Committee on General Welfare

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**THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**BRIEFING PAPER OF THE HUMAN SERVICES DIVISION**

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**COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE**

**Honorable Stephen Levin, Chair**

**June 24, 2021**

**Oversight: Status of Hunger in NYC and the Impact of COVID**

1. **Introduction**

On June 24, 2021, the Committee on General Welfare, chaired by Council Member Stephen Levin, will conduct an oversight hearing to examine thestatus of hunger and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on emergency food distribution. Representatives from the Department of Social Services (DSS)/Human Resources Administration (HRA), the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy, the Department for the Aging (DFTA), the Department of Education (DOE), the Department of Sanitation (DSNY), anti-hunger advocates, emergency food providers, and other interested parties were invited to testify.

1. **Food Insecurity**

Nearly 1.2 million New Yorkers were food insecure even before the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than 201 million missing meals across the five boroughs, also known as “The Meal Gap.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The Food Bank for New York City estimated that 1.4 million City residents relied on emergency food programs each year prior to the pandemic.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the start of the crisis in the spring of 2020, the de Blasio Administration estimated more than 2 million City residents were food insecure[[3]](#footnote-3) and in its most recent report it indicated that 1.6 million people are currently food insecure.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In 2019, approximately 16% of pantries and kitchens in the City were forced to turn people away, reduce their portion sizes, and/or limit their hours of operation due to a lack of resources; in 2020, that number doubled to over 36%.[[5]](#footnote-5) Additionally, since 2013, food inflation has increased across all five boroughs by 27% and in Manhattan, the average cost of a meal has increased by 46%.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 2018, the average cost of a meal in the City was $3.73, which exceeded the State average of $3.09 and the national average of $3.00.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. **The Impact of COVID-19 on Existing Food Assistance Programs**

*SNAP*

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provides assistance to recipients by offering monthly electronic benefits that can be used to purchase food at authorized stores.[[8]](#footnote-8) Benefit levels for SNAP are based on criteria including, but not limited to, household size and income levels.[[9]](#footnote-9) As of September 2020, SNAP households receive an estimated $246 a month on average.[[10]](#footnote-10) The average SNAP benefits per person is about $125 a month, which is an average of $1.39 per person, per meal, less than half the cost of a meal in the City.[[11]](#footnote-11) As of April 2021, over 1.7 million people were receiving SNAP benefits in New York City.[[12]](#footnote-12)

To allow states to adapt SNAP to address critical food needs during the pandemic, Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which was signed into law on March 18, 2020.[[13]](#footnote-13) The law authorized the issuance of emergency supplemental benefits up to the maximum allowable SNAP benefit for a household’s size. While the additional benefits were needed, the increase did not provide additional support to the lowest income individuals who were already receiving the maximum benefit amount. The December 2020 federal stimulus bill increased SNAP benefit amounts by 15% for the first 6 months of 2021.[[14]](#footnote-14) On January 22, 2021, President Biden issued an Executive Order asking the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to update its calculation of food costs that determine benefit levels, a requirement in the 2018Farm Bill.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Biden administration is also calling on Congress to extend the 15% increase in benefits past June 2021.[[16]](#footnote-16)

On March 24, 2020, DSS consolidated the physical Job Center and SNAP Center locations across the city, maintaining at least one in every borough.[[17]](#footnote-17) However, DSS was consolidating SNAP Centers well before the pandemic. In 2014, HRA implemented the Benefits Re-engineering Initiative to use technology to streamline SNAP and Cash Assistance eligibility processes, moving clients to online services outside of HRA’s traditional offices.[[18]](#footnote-18) DSS closed 3 SNAP Centers from 2018 to 2019, right before the pandemic,[[19]](#footnote-19) and by December 2019, 96% of SNAP application interviews and 87% of recertification interviews were held via telephone.[[20]](#footnote-20) By May 2020, months into the pandemic, 99% of all SNAP business was conducted online and outside of centers.[[21]](#footnote-21)

*Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP)*

HRA, through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), administers funding and coordinates the distribution of shelf-stable food to more than 500 food pantries and community kitchens citywide.[[22]](#footnote-22) About 1.4 million New Yorkers rely on emergency food assistance at food pantries and soup kitchens for basic nutrition.[[23]](#footnote-23) Emergency food assistance is an essential service that is often used to supplement SNAP benefits, since monthly SNAP benefits are often not sufficient to last a family through an entire month. As of June 2021, EFAP is providing support to 426 food pantries and 86 soup kitchens citywide.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Staffing challenges, public health concerns, and limited funding caused many EFAP providers to temporarily close during the pandemic, even while hunger increased in the City.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the 10 months from March 2020 through December 2020, EFAP distributed almost 15.5 million pounds of food compared to just under 15 million pounds of food for all of Fiscal Year 2020, according to HRA.[[26]](#footnote-26) Recognizing not only the increased demand, but also the increase in those who wish to help during the pandemic, HRA updated the eligibility criteria for EFAP providers[[27]](#footnote-27) to allow additional organizations to meet eligibility requirements by reducing the required amount of months of pantry operation from 6 months to 4 months.[[28]](#footnote-28) This allowed those pantries and soup kitchens which started operating in response to the pandemic to be eligible for EFAP membership more quickly. From March 2020 to March 2021, EFAP funded 55 new programs.[[29]](#footnote-29)

1. **GetFoodNYC**

In March 2020, in response to the increase in hunger caused by the pandemic, Kathryn Garcia, former DSNY Commissioner, was appointed as the COVID-19 Food Czar.[[30]](#footnote-30) The Food Czar team released “Feeding New York” in April 2020, outlining the Administration’s initial $170 million emergency food plan to address food insecurity and maintain the integrity of the City’s food supply during the COVID-19 crisis.[[31]](#footnote-31) The City established the GetFoodNYC[[32]](#footnote-32) program, to coordinate efforts across multiple agencies to provide COVID-19 emergency food distribution. GetFoodNYC efforts have included supporting DOE grab-and-go meals, free to anyone, at select school locations; home-delivered meals (HDMs) and grocery boxes to those who are homebound and cannot afford private food delivery services; and food supplies and operational support for emergency food providers.[[33]](#footnote-33) On February 10, 2021, the mayor announced that the City distributed over 200 million free meals to New Yorkers through GetFoodNYC.[[34]](#footnote-34)

*DOE Grab-and-Go Program*

When New York City schools shut down in March, students no longer had consistent access to free breakfast and lunch every weekday. In a matter of days, about 400 school sites opened up to serve any New Yorker, including adults, no questions asked.[[35]](#footnote-35) In the summer, these sites stayed open,[[36]](#footnote-36) but with the start of in-person classes starting in September 2020, the program was reduced to 200 sites and offered afterschool hours.[[37]](#footnote-37) Between late March and September 2020, 60 million meals were distributed through public schools.[[38]](#footnote-38) However, according to Chalkbeat, the DOE distributed 96 million fewer meals to children in the first year of the pandemic compared with the year before the pandemic hit.[[39]](#footnote-39) While kosher and halal meal options were delayed weeks after the program started,[[40]](#footnote-40) kosher meals are currently available at 13 sites and halal meals are available at 50 sites.[[41]](#footnote-41) Vegetarian meals are available at all sites.[[42]](#footnote-42) Grab-and-go meals will be offered throughout the summer, starting June 28, 2021, at almost 400 locations.[[43]](#footnote-43)

In the City’s 10-year food plan, “Food Forward NYC,” released in January 2021, the City committed to allowing whole families, including adults, to permanently get free grab-and-go meals at public schools during summer months even after the pandemic ends.[[44]](#footnote-44)

*Meal Deliveries*

While food insecurity affects individuals of all ages, research shows that older adults are particularly vulnerable. According to New York City Meals on Wheels, 1 in 10 older New York residents face hunger.[[45]](#footnote-45)

To help combat senior food insecurity, DFTA offers older adults a variety of ways in which to receive meals. New York City seniors who are mobile are traditionally able to receive a hot lunch, and sometimes hot breakfast, from DFTA-contracted senior centers five days a week,[[46]](#footnote-46) and homebound seniors are able to receive meals through DFTA’s in-home services program so long as they meet certain qualifications.[[47]](#footnote-47) Seniors must be above the age of 60 and a client of DFTA or a DFTA-contracted senior center to be offered these meal services;[[48]](#footnote-48) seniors who are not in contact with the DFTA system are unable to receive meals through these particular services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the City expanded food delivery services to food insecure New Yorkers across the board.[[49]](#footnote-49) Since April 2020, seniors who do not qualify for DFTA’s in-home services or HDM program or who otherwise have not previously been clients of DFTA have been able to receive food through the city’s GetFoodNYC program.[[50]](#footnote-50) As of December 2020, GetFoodNYC’s HDM program served approximately 75,000 people, 60% of whom were seniors.[[51]](#footnote-51)

