



NEW YORK

**Testimony for the New York State Assembly on  
the Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecurity in New York State.**

**September 9, 2020  
Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York**

**INTRODUCTION**

Good morning Chair Hevesi, Chair Lupardo and Chair Solages and the members of the New York State Assembly Social Services and Agriculture Committees, and the Assembly Task Force on Food, Farm and Nutrition Policy. 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 the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity in New York State.

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 coronavirus pandemic, No Kid Hungry has provided emergency grants across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam 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 Pandemic EBT – while offering strategic assistance to hundreds of local organizations. No Kid Hungry also launched a text line and website to help families locate meals.

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

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

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all parts of our lives as New Yorkers. According to the New York State Department of Labor, the number of unemployed New Yorkers increased to 1,527,000 in July of this

year, leading to one of the worst unemployment crises in the state's history.<sup>1</sup> For many of our state's children and families, the pandemic and its economic consequences has had a disastrous impact on food security. Before the pandemic, 1 in 7 children in the United States faced food insecurity, and with record jobs and wages lost, we estimate this number is now much higher. In fact, we fear a decade of progress may have been eliminated in a few short months. 1 in 4 children in the United States could face hunger this year because of the coronavirus. And in New York State, where the number was 1 in 6 children, we expect the impact could be worse.

While the entire state is facing rising food insecurity due to the pandemic, the trends in New York City are especially concerning. Prior to the pandemic, over 1.2 million New Yorkers were food insecure.<sup>2</sup> Today, Mayor de Blasio estimates that around 2 million individuals are experiencing food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity rates are even higher for children. Before the pandemic, 1 in 5 children in New York City faced food insecurity and with record jobs and wages lost, we estimate this number is now much higher.

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 electric 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 the coronavirus reverberating across the state, an entire generation is at stake. New York State must take decisive action to ensure that children have adequate nutrition whether at school or at home.

### **HOW NEW YORK COMMUNITIES ADDRESSED CHILDHOOD HUNGER DURING COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the food security of kids and families in every corner of the state. 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. These grants, distributed from March through June, have reached food insecure children and families in rural, urban, and tribal communities. Grants provided funding for equipment purchases, packaging, staffing, transportation, promotion and food items to keep kids and families from sliding into hunger. While the individual needs of school districts and community organizations varied, every grant application reflected the immense increase in need that organizations were seeing in their communities. I would like to share with you some of the stories of how our grantees helped communities across New York State.

In the Sherman Central School District, a rural, low-income district close to Lake Erie, there was an increased need for school meals as parents were laid off from their jobs. The school district used grant funds to purchase to-go containers, which allowed them to distribute meals via a mobile delivery bus route. When the school building shutdown hit Franklin county, the Akwesasne Boys and Girls Club, which

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

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/research-reports/#>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/coronavirus/mayor-fears-that-about-2-million-nyers-could-face-food-insecurity-during-covid-19-crisis/2387335/>

operates on the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, quickly adjusted their afterschool programming to become a source of food for families in their community. The Club was able to leverage grant funds to purchase a new stove, which allowed them to cook community meals more efficiently. As of early June, the Club had served 26,000 meals, which surpassed the number of meals served in all of 2019.

Some organizations had to manage the increased need for food assistance while receiving fewer food donations. The Food Bank of the Southern Tier, which operates food assistance programs in Broome, Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben, Tioga and Tompkins counties, found that their food donation rate decreased due to the pandemic while the demand for food grew tremendously. Using grant funding, they purchased wholesale food and packaging equipment to keep kids in their six-county service area fed during the spring and summer months.

Island Harvest, a food bank operating on Long Island, has also worked to keep kids and families from experiencing food shortages during the pandemic. By partnering with 33 school districts in the region, Island Harvest has been able to distribute around 550,000 pounds of food as of late May. To ensure that families who were unable to reach school sites could access the meals, Island Harvest also scaled their home delivery program to reach around 3,000 families in a seven week period. On the eastern end of Long Island, Southampton Union Free School District has operated as an integral source of meals for the community since the pandemic began. The school nutrition staff ran meal pick-up sites and a home delivery program for families, and also provided meals to the tribal reservation in the district.

In New York City, the Chinatown neighborhoods in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan have been suffering from a loss of business since January of 2020, further exacerbating food insecurity and financial hardship. 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.

In Albany, the Boys and Girls Club of the Capital Region utilized grant funds to provide meals to kids living in public housing. By purchasing a van and meal transport carts, the Club was able to deliver meals to kids in eleven sites throughout the capital region.

