communities of color and other systemically under resourced communities benefit from the recovery and prosperity following the crisis.

We are advocating for resources to ensure that the local food system and supply chain remains intact, that all families are able to access the food and support they need, and that front line community embedded organizations can respond effectively to the crisis. We call upon our representatives and policy makers across New York City to work strategically, quickly and collaboratively with our communities to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. We urge you to direct resources and support towards the following recommendations to help address and alleviate the growing hunger crisis in New York City :

1. Provide additional resources to emergency food providers to meet the unprecedented demand for their services:

- ***Clear all hurdles to immediately disperse the \$25 million in Emergency Funding for Food Providers that was promised to anti-hunger nonprofits across the city in April.*** Provide flexibility in timing when funds are distributed and when reporting needs to be completed. Ensure that this funding can be used for personnel costs, shelf stable food and PPE for staff.
- ***Allocate resources to connect NYC nonprofits with seniors and other vulnerable populations in need of food by fully funding discretionary via Council Members, Caucuses and Delegations in FY22.*** Numerous NY based CBOs and emergency food providers are well equipped and eager to prepare and deliver food and prepared meals to seniors and other vulnerable populations right now. City Council Discretionary Funding often represents a large portion of small community based nonprofits' budgets, many of which are led by, serve and are embedded in communities of color. This support from the city is now more critical than ever as demand for emergency services has increased significantly since the start of the pandemic.

2. Streamline application process for public benefits on the City level.

- ***Enable all eligible people to obtain the multiple benefits for which they are eligible through a single, easy-to-complete, application, available online in paper form and by phone.*** In addition, contact information for CBOs should be

³ NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Statistics June 2020.
<https://otda.ny.gov/resources/caseload/2020/2020-06-stats.pdf>

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NEW YORK COVID-19 FOOD COALITION

included in Access NYC and Access HRA to better support the increased need for enrollment assistance in social programs like SNAP and WIC.

4. **Extend and provide more input and transparency into NYC Food Czar Team's Work.**

- ***We call on the City Council to hold an Oversight Hearing on the Food Czar Team and the City's emergency food work in response to COVID-19.***

According to the Comptroller's office, over \$400 million has been allocated to be spent on various emergency food activities being overseen by the Food Czar team since the start of COVID-19. Yet, little to no information has been made available to advocates or City Council on the details of these activities in the weekly calls they've been holding or through specific requests. An Oversight Hearing would improve transparency and assess how equitable the Administration's response has been to this crisis. The coalition is particularly interested in learning: 1) Where have 311 requests for food been coming from by zip code/neighborhood 2) Where GetFood portal deliveries have been going by zip code/neighborhood 3) What vendors were awarded contracts to do food deliveries through GetFood Portal 4) What kind of food has been delivered through the GetFood Portal by zip code/neighborhood? 5) Whether the existing grab and go meal sites meeting needs and the participation levels at each site. In addition, the CUNY Urban Food Institute, Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy and Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center were recently given philanthropic funds to conduct an independent assessment of the effects of COVID-19 on NYC's food system as well as the City's response to the pandemic. We urge the City Council to encourage the Mayor's Office of Food Policy and the Food Czar team to sign an MOU and commit to be transparent and provide all requested data to the independent assessment team.

- ***Keep Get Food Deliveries going through the end of the Fiscal Year for vulnerable populations.*** Along with deliveries provide information on how participants can access additional nutrition benefit programs. Publish a transition plan for what will happen to the Get Food Portal and deliveries once pandemic is over.

5. **Support community gardens and urban farms so they can feed communities in need during this crisis.**

- ***We urge the NYC Government's GreenThumb Office and the Parks Department to negotiate a better Community Garden License Agreement.***

The current license agreement is flawed and inconsistent and many community gardens have refused to sign them. Some of these gardens have had their water cut off by the City as a result and are unable to grow or distribute food directly to their communities or operate their CSA programs. We ask for the following changes to be made to the license agreements quickly so gardens can support communities in crisis and prepare for next growing season:

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- Remove the Termination-at-Will clause and clarify that only current default will cause the NYC Parks Commissioner to deny to renew or terminate a License.
- Remove the Assumption of Risk clause and the sole liability placed on the community gardens and have NYC Parks purchase liability insurance for the community gardens.
- Remove the community gardeners' blanket Waiver of their Right to a Trial by Jury clause.
- Fix the event permitting requirements and the inconsistent language between the License, the Handbook, and the Parks Rules & Regulations.
- ***We call upon NYC Council to pass [Int.1653-2019](#) to permit the sale of agriculture within community gardens and require the Department of Parks and Recreation to collect and report data regarding community gardens.***
This bill would not only help community gardens and gardeners become more self-sufficient, but would also create new healthy food retail outlets in underserved communities.

6. Expand, promote and streamline students' access to food.

- ***The City should allocate additional funding to HRA and 311 to ensure these agencies have enough resources to promote and educate New Yorkers about Pandemic-EBT and other social safety net programs.*** CBOs and EFPs are already over capacity and under-resourced. The City should take responsibility for conducting direct outreach to families eligible for P-EBT and educating them about the program. In addition, the City should prepare FAQ info to customer service representatives at 311 and HRA about the program so they can answer incoming questions and direct people to the new OTDA hotline.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

For more information please contact:

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NEW YORK COVID-19 FOOD COALITION

Platform Signatories

21 in '21

A Place at the Table

Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation

Bread for the World NY

Brownsville Community Development Corporation

Bronx Eats, Inc.

Bronx Health REACH/Institute for Family Health

Children's Aid

Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

City Harvest

Cleaver Co.

Community Food Advocates

CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute

East New York Farms!/United

Community Centers

Edible Schoolyard NYC

Equity Advocates

Food Bank for New York City

Food Issues Group

helpNYC

Hunger Free America

Hunger Solutions New York

La Familia Verde Community Garden Coalition

Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education and Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University

Los Sures/Southside United

New Settlement Apartments

New York City Community Garden Coalition

New York City Council

Member Ben Kallos

Red Hook Initiative

RiseBoro Community Partnership

Rockaway Youth Task Force

Teens for Food Justice

The Salvation Army

UJA-Federation

United Neighborhood Houses

United Way of New York City

Universe City NYC

West Side Campaign Against Hunger

Wellness in the Schools

Women in Hospitality United

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**Testimony of The Legal Aid Society
Before the New York City Council Committee
on General Welfare**

**Oversight Hearing on The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic
on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens**

September 21, 2020

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The Legal Aid Society welcomes this opportunity to testify before the New York City Council's Committee on General Welfare today on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP administration, food pantries, and soup kitchens. There are many ways in which the City of New York seeks to address hunger, but our focus today is on our area of expertise: access to government benefits, including SNAP and cash assistance, benefits that New Yorkers use to purchase food.

The Legal Aid Society

Since 1876, The Legal Aid Society has provided direct legal services to low-income New Yorkers. Over the years, our organization has expanded to become the nation's largest and oldest legal services provider for low-income individuals and families. We specialize in three distinct practice areas: Criminal Defense, Civil Litigation, and Juvenile Rights, where we passionately advocate for our clients in their individual cases, for their communities in our policy work, and for institutional change in our law reform litigation. Each year our staff handles over 300,000 cases throughout New York City, the Society takes on more cases for more clients than any other legal services organization in the United States, and it brings a depth and breadth of perspective that is unmatched in the legal profession. The Society's law reform/social justice advocacy also benefits some two million low-income families and individuals in New York City, and the landmark rulings in many of these cases have a national impact. The Legal Aid Society provides comprehensive representation to many of the most marginalized communities in New York. We are a valuable piece of the New York City tapestry, and our work is deeply interwoven within the fabric of many low-income New Yorkers' lives.

The Society's Civil Practice provides comprehensive legal assistance in legal matters involving housing, foreclosure and homelessness; family law and domestic violence; income and economic security assistance (such as unemployment insurance benefits, federal disability benefits, food stamps, and public assistance); health law; immigration; HIV/AIDS and chronic diseases; elder law for senior citizens; low-wage worker problems; tax law; consumer law; education law; community development opportunities to help clients move out of poverty; and reentry and reintegration matters for clients returning to the community from correctional facilities.

I. BACKGROUND

A. COVID's impact on New York City: Disproportionately Impacting Communities of Color

New York City was the epicenter of the world's COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, over 244,000 residents have tested positive for COVID-19. Over 23,000 New Yorkers have died.¹ Nine of the top ten zip codes in New York City with the highest infection rates are in Queens and the Bronx.² More people have died in the Bronx, Queens and Kings counties than in all other states in the Union but two.³ The Bronx is the City's poorest borough; it has the highest concentration of people of color; and it has experienced the highest tolls of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths.⁴ Data from the City's own health system shows deep disparities in who is affected by COVID-19, with mortality rates tied to race and income. Neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of Black and Latinx people, as well as low-income residents, have suffered the highest death rates.⁵ The CDC reports that regardless of age, Latinx and Black people are respectively 4-5 times more likely than white people to be hospitalized due to COVID-19.⁶ "[A]s more data becomes available, one thing is clear: COVID-19 has only magnified the systemic inequalities that persist in the United States. And nonwhite Americans, especially African Americans, have been hit hard on nearly every front."⁷

B. Even Before COVID, 40 Percent of New Yorkers Experienced Food Hardship: COVID- Has Worsened the Crisis

Unfortunately, even before COVID-19 hit New York City, approximately 40 percent of New Yorkers experienced food hardship, which is defined as households that experienced a food shortage or worried that they would run out of food at some point in the year.⁸ Like COVID-19, food hardship is greatest in certain neighborhoods. For example, in the Bronx, one of the areas hardest hit by COVID-19,

¹ New York City Covid Map and Case Count, Sept. 20, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/nyregion/new-york-city-coronavirus-cases.html>

² *Id.* See also Michael Schwartz and Lindsey Rogers Cook, These N.Y.C. Neighborhoods Have the Highest Rates of Virus Deaths, N.Y. TIMES, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/nyregion/coronavirus-deaths-nyc.html>.

³ As of July, Queens (5875 deaths), Kings (5548 deaths), and Bronx (3858 deaths) surpass all but the States of New Jersey (15,525) and New York State as a whole (29,585). All three counties and New York County (2472 deaths) are within the deadliest top 7 counties of the country. Johns Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Center (Last Updated July 9, 2020) <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map>

⁴ Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, Winnie Hu and Lindsey Rogers Cook, 'It's the Death Towers': How the Bronx Became New York's Virus Hot Spot, N.Y. TIMES, May 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/nyregion/bronx-coronavirus-outbreak.html>.

⁵ Michael Schwartz and Lindsey Rogers Cook, These N.Y.C. Neighborhoods Have the Highest Rates of Virus Deaths, N.Y. TIMES, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/nyregion/coronavirus-deaths-nyc.html>.

⁶ COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Updated June 25, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.

⁷ Kaur, Harmeet, The coronavirus pandemic is hitting black and brown Americans especially hard on all fronts CNN (May 8, 2020) <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/08/us/coronavirus-pandemic-race-impact-trnd/index.html>.

⁸ Sarah Gordis, Sophie Collyer and Christopher Wimer, Poverty Tracker -Mapping Hunger in New York City: A Look at the Rate of Food Hardship in New York City Neighborhoods, Columbia Population Research Center, Nov. 2019 at 3.