*Pandemic Food Reserve Emergency Distribution (P-FRED)*

In the fall of 2020, the Administration established NYC’s Pandemic Food Reserve Emergency Distribution (P-FRED) program, to further address the increased demand at emergency food providers caused by the pandemic.[[52]](#footnote-52) The initiative ensures pantries are well-stocked with healthy food options, with a focus on fresh produce distribution in high-need neighborhoods identified by the Mayor’s Task Force on Racial Equity and Inclusion and is supported by federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds.[[53]](#footnote-53) At inception, all deliveries were fresh fruits and vegetables, but as of February 2021 only an assortment of shelf-stable foods, similar to those available through EFAP, were provided.[[54]](#footnote-54) At the end of May 2021, the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy announced the fresh produce distribution would resume.[[55]](#footnote-55) According to HRA, there were 386 food providers in the program as of February 2021 and enrolled providers can directly place orders for delivery once or twice a month.[[56]](#footnote-56)

1. **Funding for GetFoodNYC Programs[[57]](#footnote-57)**

As illustrated by the succeeding chart, cumulatively across Fiscal 2020, Fiscal 2021, and Fiscal 2022, the City has budgeted $1.1 billion dollars to support its emergency food response to the pandemic. The funding allocated for Fiscal 2020 totals $404.5 million, for Fiscal 2021 totals $620.3 million, and for Fiscal 2022 totals $31.9 million.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **GetFood NYC Emergency Food Funding** | | | | | |
| **Agency** | **Program** | **FY20** | **FY21** | **FY22** | **Total** |
| DFTA | Emergency HDMs | $13,000,000 | $0 | $0 | $13,000,000 |
|  | ***Subtotal*** | **$13,000,000** | **$0** | **$0** | **$13,000,000** |
| DOE | Grab-and-Go | $16,000,000 | $57,700,000 | $0 | $73,700,000 |
|  | ***Subtotal*** | **$16,000,000** | **$57,700,000** | **$0** | **$73,700,000** |
| DSNY | Emergency HDMs | $315,000,000 | $483,624,365 | $0 | $798,624,365 |
| Food Pantries | $10,000,000 | $17,092,900 | $0 | $27,092,900 |
|  | ***Subtotal*** | **$325,000,000** | **$500,717,265** | **$0** | **$825,717,265** |
| HRA | Emergency HDMs | $50,500,000 | $0 | $0 | $50,500,000 |
| P-FRED | $0 | $61,907,100 | $27,670,000 | $89,577,100 |
| Targeted EFAP | $0 | $0 | $4,200,000 | $4,200,000 |
|  | ***Subtotal*** | **$50,500,000** | **$61,907,100** | **$31,870,000** | **$144,277,100** |
|  | **Total** | **$404,500,000** | **$620,324,365** | **$31,870,000** | **$1,056,694,365** |
| **Food Program Totals** | | | | | |
| Emergency HDMs | | $378,500,000 | $483,624,365 | $0 | $862,124,365 |
| Grab-and-Go | | $16,000,000 | $57,700,000 | $0 | $73,700,000 |
| Food Pantries | | $10,000,000 | $17,092,900 | $0 | $27,092,900 |
| P-FRED | | $0 | $61,907,100 | $27,670,000 | $89,577,100 |
| Targeted EFAP | | $0 | $0 | $4,200,000 | $4,200,000 |
| **Total** | | **$404,500,000** | **$620,324,365** | **$31,870,000** | **$1,056,694,365** |
| *Sources: DFTA, DOE, DSNY, HRA, OMB* | | | | | |

Most of the funding for the GetFoodNYC emergency food assistance programs has been budgeted through DSNY, since the former Commissioner was appointed Food Czar by the Mayor. The Council has called for GetFoodNYC funding to be reflected in the appropriate agencies – such as DOE, HRA, and DFTA)– as these agencies have the expertise to implement and oversee these programs. Notably, as of the Fiscal 2022 Executive Plan, the Administration has added no funding for Fiscal 2022 or in the outyears for emergency HDMs, grab-and-go meals, or to directly support the City’s emergency food providers.