70 percent of New Yorkers in the neighborhoods of Concourse, Highbridge, and Mount Eden (CD BX-4) experienced food hardship.⁹ Food hardship in those neighborhoods was 30 percentage points higher than the citywide average.¹⁰

For New Yorkers struggling to put food on the table, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits play a critical role in helping to fill the gap between a family's resources and the price of a low-cost food diet. Research shows that SNAP reduces poverty and food insecurity, and that over the long term, these impacts lead to improved health and economic outcomes, especially for those who receive SNAP as children.¹¹ Moreover, Cash Assistance benefits also play a critical role in providing New Yorkers with resources to feed their families.

II. New Yorkers Face Heightened Barriers to Securing SNAP Benefits and Cash Assistance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

We appreciate the extraordinary efforts made by our colleagues who work to fight food insecurity in New York City, many of whom are testifying today. It has been amazing to witness the work of those who provide food, meals and benefits to New Yorkers in need during this pandemic. We also appreciate the hard work of the management and staff of the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) to provide SNAP and cash assistance benefits needed by New Yorkers to purchase food in their time of need. HRA staff and leadership have worked long hours in trying conditions, in many cases risking their own health to do so. We applaud many of the creative initiatives taken by HRA to expand access to government benefits during this pandemic.

Unfortunately, there are still barriers that are preventing many New Yorkers from accessing SNAP and cash assistance benefits during this pandemic because among other things, HRA is failing to provide accessible alternatives to its online system to apply for benefits and it lacks a functional telephone systems to serve its constituents. We urge the Council to exercise its oversight authority to ensure that HRA takes the steps needed to address these barriers to ensure that all eligible New Yorkers can access these vital benefits.

To help stop the spread of COVID-19, HRA has closed most of its SNAP and Job Centers. There are now only seven open centers in the city: one each in Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island and two in Brooklyn and the Bronx. HRA has directed its clients to use the agency's computerized system known as ACCESS HRA to apply for benefits and to report changes in their circumstances. In order to use ACCESS HRA, clients must have a computer or smartphone with available data, as well as the ability to navigate this online system.

The reality is that many New Yorkers cannot access online services – be it due to lack of access to Internet, lack of digital skills, or an intersection of digital and other accessibility barriers. HRA has and will continue to miss thousands of clients if they make access to benefits reliant on access to online platforms. As of March 2020, about 30 percent of New York City residents, or 2.2 million individuals,

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Chartbook: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table (Nov. 7, 2019) <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table>.

lacked broadband internet access, including 350,000 who only access internet through cell phones or tablets.¹² Seniors are much more likely to be without a broadband internet connection compared to the general population: 42 percent of New Yorkers 65 years-old and above lacked broadband internet access, compared to 23 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds. Further, recent studies indicate that 15 percent of Black and Latinx New York City residents have no internet access compared to 11 percent of White New York City residents.¹³ Getting connected to a website or app is only part of the barrier. Even if clients are connected to the Internet, they may not have the technical skills to complete an online application on their own. They may miss a key part of the application, accidentally exit the application, or be kicked off due to an HRA server error. Ultimately, barriers that they may face elsewhere, such as language accessibility and disabilities, are compounded and unlike at the Job Centers, they cannot turn to an HRA worker for assistance.

HRA has not provided adequate alternatives to ACCSS HRA. For clients who need to avoid the risk of visiting a crowded HRA center during the pandemic, the only way to get help from HRA is by calling HRA’s central phone line known as Infoline (718-557-1399) which is often busy and often hangs up on callers because of system overload. Clients have difficulty reaching the line, face wait times when they do get through and then must listen to a complex menu to figure out how to get help. Callers to Infoline hear a mandatory two-minute message which is very detailed and complex, and then the caller hears a menu with *seventeen* options, which in turn, have *additional* submenus. It is not easy to reach an agent and it is difficult to get services in languages other than English. Moreover, when a caller does manage to get through, the agent is not an HRA “worker” who can fix the client’s individual case. At best, the agent provides information and takes a message providing the caller with a confirmation number and promising that an HRA staffer will call back or attend to the client’s problem. However, callers often do not hear back – or do not hear back in a timely way.

SNAP applicants can get help applying from various community organizations – but this option is not available to Cash Assistance clients. HRA has received a waiver to enable the agency to take applications over the phone to serve such clients who are unable to apply online. But most Infoline agents do not accurately advise clients of this option and clients are told to come in person to a center. In some cases, clients are not given the phone application option and are instead mailed a lengthy and complex paper application – without instructions on how to complete it, how to submit supporting documents, or where to mail it back.¹⁴

Perhaps the most significant barrier faced by clients of HRA during the pandemic is that many have their applications denied because they cannot connect with HRA by telephone to have a mandatory eligibility interview. One of the main reasons these telephone eligibility interviews fail to happen is simple: HRA has failed to provide its staffers with telephones that can be called back by clients. Prior to COVID, each HRA staffer had a telephone number with voicemail that could be called back by clients. Now because of COVID, most HRA staffers are working remotely from home and are using internet

¹² Scott Stringer, *Census and the City: Overcoming NYC’s Digital Divide in the 2020 Census*, Office of the New York City Comptroller (July 2019), at 5. https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Census_and_The_City_Overcoming_NYC_Digital_Divide_Census.pdf.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ For a more detailed description of these problems with Infoline see Kiana Davis and Sameer Jain, *Failing Phones: City Infoline Leaves New Yorkers in Need Without Help*, Urban Justice Center Safety Net Project, Aug. 2020 <https://snp.urbanjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/08/HRA-Infoline-Report.pdf>.

phone applications which cannot be called back. One of the most frustrating problems we all have with our cell phones is that often the phone does not ring and the call goes straight to voice mail. We are all used to dealing with this problem by immediately dialing the caller back. Yet when an HRA client misses a call from an HRA staffer, they cannot just pick up the phone and immediately dial the HRA staffer back to have their mandatory interview because there is no phone number to dial back. Instead, they must call Infoline or another centralized number given by HRA and leave a message with a telephone agent which will be relayed to the staffer and then after a delay, hope that they will be get another call back. After two attempts to reach a client by telephone, HRA denies the application.

These missed calls have devastating consequences and the problem is widespread. HRA data reporting reveals that a dramatic number of applicants fail to connect to HRA for their phone interview and thus, do not manage to get benefits. During the most recent period reported by HRA, April to June, 2020, a total of 13,650 Cash Assistance applications were rejected for “Failure to Keep/Complete Interview.” This number is enormous – especially since there were only 1,397 such rejections during the quarter January to March.^{15 16}

And this problem with failing to connect by phone will only get worse. Up until this month, HRA has been able to put off “recertifications” for SNAP and Cash Assistance, the process which normally requires clients to complete recertification paperwork and have an interview in order to continue to receive benefits. Because of COVID, the State and Federal governments permitted HRA to delay these recertifications until this month. But now, even though New Yorkers are still fighting the pandemic and the vast majority of HRA staff are working from home, HRA clients will once again be subject to recertifications. This means that those clients who currently receive benefits who are subject to recertification and do not connect with HRA to have their eligibly interview by phone, will have their cases closed and will lose benefits. Each month approximately 50,000 New York City residents will be subject to recertifications – many stand to lose benefits because they will not be able to reach HRA.

III. Non-Citizens Face Specific Barriers to Securing SNAP Benefits and Cash Assistance During the COVID-19 Pandemic Because of the Public Charge Rule

Many of our non-citizen clients forgo benefits they urgently need because of the Public Charge Rule. Public Charge is a legal term used in immigration law. It is used by immigration officials primarily when someone is applying for lawful permanent residence, or “green card” status, as well as in some other limited situations. If someone is considered a public charge, their application for a green card will be denied. Because someone’s receipt of certain benefits can be considered under the Public Charge Rule, many non-citizens are understandably afraid to receive any benefits, and even food pantry assistance, because they fear becoming public charges.

The current Public Charge rules introduced last year by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of State (DOS) have for the first time broadened the benefits that count for public charge purposes to include SNAP and several other new categories of benefits, including Federal

¹⁵ Because of certain USDA partial interview waivers that were in place, it is not clear how many SNAP applications required interviews and how many were denied for failure to complete a phone interview during the most recent reported quarter, April to June, 2020.

¹⁶ Local Laws 168 and 170 Reports, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/news/legal-notice-rules.page>.

Medicaid and Section 8, as well as public housing. While the Society has mounted litigation to stop these rules, and has been successful in stopping them for various periods, the rules continue to cause fear among non-citizens who need benefits, even benefits that are not within the purview of the rule. *See Make the Road NY v. Cuccinelli* (challenging the DHS Public Charge Rule; rule is currently in effect while appeals are being pursued); *Make the Road NY v. Pompeo* (challenging the DOS Public Charge Rule; rule is currently not in effect because of an injunction plaintiffs obtained from the Court). The impact of this fear is particularly devastating in the context of the pandemic, where the need for assistance is greater and the ramifications of going without benefits, whether food assistance needed to stay healthy, or medical care, can be lethal.

At the Society, we have witnessed first-hand how misinformation about the Public Charge Rule poses a significant barrier to accessing benefits like SNAP and Cash Assistance. Many of our non-citizen clients are categorically exempt from the Public Charge Rule, meaning that the rule has no bearing on their eligibility for immigration status, yet these same clients believe they cannot use benefits because of inaccurate information circulating in their communities. We also have non-citizen clients who are not eligible for benefits themselves, yet have family members, such as U.S. citizen children, who are eligible for these benefits and who may safely receive them. Many of these clients also forgo benefits in fear that their family members' receipt of benefits will negatively impact them, even though there is no such negative impact, in most cases. At the Society, we help clients understand the Public Charge Rule, yet still see how misinformation and fear permeates our clients' communities, leaving them vulnerable to hunger, poverty, and more. While we continue to fight the Public Charge Rule in courts and seek to get correct information out to the clients and communities we serve, the chilling effect caused by the rules makes the recommendations set forth below, which would remove barriers to assistance for all, even more critically important for all of our clients.

IV. Recommendations

We respectfully submit the following recommendations that would help the City address the hunger needs of New Yorkers:

A. Replace Infoline Without Delay.

HRA's central phone line system is complex, unwieldy and lacks adequate capacity to meet client needs. HRA does not plan on replacing it until one year from now. New Yorkers need to be able to contact HRA by phone now – to access benefits, reduce the spread of COVID and avoid in-person visits to crowded HRA centers.

B. Give HRA Staffers Phones that Can Be Called Back and Do Not Reject Applications or Close Cases for Failing to Recertify Until this Option is in Place.

Give HRA clients a fair chance to get applications approved and recertify to keep their benefits – enable them to call back HRA staffers directly. Give HRA remote staff phones which can be called back.

C. Provide Realistic Alternatives to Applying Online:

- Provide widespread information about the availability of phone applications, train HRA staff on this option and ensure adequate staffing to take phone applications.
- Create community partnerships with nonprofit organizations to help New Yorkers apply for Cash Assistance benefits in addition to SNAP.
- Improve procedures on providing paper applications: provide accurate information on the complexity of these forms and provide understandable information on how to complete and return them as well as return postage and drop boxes to submit them.

D. Advocate for continued waivers with the Federal government to ensure that New Yorkers can access SNAP benefits.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has issued some waivers to New York State which has permitted HRA to expand access to SNAP benefits. For example, USDA permitted HRA to delay recertifications and thus, focus the agency's resources on new applicants for SNAP during the beginning of the pandemic. Unfortunately, USDA has discontinued many of these waivers. HRA should continue to advocate with the state Office Of Temporary and Disability Assistance to attempt to get continued waivers from USDA.

E. Require HRA to Provide Complete Data.

HRA has posted data to its website to comply with a series of bills passed by the Council last year.¹⁷ The data include application outcomes and recertification denials. But HRA should be required to provide a denominator for the data –so the Council can determine the percentage of applications rejected and percentage of cases subject to recertification that were closed during each period. HRA should also provide data on the method of applications: online, at Job Centers, on paper, and by telephone.

F. Fight Food Hardship by Preventing Evictions: Help New Yorkers Access Rental Assistance Benefits by Creating a “One-Stop” Portal for Tenants to File a Single Application for Rental Assistance.

Because stable housing plays an important role in a family's continued health just as SNAP benefits do, we urge the Council to take steps to provide online access regarding rental assistance as provided in a bill considered by the Committee at its hearing on Thursday, T202-6576. In addition to what is provided for in that bill, we recommend creating a “One-Stop” portal for tenants to file a single application for rental assistance and be able to track such an application. Such a “one-stop” portal where tenants can file a single application for rental assistance should contain pertinent information for the full range of available assistance instead of the current process which involves multiple applications and

¹⁷ Local Laws 168 and 170 Reports, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/news/legal-notices-rules.page>.

multiple points of contact. We recognize that such a portal may require the partnership of the State but ultimately it will be more efficient for the government agencies, contracted community partners and tenants, and such a system has fewer negative public health consequences. It also has the added benefit of making it easier for landlords to directly upload documents needed to complete the process of obtaining assistance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, The Legal Aid Society commends the City Council's efforts to battle food hardship during the COVID-19 crisis. We thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today.

Respectfully Submitted:

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Testimony Submitted by
Chef Gregory Silverman, West Side Campaign Against Hunger
Before the City Council Committee on General Welfare

My name is Chef Gregory Silverman and I am the Executive Director of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH). We thank the New York City Council for holding today's hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

I am here today, representing the West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) and our **community** of almost 20,000 families who come to us from across NYC to gain access to healthy food and supportive services. Founded in 1979, West Side Campaign Against Hunger is the country's first supermarket-style, multi-service food pantry, and one of the largest emergency food providers in New York City. The West Side Campaign Against Hunger alleviates hunger by ensuring that all New Yorkers have access with **dignity** to a **choice** of healthy food and supportive services.

In the last year, we provided over 2.2 million pounds of food, which included over 1 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables, to nearly 40,000 individuals in need. Our customers are overjoyed that we serve 46% fresh produce, this is unheard of anywhere else in NYC, let alone the United States. Fresh, healthy, appetizing produce helps us battle not only short term food insecurity but support the health and well being of families in need. As the speaker has said, ***"Access to adequate nutritious food is a human right..."***

New York emerged as the first American the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic. This crisis is causing major disruptions to our food system and is exacerbating poverty and food inequity across the city, the state and our entire planet. Each and every emergency feeding organization in NYC has fought this pandemic battle in its own way and with power, grace, and innovation. We have moved operations to the street, moved social services virtual, created new partnerships, and engaged larger networks in need. Each and every one of us can tell this story.

This past year, specifically due to the impact of COVID-19, WSCAH has seen, and continues to see an increase of food insecurity across the city. This past year, across all our 22 sites, which include our Mobile Market sites and 86th Street Location, we've served 20,899 households, which equals to 35,506 unique individuals. This is a 71% increase in unique individuals served. And, due to the pandemic, there are also newly vulnerable individuals and families.

At the beginning of the pandemic, our team noticed that even though we were seeking a huge spike in new customers, we were seeing a rapid decline in older adult customers. We quickly partnered with United Way and Doordash, a food delivery carrier to deliver healthy pantry items to the most vulnerable. We are now expanding this partnership through Uber Eats to reach even more older adults and families who may have barriers due to their children and remote

learning. I use this example as its evidence of power of collaboration, something that is essential, but essentially lacking in many of the efforts being driven across the city today!

Bringing food to people is one more way to ensure dignity in emergency feeding. Using technology to expand individual choice of food, delivery options, communications, etc is key for our efforts going forward and WSCAH will be investing over a million dollars in year ahead to build out collaborative, choice model food delivery technology platform to make these options and choices a reality for the community and welcome city support for this.

Our social service team continues to serve our customers through a virtual call center. Our team conducts outreach to new customers, ensuring they know about our services. For example, recently, a 64 year old woman who lost her employment as a home attendant due to COVID-19 reached out to WSCAH seeking support. As a new customer, she went through our comprehensive intake assessment.

One of our Community Resource Specialists assisted her by pre-screening for SNAP benefits and applying for Medicaid and unemployment benefits. She was approved for \$109 of Expedited SNAP benefits and \$194 of ongoing SNAP benefits. She was also approved for Medicaid and unemployment benefits of \$504 in weekly payments as well as the weekly pandemic unemployment of \$600 which she started receiving the week after she applied. She also received her back weekly payments of \$9,336. Our customer needed support in navigating the safety net and organizations like WSCAH are here to provide it!

As previously stated, we don't do this work in isolation, it's only possible through collaboration. WSCAH built out over the last 2 years a collective model of engagement with 6 of the largest Emergency Food Providers in the city: St. John's Bread and Life, Project Hospitality, NY Common Pantry, Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, Met Council, and the West Side Campaign Against Hunger. This collective has not only helped us save upwards of 20% on our food purchases, but helped us navigate COVID safety issues, purchase equipment, advocate for city and state support and simply build an even stronger community of changemakers. In the future this group will continue to grow, to find new ways to leverage our strengths whether via distribution, advocacy, technology platforms, program evaluation, etc to help us all to make sure this city and all its people are fed with the food and supports each and all want and deserve.

The community we serve has known and felt isolation and hunger well before this pandemic. We therefore are calling on city leaders to allocate increased and longer-term funding to enable Emergency Feeding organizations across the city – to continue our important work, in collaboration, with effective data tracking, and with high quality, fresh healthy food options, in ensuring that no New Yorker goes hungry.

WE THANK YOU NYC Council and together, as a community we will make sure all New Yorkers have access with DIGNITY to healthy food and supportive services. Thank you .

Chinese-American Planning Council, Inc.
Testimony at the New York City Council Committee On Aging
Honorable Council Member Margaret Chin, Chair
September 21st, 2020

Thank you Chair Chin the Members of the City Council for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Peter Cheng and I am the director of the CPC Nan Shan Senior Center in Flushing, Queens. The mission of the Chinese-American Planning Council, Inc. (CPC) is to promote social and economic empowerment of Chinese American, immigrant, and low-income communities. CPC was founded in 1965 as a grassroots, community-based organization in response to the end of the Chinese Exclusion years and the passing of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. Our services have expanded since our founding to include three key program areas: education, family support, and community and economic empowerment.

CPC is the largest Asian American social service organization in the U.S., providing vital resources to more than 60,000 people per year through more than 50 programs at over 30 sites across Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. CPC employs over 700 staff whose comprehensive services are linguistically accessible, culturally sensitive, and highly effective in reaching low-income and immigrant individuals and families. With the firm belief that social service can incite social change, CPC strives to empower our constituents as agents of social justice, with the overarching goal of advancing and transforming communities.

To that end, we are grateful to testify about issues that impact the individuals and families we serve, and we are grateful to the Council for their leadership on these issues.

COVID 19 has hit our seniors hard. Food insecurity has been a growing issue for seniors and COVID 19 just compounded it. Since March, CPC has distributed over 108,000 pounds of food to community members across all five boroughs. At the Nan Shan Senior Center which I manage, we distribute food to seniors every Thursday and there's always a long line waiting. Meals provided by senior centers often have been the only reliable source of nourishment for many seniors. Congregate meals are developed to be 70% of daily nutritional value for this purpose. In order to address the growing food insecurity in our communities, I urge the City to consider re-opening food services by senior centers in an orderly and safe manner. This means ensure proper PPE, funding ventilation upgrades, and supporting Seniors centers to select appropriate options for their individual needs, like grab and go or appointment-based just for examples. This is something the seniors greatly need.

In regard to the upcoming senior center RFP, I respectfully suggest that we postpone it until the senior centers are re-opened and have settled down into a new normal. There are just so many uncertainties now and whatever numbers proposed in the contract will be like a shot in the dark. It would be much better for us to have a clearer picture first before projecting what we are going to be doing for the next few years. We are concerned about the lack of details presented in the current concept paper. Regardless, it is critical that the RFP includes full funding for the needs of senior centers, including all staffing, indirect funding, and fully-funded rates. Now more than ever, it is critical for DFTA to pay for the full costs of providing senior services, including indirect costs, food services, and model budgets. Many senior centers are dependent on discretionary funding and donations to fill budget gaps and to just provide basic senior services. There is no money to improve site infrastructure and to pioneer innovative programming. This is especially relevant to this moment as we are investing in remote programming due to the pandemic.

Thank you again for giving us the opportunity to speak about issues that impact the seniors we serve. We are grateful to your leadership on these issues and look forward to working with you on them.

If you have any questions, please contact Carlyn Cowen at ccowen@cpc-nyc.org

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To that end, we are grateful to testify about issues that impact the individuals and families we serve, and we are grateful to the Council for their leadership on these issues.

During COVID-19, CPC continues to provide in person and remote services to our community, from meal delivery to home care to daily wellness checks. We delivered over 108,000 pounds of meals and groceries between mid-March and mid-June, and the deliveries have only continued to grow, as has food needs in our community.

As the economic crisis grows, and the federal assistance has run out, the food crisis in New York City is only deepening. Unemployment has grown 6900% since March. Through our wellness checks we learned that half of our community members surveyed reported that they are out of work or income, and will run out of money in the coming weeks. Families have reported skipping and rationing meals.

We are deeply grateful to the City and particularly HRA for springing into action to meet urgent food needs during uncertain times, and recognize the challenges in doing so. However, as the food needs continue to grow, we urge the Council to consider the following challenges that Asian American and immigrant communities, and the organizations that serve them are facing:

- **Public charge:** Concerns over the public charge rule have deterred community members from applying for and staying enrolled in benefits like SNAP. The uncertainty of the injunction being granted and then removed has only increased the fears. Asian Americans already have the highest level of eligibility for public benefits without being enrolled, this has exacerbated during the pandemic. Community based organizations have been scrambling to help community members access benefits, and also allay their fears.

- **Language access and cultural competence:** Asian Americans have the highest level of Limited English Proficiency, and the language barriers make it even more difficult to navigate City resources and supports. Community members struggle to access important information, request City food support, and apply for support. As the pandemic continues, many community members report being unable to get culturally competent food support that meets their dietary needs and preferences. We urge the City to work closely with community-based organizations and small businesses to provide culturally competent food.
- **Community-based organization support:** At a time when the need for human services and community based services is skyrocketing, and our staff have been designated essential by the City, we are facing programmatic cuts and core cuts such as the retroactive Indirect Cost Rate (ICR) cut. Collectively the sector has experienced 14,000 job losses due to City funding cuts since March. We need to fully fund our essential workers, and fully fund these essential programs and safety net services. CPC urges the City to fully fund all services and contracts through at least FY21, and ensure that contracts have maximum flexibility to allow organizations to meet emerging and changing needs.
- **Lack of Federal and State support for immigrant community members:** Immigrant New Yorkers have made up the core of the essential workforce yet many of them have been left out of the Federal pandemic assistance or State unemployment assistance, because of their type of work or immigration status. In just one of our preschool families for example, 20 out of 24 families lost all income within two weeks, and less than half qualify for Federal relief or State unemployment, leaving them unable to pay rent, buy groceries or pay for prescriptions. Ensuring that all of our workers have support through this pandemic is at the core of creating food security.