The City’s emergency food response is 93.3% supported by federal funding sources and 6.7% by City tax-levy. No State funding has supported these efforts. Most of the federal sources relate to pandemic aid relief with $608.8 million from grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); $237.1 million from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act[[58]](#footnote-58); $107.7 million from federal CDBG; and $31.9 million from the American Rescue Plan (ARP).[[59]](#footnote-59)

*Food in the Council’s Budget Responses*

In the Fiscal 2021 Preliminary Budget Response,[[60]](#footnote-60) the Council identified food insecurity as a key area of concern and called on the Administration to invest at least $25 million in the City’s emergency food network. In response, the Fiscal 2021 Executive Plan added $25 million to the DSNY budget to fund emergency food providers across the City, under the GetFood NYC umbrella of programs. The funding was split across fiscal years, with $10 million in Fiscal 2020 and $15 million in Fiscal 2021. An additional $1.5 million was added for Fiscal 2021 in Fiscal 2022 Preliminary Plan.

In the Fiscal 2022 Budget Response,[[61]](#footnote-61) the Council called on the City to expand and improve food pantry programs by increasing the EFAP baseline food budget by $10 million and allocating an additional $20 million in baselined funding to support smaller, community-based providers that are not part of the EFAP network. The Council also called on the Administration to continue the P-FRED program with an allocation of $30 million in Fiscal 2022 and the GetFoodNYC emergency HDM program with an allocation of $80 million in Fiscal 2022. The Fiscal 2022 Executive Plan only partially addressed these concerns. The EFAP baseline budget was increased by $3.6 million and P-FRED funding of $27.7 million was added for Fiscal 2022. No baselined funding was added to support smaller, non-EFAP providers on an ongoing basis or for GetFoodNYC HDMs.

1. **Council Discretionary Food Funding**

For many years, the Council has provided direct support to community-based organizations that administer a range of food assistance programs across the City, including food pantries, soup kitchens, farmers markets, nutrition education and outreach, and social services benefits support. Council discretionary funding designated to food programs in Fiscal 2020 and Fiscal 2021 are listed by initiative in the below table.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Council Discretionary Food Funding** | | |
|  | **FY20** | **FY21** |
| **Food Initiatives** | | |
| Food Pantries | $5,659,000 | $21,659,000 |
| Access to Healthy Food and Nutritional Education | $2,258,750 | $1,683,750 |
| Food Access and Benefits | $725,000 | $725,000 |
| ***Subtotal*** | **$8,642,750** | **$24,067,750** |
| **Senior Services Initiatives** | | |
| Senior Centers, Programs, and Enhancements | $500,000 | $500,000 |
| **Total** | **$9,142,750** | **$24,567,750** |

For Fiscal 2021, the Council’s designations to food programs totals $24.6 million and are further detailed below.

* **Food Pantries** – Funding totals $21.7 million, with $1 million allocated to support 25 DOE-based school food and hygiene pantries and $4.6 million allocated by the borough delegations to community-based emergency food providers. During Fiscal 2021, the Council observed a continuing need for emergency food distribution across the City and added an additional $16 million in support for emergency food providers under the initiative. In Fiscal 2021, approximately 338 community-based organizations are funded, across all boroughs, to provide food pantry and soup kitchen services.
* **Access to Healthy Food and Nutritional Education** – Funding totals $1.7 million to support programs that expand access to healthy food and improve understanding of nutrition and wholesome food choices, while engaging communities to make positive changes related to food and lifestyle to improve health outcomes. Efforts include farmers markets, urban farms, community gardens, programs to expand the use of SNAP benefits for healthier, less processed food, and educational workshops and training programs.
* **Food Access and Benefits** – Funding totals $725,000 to support technical assistance for tax return preparation for low-income City residents; SNAP and emergency food assistance benefits education and outreach; and SNAP eligibility screening, application, and recertification assistance.
* **Senior Services** – The Council allocated $500,000 to Senior Centers, Programs, and Enhancements initiative for emergency food deliveries for homebound elderly individuals.

1. **Conclusion**

While the City responded quickly to the immediate hunger crisis caused by the pandemic, the response was led by a newly created Food Czar (with staffing assistance and contracting through DSNY ) then shifted to the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy, causing confusion and a lack of transparency in the process. The Committee is interested in the current leadership and coordination of emergency food, how long the DSNY will be involved in emergency food contracts, and whether the current programs are serving their purpose. The Committee would also like to explore the future of emergency food, plans to ensure the next emergency is not cobbled together, and how the City plans to provide transparency to the emergency food process going forward.

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