CPC appreciates the opportunity to testify on these issues that so greatly impact the communities we serve, and look forward to working with you on them.

If you have any questions, please contact Carlyn Cowen at ccowen@cpc-nyc.org

September 21st, 2020

Testimony for the NYC Council Committee on General Welfare

My name is Carol Daly, and I am a NORC Program Director representing the YWCA of Queens. We currently run a robust food pantry serving hundreds of seniors and liaising with dozens of community organizations in Queens and each week. We also distribute a “Love Sharing Box” that includes ethnic and culturally appropriately food items.

In my many years working as a director, creator and teacher of adult programming in over a dozen senior fragilities, providing food is a central basic and vital service for our precious seniors.

When I ask seniors what they are most proud of they will inevitably say their children and grandchildren.

When I ask a senior what they are most grateful for, they will say the senior centers and to be able to gather for a meal together and the meaningful social engagement.

While we have limited choices for seniors to socially engage in person, we cannot and must not diminish their opportunity for nutritious food. Doing so could very well contribute to further loss of life for this incredibly important yet fragile population.

I’m confident that we will prioritize wisely placing the protection and support of human life central to the decision making regarding the allocation of monetary funds.

Thank you



**Testimony
New York City Council
Committee on General Welfare
Monday, September 21, 2020**

Submitted by Beatriz Diaz Taveras
Executive Director
Catholic Charities Community Services

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify on the rising food insecurity brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and Catholic Charities' efforts to respond to increased need.

The rapid economic devastation caused by COVID-19 and the consequent torrent of food insecurity required significant adaptation and mobilization in Catholic Charities Community Services' pantry and distribution network to meet rising need. Prior to the pandemic, CCCS' Feeding Our Neighbors program served 4 million meals and distributed 698,000 pounds of food to partner programs throughout the Archdiocese. Each food pantry was set up with flexible options where families could pick out fresh produce, meat, poultry and nonperishable food items.

Given the social distancing and other precautionary measures required by the pandemic, Feeding Our Neighbors had to adopt a grab and go model, where families could receive approximately 12 meals in one bag, and organize pop-up pantries to respond to spikes in need. CCCS also received special requests from parishes, community-based organizations and public schools. Between March and September of 2020, Feeding Our Neighbors provided individuals and families with 84,301 bags containing 1,011,612 meals and distributed 815,000lbs of food to partner programs. Food pantry distributions rose 68% (from 20,104 to 33,825), while deliveries rose 44% (from 157 to 226).

In addition to distributing food, the need for other wraparound services such as case management, eviction prevention, applying for cash assistance and SNAP, and immigration legal services caused CCCS to emphasize making these services, as well as other new service avenues, available at food pantries. One recent food distribution in the Bronx included a morning of financial empowerment that encouraged families to register their skills and job goals as part of efforts to link them to open positions in the New York City job market. Several have provided assistance with filling out the Census.

Supplementing efforts to provide for more immediate food needs, CCCS SNAP Program has worked to expand SNAP awareness and increase enrollment through positive, continuous, culturally- and linguistically-sensitive messaging and services in the communities in the

Bronx and the Hudson Valley most prone to food insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March, CCCS has processed 520 SNAP applications in the Bronx and the Lower Hudson Valley, up 66% from the same period in 2019.

In responding to the pandemic, CCCS has partnered with the City in helping the most vulnerable New Yorkers and reflected on how future disaster responses would benefit substantially from an earlier inventory and utilization of nonprofit services and expertise. CCCS was glad to be designated to receive and distribute a portion of the City's \$25 million investment in food providers in April, and to work with the City to deliver emergency cash relief to immigrants who have been excluded by federal stimulus as part of the New York City COVID-19 Immigrant Emergency Relief program. We are additionally grateful for the City's substantial investment in combatting food insecurity through programs such as GetFoodNYC, but caution that earlier involvement of human services nonprofits, who have intimate familiarity with and the trust of the communities in which they serve, would have allowed City resources to deploy and operate more quickly, efficiently and with even greater success. Moving forward on the path to recovery, we hope that the City will continue to make available the more consistent support for food programs that will allow it and its nonprofit partners to continue to serve those who are still unemployed, bereft of business revenues and otherwise struggling to make ends meet.



Testimony of
Coalition for the Homeless

on

Oversight - The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens

submitted to

The New York City Council's Committee on General Welfare

Giselle Routhier
Policy Director
Coalition for the Homeless

September 21, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP administration, food pantries, and soup kitchens. As an advocacy and direct service organization, we have seen firsthand the tremendous increase in food insecurity since the start of the pandemic. Homeless and unstably housed New Yorkers were already struggling with hunger prior to this past spring, but the economic impact of the pandemic has exacerbated the hunger crisis throughout the city.

As the pandemic continues, few are at greater risk of the virus than families and individuals experiencing homelessness. Homeless New Yorkers have nowhere to self-quarantine, cannot practice social distancing, and those on the streets lack even regular access to a sink with running water and soap to wash their hands. Furthermore, homeless New Yorkers are far more likely to have the types of underlying medical conditions that result in high mortality rates from COVID-19.

The Coalition for the Homeless operates 11 direct service programs, serving approximately 3,500 homeless and low-income New Yorkers each day. Our Grand Central Food Program is the largest nightly mobile soup kitchen in the United States, and in 35 years has never missed a night of operation – including during the height of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, we typically served 800 to 900 meals per night at our stops in Manhattan and the Bronx. However, we have witnessed a significant surge in need as other soup kitchens and food pantries suspended their operations during the crisis, and now we regularly serve more than 1,100 meals per night. At just one of the program’s 25 nightly stops, the number of people lining up for a meal increased from roughly 180 to over 400 during the first weeks of the crisis. We have increased meal production by 40 percent and handed out more than 200,000 emergency meals since the onset of the crisis.

In addition to food, we also began distributing essential items to help homeless New Yorkers follow public health guidance, such as by handing out more than 50,000 bottles of hand sanitizer and more than 130,000 surgical masks to stem transmission of the virus. To help people meet their immediate needs while encountering closed or reduced services and unprecedented economic upheaval, we also distributed 500 prepaid cell phones and thousands of prepaid cash cards that homeless people could use to purchase essentials like hygiene items, OTC medications, food, and clothing. Our staff have created and continually update accurate resource guides by borough that allow both service providers and homeless people to remain informed about what frontline services are open and closed during the crisis. Furthermore, we partnered with Doctors Without Borders and Shower Power to open and operate two Relief Centers – one in Midtown West, the other in Harlem – which offer unsheltered homeless people showers, toilets, PPE, clothing, bottled water, snacks, and resource guides. The Midtown West location has since closed, and we are actively looking for another second Relief Center location. Additionally, we opened a Crisis Services hotline so that hundreds of people in need of shelter and referrals get the help they need, seven days a week, and we regularly inform the people we serve through our food program of these other resources.

Our work distributing food and essential items to the most vulnerable New Yorkers would not be possible without the generous support of the New York City Council. Although the number of people lining up at the street sites where our Grand Central Food Program hands out meals each night has

decreased slightly from the peak in April, the need remains elevated far above normal levels. We are still struggling to provide enough food for the significant number of people in need, and too often must turn people away unfed. With the economic impact of the pandemic promising to linger for months or years to come, the need for services like the Grand Central Food Program is of utmost importance. No one should have to go to sleep hungry and homeless in our city.

We thank the Council for your attention to the urgent hunger crisis throughout the city, and for the Council's continued support of the Grand Central Food Program and other vital frontline services.

About Coalition for the Homeless

Coalition for the Homeless: Coalition for the Homeless, founded in 1981, is a not-for-profit advocacy and direct services organization that assists more than 3,500 homeless and at-risk New Yorkers each day. The Coalition advocates for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern homelessness, which is now in its fourth decade. The Coalition also protects the rights of homeless people through litigation involving the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, the right to reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities, and life-saving housing and services for homeless people living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates 11 direct-services programs that offer vital services to homeless, at-risk, and low-income New Yorkers. These programs also demonstrate effective, long-term, scalable solutions and include: Permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals living with HIV/AIDS; job-training for homeless and low-income women; and permanent housing for formerly homeless families and individuals. Our summer sleep-away camp and after-school program help hundreds of homeless children each year. The Coalition's mobile soup kitchen, which usually distributes about 900 nutritious hot meals each night to homeless and hungry New Yorkers on the streets of Manhattan and the Bronx, is now regularly serving more than 1,100 meals per night and distributing PPE and emergency supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, our Crisis Services Department assists more than 1,000 homeless and at-risk households each month with eviction prevention, individual advocacy, referrals for shelter and emergency food programs, and assistance with public benefits as well as basic necessities such as diapers, formula, work uniforms, and money for medications and groceries. In response to the pandemic, we are operating a special Crisis Hotline (212-776-2177) for homeless individuals who need immediate help finding shelter or meeting other critical needs.

The Coalition was founded in concert with landmark right-to-shelter litigation filed on behalf of homeless men and women (*Callahan v. Carey* and *Eldredge v. Koch*) and remains a plaintiff in these now consolidated cases. In 1981, the City and State entered into a consent decree in *Callahan* through which they agreed: "The City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason of physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary shelter." The *Eldredge* case extended this legal requirement to homeless single women. The *Callahan* consent decree and the *Eldredge* case also guarantee basic standards for shelters for homeless men and women. Pursuant to the decree, the Coalition serves as court-appointed monitor of municipal shelters for homeless adults, and the City has also authorized the Coalition to monitor other facilities serving homeless families. In 2017, the Coalition, fellow institutional plaintiff Center for Independence of the Disabled – New York, and homeless New Yorkers with disabilities were represented by The Legal Aid Society and pro-bono counsel White & Case in the settlement of *Butler v. City of New York*, which is designed to ensure that the right to shelter includes accessible accommodations for those with disabilities, consistent with Federal, State, and local laws.

HAMILTON-MADISON HOUSE

TESTIMONY TO
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE

FOOD INSECURITY

PRESENTED BY BONNIE LUMAGUI
ASSISTANT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SENIOR SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Good morning Councilmember Stephen Levin and members of the committee. I am Bonnie Lumagui, Assistant Executive Director for Senior Services and Community Services at Hamilton-Madison House. My colleagues and I are grateful to you for holding this hearing on the vital and timely topic of food insecurity.

Hamilton-Madison House has long been deeply dedicated to supporting seniors in Manhattan, especially in the neighborhoods of the Lower East Side and Chinatown. In particular, we extend services to low-income and immigrant seniors, many of Asian descent. We operate NORC programs, a Social Adult Day program, Caregiver support programs and, particularly pertinent to this hearing, the City Hall Senior Center, which is among the City's largest and longest-standing seniors centers.

Perhaps more than any other population, the adverse effects of COVID-19 have been felt cutely among seniors. As is well known, the large majority of those who have sadly died from the virus have been seniors and the population has therefore been compelled to remain at home and avoid contact with others, making them more susceptible to isolation, mental health difficulties and other difficulties.

The closing of senior centers in particular has been highly problematic, in that these programs serve as hubs for seniors, many with limited resources, for multiple essential purposes, including meals. We thank Rethink for providing meals to our seniors During COVID. Meals that are paid for with foundation funds. We look forward to the day when we can reopen the City Hall Senior Center, and we intend to partner with NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA) and others to ensure that reopening occurs in a manner that maximizes safety for seniors and staff and, at the same time, allows for the most satisfying possible experience.

Toward this end, following are our comments and recommendations:

SUPPORT IMMIGRANTS

- Ensure that all senior centers serving immigrant populations are fully equipped to respond to the unique post-COVID-19 needs of the population, with respect to matters of nutrition, health and cultural matters

PUT IN PLACE COMPREHENSIVE SAFETY MEASURES

- DFTA issues safety and screening protocols and procedures and extends the resources necessary to comply, including staffing to manage screening, temperature checks, crowd control and cleaning
- Staff be provided with and required to utilize PPE – face coverings, shields and gloves
- DFTA provides additional funding necessary to purchase cleaning and sanitizing supplies to allow for daily disinfecting and for deep-cleaning by professional services
- Plexiglas barriers are utilized to allow for separation between staff and participants
- Hand-sanitizing stations are installed
- Staffing schedules are staggered as feasible
- Volunteers are not included in programming
- Clear policies are put in place for managing situations in which participants do not comply with safety rules

ENSURE SAFETY IN THE PROVISION OF MEALS

- In the case of Grab and Go meals, special efforts are made to ensure social distancing given that availability of these meals attract large numbers of New Yorkers who would not otherwise attend senior centers
- Accordingly, particular criteria are established as to the eligibility of meal recipients and who may accept meals on behalf of seniors

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify at this matter. Hamilton-Madison House would be pleased to partner with City Council and DFTA to ensure a safe and productive reopening to senior centers.

WRITTEN TESTIMONY
New York City Council Committee

Hearing of the Committee on General Welfare
Oversight: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries,
and Soup Kitchens

To: The Honorable City Councilmember Stephen T. Levin
From: Sheena Wright, President & CEO, United Way of New York City
Date: September 21, 2020

Dear Councilmember Levin,

Thank you for your leadership to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) administration, food pantries, and soup kitchens. We also thank the New York City Council for quick action in committing \$25 million in emergency funding for food providers in April, as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact communities across New York City, creating an unprecedented demand for emergency food organizations.

For nearly 80 years, United Way of New York City (UWNYC) has worked to support vulnerable New Yorkers throughout the five boroughs. We partner across the business, government, non-profit and philanthropic sectors to fight for the health, education, and financial stability of every person in New York City. Our mandate is to stem the root causes of poverty and create systems-level change so that everyone can access quality education and the opportunity to lead healthy and financially secure lives. **UWNYC has worked with a cross-section of partners around the city for more than 30 years to ensure that our Emergency Food System, and the soup kitchens, food pantries and community-based organizations that comprise it, have strong and effective operations, and make healthy and nutritious food not only accessible, but a staple to the clients they serve.**

In 2018, United Way of New York City partnered with the Women’s Center for Education and Career Advancement and City Harvest to release “Overlooked & Undercounted 2018: The Self-Sufficiency Standard for New York City”, a study that determines the required income to achieve economic independent for more than 700 family types in each of the boroughs. The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a nuanced measure of the income a household needs to afford basics necessities without turning to public or private assistance. Unlike the federal poverty level, it accounts for variability based on the number of people in the household, their ages, geographic location, and a specific point in time.

Through this report, we learned that **in 2018, two in five working-age New York City households— over 905,000—lacked enough income to cover the necessities, such as food, housing, health care, and child care. Over 2.5 million men, women, and children were struggling to make ends meet in New York City before the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.** We also learned that between 2000 and 2018, food costs have increased an average of 68% across New York City, and food costs more here than most other places across the country. When the grocery budget is insufficient, families seek private and public assistance, including visits to a food pantry or through SNAP. According to the report, in 2018, only 31% of New York City families below the Standard received SNAP.

Additionally, the report showcased that the relationship between hunger and educational achievement cannot be overstated. High school graduation rates were lower among those experiencing hunger, and in 30% of households with hunger among children, the adults did not attain educational levels beyond high school. **A recent poll conducted by our education partners, shows that as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, 50% of NYC parents have skipped/reduced meals for their family, and 62% are concerned about their child's access to food this fall.**¹

In 2018, we invested \$11 million in more than 500 community-based organizations so that thousands of children, adults, seniors and families could access emergency food, emergency shelter, and income supports to meet their basic needs. UWNYP initiatives include:

- FeedNYC program strengthens 500+ food pantries and soup kitchens with healthy and nutritious food, operational capacity building supports, and funds for capital equipment.
- Emergency Food and Shelter Program funds community-based organizations to meet a range of costs associated with emergency food, lodging and services to homeless families.
- Emergency rent, mortgage and utility payments provide emergency funds for thousands of families to prevent homelessness by covering a month's rent, mortgage or utilities.
- SNAP funding enables caseworkers to outreach and screen thousands of New Yorkers every year, with more than 6,500 individuals enrolled in SNAP in 2018.
- In 2018, we provided technical assistance and support to 40 pantries to help them convert to a client choice-based distribution system that encourages client dignity by allowing people to select the right mix of foods for their household based on nutritional and cultural preferences.

Due to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, **food pantries are reporting record number of visits as need for healthy nutritious food is an all-time high.** Pantries in high need areas like Corona/Elmhurst, Washington Heights, Central Harlem, Sunset Park, and are seeing more visitors. Like Holding Hands food pantry in Sunset Park is now serving more than 25,000 monthly pantry visitors – up from 2,000 monthly visitors before the pandemic. This increase is the norm, especially in communities with undocumented individuals.

Pantries are seeing many new faces as hunger and food insecurity becomes reality for more families. **More than 80% of new visitors to our Plentiful² pantries, accessing through SMS self-registration, reported that it was their first time visiting a pantry in the past 6 months.** This is not a surprise. New York City is bracing for an 800,000 increase in household food insecurity. Experiencing food insecurity means cutting the quantity and quality of what your family eats. This means having to choose between low cost but less nutritious foods, over the healthier, yet expensive items, like fresh fruits and vegetables, which are often harder to find in our lower income neighborhoods.

Now more than ever, nutritious food is necessary for all New Yorkers to stay in good health, while we all try to keep our low COVID-19 infection rates. This why at UWNYP, we prioritize fresh produce through

¹ <https://newyork.edtrust.org/press-release/poll-half-of-nyc-parents-have-skipped-reduced-meals-for-their-family-and-62-are-concerned-about-their-childs-access-to-food-this-fall/>

²Plentiful is a project of United Way of NYC and City Harvest and was created by the NYC Food Assistance Collaborative to improve dignity and efficiency at food pantries. Plentiful eliminates lines, increases agency, and restores dignity to families in need, while providing better information for service providers: <https://www.plentifulapp.com/about-us>

partnerships with New York State farmers. Last year our food pantries spent more than 30% of our funding on fresh fruits and vegetables. **With two million city households unable to afford enough food we have invested in connecting New Yorkers to public benefits, like SNAP, because we know the charitable or emergency food sector can only handle so much additional surge.** We are so grateful and appreciative of our hard working and dedicated pantry operators and we also invest in SNAP outreach to increase a household's ability to purchase food at their preferred stores, farmers markets, and more.

Over two million working New Yorkers (statewide) have lost employment since mid-March, with [Black and brown communities](#) suffering the most. Nearly [597,000 undocumented New Yorkers](#) are completely shut out of unemployment benefits — despite contributing over \$140M annually in unemployment taxes. This level of economic uncertainty has drastically increased the need for access to benefits, like SNAP, and increased demand for food pantries and soup kitchens, among other emergency food organizations. **We are thankful for the New York City Council's efforts to address this, and ask the Council to prioritize continued support for SNAP outreach and administration, as well as continued support for food pantries, and soup kitchens so that New Yorkers have access to healthy, nutritious food.**

Testimony by Rethink Food

Before the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare:

Oversight - The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens

Monday, September 21, 2020

Chair Levin, Council Members, staff, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to let me testify today about the impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens. My name is Liz Peralta and I am the director of external relations at Rethink Food, which is a nonprofit that envisions a nourished and thriving world. We believe that access to food is essential to human dignity and our ability to contribute to society. Current food systems allow for nutritious food to go underutilized every day, while nearby populations suffer from food insecurity. Enough is enough. We aim to combat these issues by designing and implementing programs that use surplus food to prepare healthy, delicious meals to be distributed to those in need. I am also a proud latina that has lived through poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Which is why I am so dedicated to speaking out about hunger.

When we first started working on problems of food insecurity, we partnered with restaurants that had surplus food and used that food to make meals for people who needed good, healthy food. During the COVID crisis, however, as the pandemic tore through NYC triggering record unemployment and driving already-catastrophic food insecurity levels up by 67%, we shifted some of our operations because many of our restaurants were (hopefully) temporarily closed and could no longer provide us with their surplus food. In turn, the increased need for food among the communities we serve affected both the capacity and need of food pantries and soup kitchens across the city.

Specifically, since COVID,

- Nearly 1 in 4 New Yorkers are facing inadequate food, which translates to 2 million of our neighbors;
- 44% of New Yorkers are worried about running out of food before next paycheck;
- 54% of city residents say their diets are less healthy now than pre-COVID; and
- NYC unemployment rate is 19.8% (the highest rate since the Great Depression).

Further, COVID has shown us that food insecurity may not always look like what we thought. For example, food insecurity often affects working people. In just the last month, Rethink

partnered with the RETI Center in Brooklyn as part of a Cool Street initiative in Red Hook because the trees the community relied on for shade were cut down. Multitudes of people lost their jobs during this pandemic, which means little money for high electric bills to cool down at home, let alone to spend money on food. By linking paying for gas or electricity as a problem related to food insecurity, we have to stop thinking that a can of food will do the job. Most food provided to those who need it requires storage and preparation, which is not possible for those who do not have a home, kitchen, refrigerator, no electricity, etc. It's not possible for the families in Red Hook who lost power, it's not possible for the men, women, and children living in shelters, it's not possible for many of the people we say we care about when we make laws.

Additionally, since COVID,

- 83% of NYC restaurants could not pay full rent in July;
- Nearly 1,000 of the total 27,000 restaurants in NYC have permanently closed since 3/1 and many more are expected to close; and
- 20% of all NYC job loss comes from the food service industry (250K jobs lost).

As such, Rethink launched a program to address two escalating crises during Covid: demand for food and struggling restaurants. This program

- Subsidized 40 restaurants to stay open
- Coordinated the partnership between these restaurants and 75 neighboring community based organizations (CBO's)
- Facilitated the preparation and delivery of 1M+ prepared, hot meals for vulnerable New Yorkers
- Preserved 120+ restaurant jobs

We are ready to scale to 27M+ meals and have already vetted and pre-qualified additional 140+ restaurants and identified needs of 100+ CBOs across all 5 boroughs.

In addition to feeding those who are most vulnerable, reducing the burden on some of our food pantries, thriving restaurants are also essential to:

- The vitality of our communities
- Employing nearly 1 in 10 New Yorkers
- Attracting tourism
- Generating crucial sales tax dollars
- Why we live and work in New York City

By working with restaurants to prepare necessary meals, we not only provide for the neediest among us, but also work with existing food systems, in this case the food industry to improve their viability for everyone's benefit. We further focus on restaurants in our most vulnerable communities. This is why Rethink works with food surplus, as well as local restaurants, to create ready meals for individuals, such as our consumers in Red Hook, which is a different services than what a food pantry can provide. I'm out there everyday, I hear the people, they want more

than a bandaid. They want resources to be empowered to break cycles. I am proud Rethink strives everyday to do so for the people we serve.

Feeding people requires love, and care and respect. In order to help those with food insecurity, the restaurant industry, support sustainability efforts, and be cognisant of the capacity of the food pantries in our city, we encourage this body to look at innovative solutions that involve this kind of cross sectionality; we recommend that you support efforts to allow SNAP recipients to use their food stamps to buy hot food at restaurants; and ask that you continue generously fund programs of the kind we have set up.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Peralta



HUNTER COLLEGE NEW YORK CITY FOOD POLICY CENTER

NY Food 20/20: Visions, Research and Recommendations for Food Systems During and Beyond COVID-19 Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Section

Introduction

Testimony to the New York City Council: Committee on General Welfare

Testimony of Charles Platkin, Ph.D., J.D., M.P.H., Executive Director, Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center, Distinguished Lecturer, Hunter College, CUNY

Title of Hearing: Oversight: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SNAP Administration, Food Pantries, and Soup Kitchens

Good afternoon and thank you to the members of the Committee on General Welfare for the opportunity to submit written and oral testimony regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNAP administration, food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City.

My name is Charles Platkin, and I am providing this testimony on behalf of the Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center, of which I am the executive director. The Center works with policymakers, community organizations, advocates and the public to create healthier, more sustainable food environments. We thank the City Council for their support.

Along with the challenges and fears of COVID-19 spreading throughout the five boroughs, New Yorkers have faced challenges of unemployment, inability to leave their homes safely, and increased levels of food insecurity. With more than 600,000 New York City (NYC) residents facing unemployment since March,¹ with disproportionately higher rates in many lower-income communities such as neighborhoods in the South Bronx,² individuals and families are forced to make the impossible choices between paying bills and feeding their families. Additionally, many individuals who became homebound in effort to avoid exposure to COVID-19 became unable to access groceries for themselves or their families. Two months into the coronavirus pandemic, the New York Times noted that NYC residents were already more food insecure than before COVID-19,³ and since the beginning of the pandemic, 74 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens have reported an increase in the total number of visitors compared to last year.⁴ But along with an increased need and use of food pantries and soup kitchens came many food pantry and soup kitchen closures, low food supply to provide for community members, long lines and crowded food pantries, and a lack of up-to-date information

¹ New York State Department of Labor, Labor Statistics for the New York City Region, July 2020, <https://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/nyc/>.

² Ghitza Yair and Steitz Mark. DEEP-MAPS Model of the Labor Force, August 2020. https://github.com/Catalist-LLC/unemployment/blob/master/deep_maps_20200804.pdf.

³ Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap 2018, <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/new-york/county/richmond>.

⁴ Food Bank For New York City, 2020 Report: New Yorkers Don't Live Single-Issue Lives: The Intersections of Hunger, https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Intersections-of-Hunger_NYC-Hunger-Conference-Report_02.13.20.pdf.

regarding openings and operating hours from the food pantry organizations Hunter College Food Policy Center research.

In crisis, the City's food supply is left incredibly vulnerable. Seen with the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, The Counter notes that cities' food supplies are left unstable in crisis "because [cities] are complex systems that rely on other complex systems to survive."⁵ Even with city responses and financial incentives to help feed the NYC community that have been put in place since March,⁶ organizations struggle to keep up with demand and individuals struggle to access food. On a community and individual level, COVID-19 has resulted in severe, unprecedented challenges in feeding New Yorkers especially for individuals living in underserved communities and or those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 across the five boroughs.

Various entities, including City- and community-based organizations responded swiftly in handling the enormous added demand for resources. In mid-April, the City unveiled *Feeding New York*, a short- and long-term plan to provide support to food pantries and emergency food providers.⁷ Prior to the plan's announcement, the City had already begun transitioning all congregate meal programs at more than 240 senior centers into delivered meals as well as expanded senior meal deliveries in general through the NYC Emergency Home Delivery Assistance program. These services became a part of the newly-created *GetFoodNYC* initiative that also includes the free Grab & Go program for keeping NYC school children and adults fed.⁸ Meanwhile, local anti-hunger initiatives, such as Lifeline and Green Bronx Machine, also focused on the needs of homebound, vulnerable residents through their free food delivery services.⁹ Following these initial and massive efforts, New Yorkers still face sizable threats to food access in the months ahead.

Lack of Information for Needed Food Resources

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a lack of any centralized information guide for all food access resources, by the City or community-based organizations. School meals transformed as schools closed, and the NYC Department for the Aging congregate meals morphed and merged with the City's meal delivery program. As New Yorkers isolated and followed the lockdown precautions, access to food resource programs as well as information regarding new programs and transitions became increasingly challenging. City leaders, community based organizations, and others concurred that there was a lack of updated food resource information in NYC. To help connect community members in need with food resources during the pandemic, the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center (FPC) developed Coronavirus NYC Food Resource Guides for each neighborhood in the five boroughs. The neighborhoods were divided by the 59 NYC Department of City Planning's Community District Profiles, and each resource guide includes specific food-related resources within the zip codes of that specific neighborhood. Resources in the guides include location and hours of food pantries, meals for students and senior citizens, delivery services and retail food stores that offer delivery, and social services such as immigrant, housing, and disability services.

The genesis and expansion of the resource guides was in partnership with City departments and community organizations, with the partnership of Share Meals to create an online database of resources. In order to ensure that the guides contain the most up-to-date information, the Center has trained more than 125

⁵Cox, K. Will the Food System Survive Another Hurricane Sandy? The Counter, August 3, 2017. <https://thecounter.org/baltimore-food-hurricane-sandy/>.

⁶ Sanders, Anna. "De Blasio Announces \$170M Initiative to Help Feed NYC Residents During Coronavirus Pandemic." NY Daily News, April 15, 2020. <https://www.nydailynews.com/coronavirus/ny-coronavirus-hunger-initiative-pandemic-new-york-city-20200415-n5mml5c4orhizhq37c5duawa3e-story.html>.

⁷ Feeding New York. The City of New York, New York City Department of Sanitation. April 15, 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/reports/2020/Feeding-New-York.pdf>.

⁸ GetFoodNYC, COVID-19 Emergency Food Distribution. The City of New York. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/contact/services/COVID-19FoodAssistance.shtml>.

⁹ Green Bronx Machine Delivers Food in the Bronx During COVID-19 Pandemic, Green Bronx Machine. <https://greenbronxmachine.org/video/>.

volunteers and maintains a continuous, weekly calling schedule to food pantries and soup kitchens, neighborhood organizations and resources as well as supermarkets, bodegas and other retail food outlets. More than 30,000 volunteer call attempts were made between early April and August to update the resource information, and the food resource guides reached upwards of 5,500 visits per day during the height of the lockdown. Community members began reaching out to the FPC in response to the publishing of the food resource guides, urgently in need of food for themselves and their families. The FPC received emails frequently from a range of community members. For instance, a community leader was looking to find food resources for a household of nine whose head of household was laid off due to the pandemic. Others reached out in Spanish, requesting translation of the food resource information and the at-risk elderly also sought information from the FPC as characterized by this email received from a senior:

April 13, 2020

To: info@nycfoodpolicy .org

I am a 75 year old senior living alone in a small apartment in Brooklyn... I have several ailments that compromise my immune system. Now, told to always stay in my house... Kindly tell me [the] best way to get groceries right now... Please, any program that I can avail myself of for vegetables and fruits delivery???? OR, Supermarket in Bensonhurst that might always deliver to a single 75 year old who must stay at home???? Thank you so much.

Research in the Community

Interviews with Community Members

In an effort to assess the individual and community-level impact of New York City’s food system response to COVID-19, the FPC conducted interviews in July and August with 13 individuals (9 women; 4 men) from several underserved and/or disproportionately affected communities throughout the City. The participants came from neighborhoods in the Mott Haven/Melrose, Fordham/ University Heights, Morrisania/Crotona, and Belmont sections of the Bronx; the Elmhurst/Corona, Kew Gardens/Woodhaven sections in Queens; and the Brownsville section in Brooklyn. The interviewees ranged in age from 25 to 72; seven of them had an educational background of high school or less, with the remaining having a college or professional degree. Seven self-identified as Latino/Hispanic; five Black/African-American, and one Pacific Islander. All but one participant lives with other family members (households ranging from two to nine occupants), while 10 participants (77 percent) reported their household was receiving SNAP benefits.

Participants were asked questions related to the food security resources (e.g., delivery services, pantries) they used during the months in lockdown; whether or not they experienced changes to food access; their perception of quality of foods received; and what problems they encountered at local retail environments, such as supermarkets and bodegas, during lockdown.

Food Pantry Data

As part of maintaining the Food Resource Guides, FPC volunteers called each food pantry/soup kitchen on a weekly basis to collect such information as status (open/closed/unknown), hours, and dietary accommodations (i.e. Kosher). This food pantry data was merged into a single dataset with information from other city and community-based sources (City Harvest, DSNY, FeedNYC, and Plentiful). Address and latitude and longitude coordinates were used to identify the Community District/Neighborhood for each food pantry and soup kitchen, and the data collected by the FPC was entered into an AirTable form. Descriptive statistics were used to assess food pantry availability in the neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19, in comparison to respective boroughs, NYC overall, and throughout the pandemic. Because there are multiple sources of data, measures were taken to identify and eliminate duplicates to paint an accurate picture of the availability of food pantries in these neighborhoods.

What We Found in the Collected Data

Interviews with Community Members

Analysis of the interviews revealed several overarching themes related to food access in NYC during the height of the lockdown in March, April, and May. They include facilitators and barriers to food access, as well as the tangential issues connected to food quality, food prices, and the lack of awareness of existing resources. Many of these challenges are not new within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, however the concerns of many community members have been further compounded by the crisis.

Facilitators of Food Access

Throughout our interviews, City and community-based **free food delivery organizations** emerged as significant facilitators of food access during the height of the lockdown in March, April, and May. By early August, more than 100 million meals were provided for New Yorkers through the City’s emergency meal program.¹⁰ For some people, food deliveries have played a critical role in the procurement of essential groceries when shopping online proved to be unfeasible and/or money was tight.

"We stopped shopping online sometime around the end of April when people started doing these food delivery programs for people who were having a hard time getting the food. . . . We were scared before the food deliveries started because wherever we went online everything would just be sold out, we couldn't order the food that we

It should be noted that the sign-up process for food deliveries can be cumbersome and complicated.¹¹ For food delivery programs, specifically for the emergency home delivered meals GetFoodNYC program, sign ups are completed online or by calling 311.¹² Early on the pandemic response, when the Department for the Aging (DFTA) meal program merged with the GetFoodNYC program, communities around the City reported that senior citizens had not received meals consistently.¹³ For many senior citizens who were not already enrolled in DFTA meal programs, the information on how to sign up and access registration proved to be complicated for a population less familiar with online-based registrations

and accessing program information exclusively online. For many food pantries and soup kitchens, individuals must provide a form of identification or proof of address in order to be eligible, sometimes after waiting on long lines before reaching the registration table. However, one of our participants remarked that their sign-up process for the NYC Emergency Food Delivery Program was easy and the organization provided her with additional information on resources in her community.

"When the pandemic started well, yes... we were afraid because when we began to see that there was a shortage in the supermarket and yes, yes, we were afraid that there would not be food. But . . . after we stayed in for a month and we began to see that there were organizations that were helping with food, we stopped feeling fear due to the lack of food."

— 28-year-old woman, Elmhurst/Corona (Queens)

Our interviews also revealed the crucial role that **community members and leaders** have played in improving neighborhood food access during the COVID pandemic. Stephen and Lizette Ritz, founders and educators of Green Bronx Machine, an organization in the South Bronx focused on incorporating urban agriculture into the classrooms of marginalized communities, purchase fruits and vegetables from the Hunts Point Market each week and deliver food boxes to their students throughout the Bronx as well as to Memorial Sloan Kettering cancer patients, who are unable to safely go out

¹⁰ Mayor de Blasio Announces City Has Distributed 100 Million Meals to New Yorkers Since March, Calls on Federal Government to Increase Funding for Food Assistance. The City of New York, July 21, 2020. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/533-20/mayor-de-blasio-city-has-distributed-100-million-meals-new-yorkers-since-march-calls>.

¹¹ Ginsburg ZA, Bryan AD, Rubinstein EB, et al. Unreliable and Difficult-to-Access Food for Those in Need: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Urban Food Pantries. *J Community Health*. 2019;44(1):16-31. doi:10.1007/s10900-018-0549-2.

¹² GetFoodNYC: COVID-19 Emergency Food Distribution. City of New York. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/contact/services/COVID-19FoodAssistance.shtml>.

¹³ Bergin, Brigid and Chang, Sophia. "Stuck at Home, Some Elderly NYers Are Struggling to Get Food During Coronavirus PAUSE." Gothamist, April 16, 2020. <https://gothamist.com/food/stuck-home-some-elderly-nyers-are-struggling-get-food-during-coronavirus-pause>.

and buy groceries because of their compromised immune systems.¹⁴ Some of our participants are recipients of the Ritz’s food deliveries, an initiative entirely run by the team of community leaders. **Pop-up pantries** created and run by community members have been an additional resource that has facilitated access to a variety of foods. One of our participants remarked about how proactive community members were in starting up these grass-roots initiatives.

"Oh it [NYC Emergency Food Delivery Program] was easy, and they did the sign up for me and they gave me all the paperwork and they explained to me . . . alright . . . you know. I see you don't live in the area, if you don't live in the area, you go to this link and it'll . . . put in your zip code and it'll let you know where you get the services for your area. I didn't have to do anything."

— 36-year-old woman, Belmont(Bronx)

Barriers to Food Access

While **food pantries** during this time were a critical access point for New Yorkers for obtaining much needed food staples and/or essentials, a number of participants expressed frustration related to the **long lines and wait times** at many of the locations.

The problem of long lines was compounded by increased individual use of food pantries and widespread food shortages,¹⁵ and the fact that there are 30 percent fewer pantries in the City as compared to before the outbreak, because many of the volunteers that service these centers are older adults who are at greater risk of catching the virus and developing life-threatening

"I must say that a lot of the community leaders have stepped up to where sometimes you might just be walking on the street and there's a pop up where they're just giving out food like boxes of food . . . a lot of [community leaders] are stepping up and buying stuff out of their own or partnering with companies and actually doing pop up sites...so that's...where I...receive some items."

— 26-year-old woman, Brownsville (Brooklyn)

complications.¹⁶ In a survey conducted by the Food Bank for New York City to determine food pantries’ and soup kitchens’ preparedness and response to COVID-19, 53 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens that were surveyed reported running out of food in April. Seventeen organizations surveyed reported running out of food twice or more each week.¹⁷ A pastor from Jamaica, Queens whose church runs a food pantry for community members spoke to the difficulty it has been to keep up a food supply for the pantry. With very little money

"To go to the food pantries is very challenging because there are many people like me. And there are long lines. . . . There are a lot of people. I had to be standing on a Tuesday and it was raining, storms, and that's how we had to wait. It didn't matter because we needed food. . . ."

— 26-year-old woman, Elmhurst/Corona (Queens)

remaining in the budget by mid-May, the food pantry became reliant on donations from individuals and neighborhood businesses in order to continue functioning.¹⁸

The reports of **burdensome lines and food shortages** at pantries mirrored the study participants’ experiences **at supermarkets as well**, where long waits were followed by the discovery that many staple items,

¹⁴ Changemaker: A Modern Day Hero Changing One Life at a Time. Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, August 19, 2020.

<https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/changemaker-a-modern-day-hero-changing-one-life-at-a-time/>.

¹⁵ Dickinson M. Food frights: COVID-19 and the specter of hunger [published online ahead of print, 2020 May 13]. *Agric Human Values*. 2020;1-2.

doi:10.1007/s10460-020-10063-3

¹⁶ Gilman, Asure. "‘I Can’t Believe This is America.’ Confronted With Unprecedented Need, New York Food Pantries Try to Fill in the Gaps." *MarketWatch*, August 6, 2020. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/i-cant-believe-this-is-america-confronted-with-unprecedented-need-new-york-food-pantries-try-to-fill-in-the-gaps-2020-08-06>.

¹⁷ Fighting More than COVID-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic. Food Bank for NYC, June 2020. https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Fighting-More-Than-COVID-19_Research-Report_Food-Bank-For-New-York-City_6.09.20_web.pdf?utm_source=June+10%2C+2020&utm_campaign=Dec.+6%2C+2017&utm_medium=email.

¹⁸ Informal citation: Phone call with Melissa and pastor for FPC Food Resource Guide data collection, May 15, 2020.

"I tried to go to several [supermarkets] but the line was still long. I went to other supermarkets that were far away, like 20 minutes, 30 minutes from here...I went there because people told me 'go there because there is rice there,' so I went and when I arrived, there was no rice...it was traumatic."
— 26-year-old woman, Elmhurst/Corona (Queens)

such as rice, were sold out. Though smaller grocers and bodegas were utilized as an alternative to supermarkets, some participants observed that these establishments charged more for their products and/or offered more packaged and processed food choices rather than fresh and perishable items.

In addition to the challenge of dealing with long lines, many of the interviewees described **fear of going outside and being vulnerable to catching the virus**, especially if they or a household member had any one of a

number of **comorbid medical conditions**, such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma, cancer, or HIV. Such fears are especially well-founded in minority communities, which have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. A study published in late April found that U.S. counties that are majority-black had three times the rate of infection and almost six times the rate of death compared to majority-white counties.¹⁹ A more recent report in New York City concluded that a confluence of factors such as comorbidities, occupational exposure, and poverty place minority populations at higher risk for infection and adverse outcomes.²⁰ To reduce their risk, many of those interviewed (all of whom are residents of predominantly minority neighborhoods) went food shopping far less frequently than they did prior to the pandemic.

For families with young children, the **K-12 school closures** introduced an additional layer of hardship for struggling parents needing help with food access. Prior to the pandemic, universal free school meals were available daily to 1.1 million NYC public school children. In response to COVID-19, DOE had organized free grab-and-go meals across over 400 school sites, but it has not been feasible for this

"I'm a single mom, I have three small children . . . I already have a weakened immune system. I'm a cancer survivor. I was born HIV positive, so my immune system is already compromised and now I gotta battle COVID."
— 36-year-old woman, with multiple health issues (including testing positive for COVID), Belmont (Bronx)

program to achieve the same scale of meal distribution as before the pandemic. Additional concerns include repetition of food options, lack of choice, and consistent locations of the meal hubs. A school social worker in the Bronx and Flushing noted, "I have been in contact with many families mostly in the Bronx that are running into issues regarding food supply. I have had a difficult time providing adequate resources for these families... Is there a way to link up with a resource in the Bronx to directly connect these families to a food source? Many of these students have sensory issues that make eating more difficult" (Email correspondence with the HCFPC). With the unchanging food choices available through the DOE, the resources were unable to reach the families

¹⁹ Center JHUR. Racial Data Transparency. <https://coronavirusjhuedu/data/racialdata-transparencydownloaded> April 28, 2020. 2020.

²⁰ Arasteh, K. Prevalence of Comorbidities and Risks Associated with COVID-19 Among Black and Hispanic Populations in New York City: an Examination of the 2018 New York City Community Health Survey. *J. Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-020-00844-1>.

who needed additional or more specific support. As a result, many families looked to emergency food providers to fill the gap.²¹

However, being able to take advantage of these resources with children in tow created additional stresses and barriers. As one mother stated: “At the beginning, when I did not know about this service that they deliver food to the house, I was going to the food pantry but they always told me, ‘no children, you can't bring children, just parents can come.’ Then I said ‘ah, but I don't have anyone to leave them with.’ For another mother, standing on line for long stretches of time with young children proved to be highly burdensome, as she describes: “I had to be standing on a Tuesday and it was raining, storms, and that's how we had to wait. It didn't matter because we needed food. . . . And with children it is difficult, my oldest daughter told me, ‘Mommy, I don't want to wait anymore, my feet hurt.’ And I had a mini chair for her to sit on and I had my other daughter in the stroller, and that's how it was.”

While community leaders have played a significant role in filling a major food access gap, some of our participants expressed a general **lack of awareness of City and community-based anti-hunger initiatives and resources and eligibility criteria**, as some discovered critical resources by happenstance.

One of the barriers to community outreach faced by local anti-hunger initiatives is how to promote their services to people in need who do not have mailing addresses, emails, or cell phones. As one participant who works at a pantry and also receives food from it noted: “Sometimes you walk down the street and you see a line of people at a pantry, but you don't know: What are the qualifications? Do I stand in this line for two hours to get an answer or you know, how do y'all find out to get the services?”

An additional barrier was the **limited number of days that pantries were open**—in many instances only once a week or once a month. Data from the FPC Food Resource Guide food pantry data indicates that 14 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens that were open in August 2020 were only open once or twice a month, on rotating schedules such as “every other Sunday” or the “first and third Wednesday of the month.”²²

Economic Challenges

Economic challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded the existing barriers related to food access. In parallel with the levels of unemployment not seen since the Great Depression²³ there has been a **rise in food prices**. A report from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics published in May notes that food-at-home prices in April 2020 had a higher monthly inflation rate than any month since 1990. The price index for meat, poultry, fish, and eggs all rose with a 4.3 percent index.²⁴ As more New Yorkers lose their income, the

“A lot of people in these communities just don't have email addresses or they don't have internet, so it's like, a lot of times, or even cell phones. So a lot of times when we're signing them up or trying to sign them up, like, ‘Hey, you wanna sign up to get food?’ The only legitimate thing I can take from you is your name, you don't have a number, you don't have an email . . . some people don't even have a legitimate address ‘cause they live in a shelter. So, if there was like a definite hub to where, or if not like you have to fill out an application, you just walk in and there you can fill out the application.”

— 26-year-old woman, Brownsville (Brooklyn)

²¹ Fighting More than COVID-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic. Food Bank for NYC, June 2020. https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Fighting-More-Than-COVID-19_Research-Report_Food-Bank-For-New-York-City_6.09.20_web.pdf?utm_source=June+10%2C+2020&utm_campaign=Dec.+6%2C+2017&utm_medium=email.

²² Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Neighborhood Food Resource Guide AirTable database. August 28, 2020.

²³ McGeehan, Patrick. “A Million Jobs Lost: A ‘Heart Attack’ for the NYC Economy.” The New York Times, July 7, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/nyregion/nyc-unemployment.html>.

²⁴ Consumer Price Index. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cpi.pdf>.

increasing prices of groceries to feed themselves and their families have created a greater need for food assistance programs and organizations.

For many individuals and families who have immigrated to the United States, the pandemic's economic consequences have been dire. Because of their immigration status, many **undocumented workers** are ineligible to receive federal cash stimulus support and at the same time many are fearful of signing up for federal food assistance programs such as SNAP.²⁵ Immigration status makes it challenging to utilize food pantries and soup kitchens as well, since many sites require forms of identification as part of their sign-up and registration process. One interviewee said about not signing up for SNAP: "I am afraid because maybe they will take away our visa, that is why I have not asked for help from anyone."

"The price was going up, the food was the same... (laughs)... but the price of the food...the cost of the food is definitely going up."

— 36-year-old woman, Belmont (Bronx)

Additionally, according to a report from the Center for an Urban Future, there is an estimated 192,000 undocumented workers in NYC, many of whom have lost jobs, which was their primary source of income. Many others have continued to work through government shutdowns, as unauthorized immigrants are disproportionately deemed "essential workers," especially in construction, the restaurant industry, and in agriculture, farming, and grocery stores.²⁶ Continuing to work provides income, but with higher risk of contracting COVID-19 than those who are able to shelter in place.

Food Quality and Freshness

When asked about the **quality and freshness of the foods** they obtained either through free food deliveries or pantries, many participants spoke positively about the items they received. One participant stated that because of the deliveries, she was able to eat more nutritious foods that she normally could not afford to purchase, "I am eating more vegetables because there are more vegetables in the food (deliveries) and it has been good. I have changed my diet."

However, other participants expressed frustration with receiving deliveries of only snacks (e.g., cookies, nuts, and cheese), which they considered not as useful as items such as milk and eggs, which would have been preferred and more helpful. Another participant mentioned receiving pre-cooked meals, such as salmon with broccoli. While she considered the meals to be healthy, she would have preferred raw or whole foods so the meals could be prepared their own way. Another interviewee stated that timing is important when frequenting the pantries in that arriving "early" offers an opportunity to get better quality produce. In addition, one participant who works at and uses a pantry observed that sometimes the patrons perceive the fruits and vegetables as being "bad" or "damaged" when they see dirt on the produce, not realizing that the food was boxed and transported from the farm and "right out of the ground."

Food Pantry Data

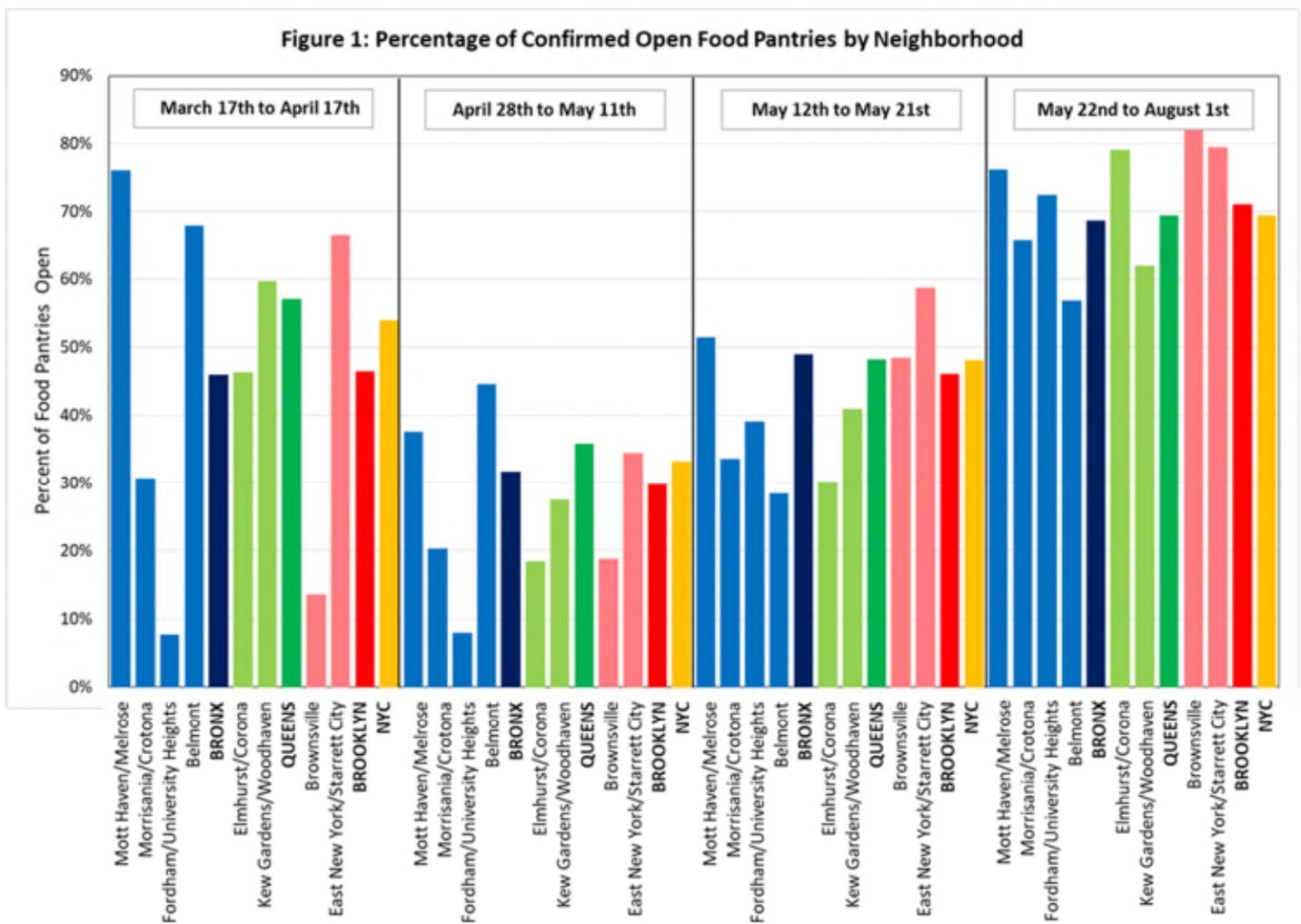
Throughout the initial pandemic response period, there was disparity in that neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19 had access to fewer open food pantries and soup kitchens. Certain neighborhoods, such as Morrisania and Brownsville, were hard hit with very low percentage of opened pantries (8% and 12%, respectively, compared to 53% for NYC overall), particularly during the earlier phase of the lockdown. In tandem with the increased use of food pantries as a crucial source of groceries, only 20 to 35% of food pantries citywide were confirmed to be open between April and mid-May, according to data collected by the HCFPC. Other food pantries may have been open, however, HCFPC data is only based on organizations that could be reached via phone calls. That number began to tick up from May 11th to May 21st, and from May 22nd

²⁵ Amandolare, S, Gallagher, L, Bowles, J, and Dvorkin, E. Under Threat & Left Out: NYC's Immigrants and the Coronavirus Crisis. Center for an Urban Future, June 2020. <https://nycfuture.org/research/under-threat-and-left-out>

²⁶ US Foreign-Born Essential Workers by Status and State, and the Global Pandemic. CMS Report, May 2020. <https://cmsny.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/US-Essential-Workers-Printable.pdf>.

through August 1st, the percentage of confirmed open food pantries steadily increased from 63 to 72%. While the openings have improved over the past few months, rates are still lower than prior to the pandemic.²⁷

The increase in food pantries that were confirmed open was the result of the persistent call attempts to reach food pantries to update information that increased with the longevity of the project, in combination with the reopening of food pantries that had been closed in initial response to the pandemic. The Food Bank for NYC reports that by mid-April, food pantry closures peaked at more than one-third citywide.²⁸ Figure 1 shows the percentage of open food pantries by neighborhood, borough, and NYC overall during the phased time periods described above. The findings are consistent with the stories from the interviews; one participant from Brownsville stated that she had to travel to Walmart in Long Island to find food. As shown in Figure 1, from March 17th through May 11th, the availability of food pantries in Brownsville was far lower than the borough or city average. The Food Policy Center started collecting Notes in May with regards to accepting food donations, monetary donations, and need for volunteers and drivers. The difficulties described in interviews regarding both availability of food and cost of food at retail stores likely contributed to a lack of donations to food pantries, and even once the worst of the crisis was over, there was a clear need for volunteers and drivers, again likely contributing to long lines and delays with delivery.



²⁷ Gilman,ASURE. "I Can't Believe This is America.' Confronted With Unprecedented Need, New York Food Pantries Try to Fill in the Gaps." MarketWatch, August 6, 2020.

²⁸ Fighting More than COVID-19: Unmasking the State of Hunger in NYC During a Pandemic. Food Bank for NYC, June 2020. https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Fighting-More-Than-COVID-19_Research-Report_Food-Bank-For-New-York-City_6.09.20_web.pdf?utm_source=June+10%2C+2020&utm_campaign=Dec.+6%2C+2017&utm_medium=email.

As discussed in the qualitative interviews, it was difficult for residents in hardest-hit neighborhoods to obtain information about whether food pantries were open and if they would be eligible to receive food when they arrived. The percentage of “unknown” status during late April and early May demonstrates there were also challenges in FPC staff and volunteers obtaining even basic information on whether a pantry was open or closed. It is less likely information would be able to be obtained from a closed food pantry than an open one, which may account for a percentage of the unknowns, but the challenges encountered by the FPC team to obtain and confirm information only serve as a proxy for the challenges community residents with limited resources have encountered to obtain such critical information. While data on openings and closings are useful, particularly for comparing neighborhoods, the data does not account for the length of the line, the availability of fresh produce, and whether the pantry’s resources were able to meet the needs of the communities. It is the words of our interview participants that highlight those experiences and describe the barriers and challenges community members have had to overcome these past few months.

Conclusion

Our interviews with residents from low-income communities throughout NYC gave us an opportunity to highlight varying perspectives on how individuals facing sharp socio-economic challenges are coping with food insecurity during the City’s worst public health crisis in a century. The comments—straight from the voices of those living through the pandemic in some of the City’s hardest hit neighborhoods—revealed that food pantries and emergency food delivery services are an effective means for providing key food supplies among the most vulnerable populations. The quantitative data we collected also reflects the food access challenges experienced by our participants, particularly as they relate to food pantry availability—widely and adversely impacted especially during the first two months of the lockdown.

While the problems with community-based assistance measures seem to have started to abate in recent weeks, the core challenges addressed in this report, such as food supply issues, lack of community awareness of resources, and socio-economic burdens, still persist in the aftermath of the initial lockdown. Depending on the likelihood of another major outbreak and the risk-reduction steps that may need to be put in place again throughout the City, the barriers to food access described here may rise further. At this pivotal moment, community leaders, policy makers, and grass-roots organizers must work together to confront the challenges ahead and carve out a long-term action plan and access system to better support the availability of nutritious food citywide.

We at the Hunter College New York City Food Policy Center recognize the importance of these issues, and we stand ready to help in any way we can.

Thank you.