Across the state, the pandemic has hit vulnerable populations especially hard. The pandemic has caused cascading hardship for many survivors of domestic violence as they contended 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 State and Puerto Rico, I also wanted to acknowledge the organizations working hard to ensure children have regular access to food in Puerto Rico too. 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 coronavirus crisis. We also support efforts undertaken by the Salvation Army in Puerto Rico to address childhood hunger.

These organizations and school districts have provided an incredible amount of support to their communities, often at a significant hit to their bottom lines. However, they can't fill in the nutrition gap on their own. Policy change is a critical step in this process.

## **POLICY CHANGE TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY IN NEW YORK**

Among the critical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity is one of the most widespread and solvable. As millions of students face uncertainty about school operation and families continue to struggle financially, the indispensable role the federal child nutrition programs play in the lives of Americans has never been more evident. At the same time, the pandemic creates significant challenges for these programs to feed kids, whether at home, at school, or elsewhere in their community. The following includes some policy actions New York State could take to leverage federal programs and stimulus funds to support child nutrition programs and ensure that students' families, nutrition program staff and volunteers, and community restaurants and their workers are able to meet their needs during this unprecedented crisis.

### **Leverage Federal Funds to Support Nutrition Programs.**

The federal CARES Act allocated billions of dollars in emergency relief funds to cover costs associated with COVID-19. Three major streams of this funding are potentially available to support nutrition programs working to feed vulnerable children and families: [Governors Emergency Education Relief \(GEER\) Fund](#); the [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ESSER\) Fund](#); and [the Coronavirus Relief Fund](#).

School meal programs are experiencing severe financial strain as a result of costs incurred from providing emergency meals to students and families when schools closed in the 2019-2020 school year and over the summer. Many states are using CARES Act funds to help cover these costs. In Virginia, for example, funds were allocated to cover unfunded costs for the continuation of school-based meal programs while schools were closed due to COVID-19, including hazard pay for school nutrition staff. In California, funding was allocated in the state budget to provide additional reimbursements of up to 75 cents for each meal served during school closures and summer break.

As the Legislature and Administration considers allocations of CARES Act funds, future federal relief funding, or state general funds in response to the pandemic, we urge that financial support for school meal and other nutrition programs be prioritized.

### **Expand Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Other Federal Programs.**

SNAP is one of the most effective and efficient ways to ensure that kids and families have the support they need to purchase food. SNAP 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. With the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis permeating every part of the state, it is more important than ever to remove the barriers that impede access to SNAP, such as transportation challenges, stigma, and food supply issues. As New York continues to face the many repercussions of the pandemic, it is vital that we utilize all available federal options to ensure that New York children have access to adequate nutrition.

We urge the Legislature to work closely with the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to ensure maximum impact of [waivers and flexibilities](#) as authorized by Congress to strengthen program reach and effectiveness.

The New York State Assembly has already taken significant steps to expand the reach of SNAP. No Kid Hungry New York strongly supports Assembly Bill 10673, which would permanently authorize the state's online SNAP purchasing pilot program. This pilot program allows households to use their SNAP benefits

for online grocery store purchases. By using SNAP benefits to purchase food remotely, families can reduce their risk of transmitting or contracting COVID-19 during trips to the grocery store. The bill also addresses long-standing barriers to SNAP, such as transportation issues and stigma against the program, that contribute to food insecurity in the state.

We also support Assembly Bill 08764A, which 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. No Kid Hungry New York applauds this bill for making prepared food easier to access for these vulnerable populations. We would also encourage the Assembly to consider expanding eligibility for New York's RMP in the bill to include all SNAP-participating households. By allowing all SNAP-receiving households to use their benefits to purchase prepared food, New York would lead the country in addressing the immense challenges many families are experiencing to safely procure nutritious, fresh food in the face of food supply shortages.

With record unemployment numbers in New York and across the country, it is critical that families know that safety net programs like SNAP, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and a new benefit called Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) are available to help them get back on their feet during hard times. 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. The programs are important tools to help families in New York weather this crisis, and investing in outreach will help families keep their children healthy and fed.

### **Providing Support and Protection for Nutrition Staff Working to Serve Vulnerable Families and Children.**

I also want to take a moment to recognize the hard-working child nutrition and cafeteria staff who were on the front lines of the pandemic and continued to serve school meals during school closures and over the summer months. As we look to the current school year, we must ensure school districts have the funding they need to keep their staff members safe and to continue their essential work of feeding vulnerable children.

### **Strengthen the Emergency Food Network.**

Further, no conversation in New York State about addressing food insecurity is complete without a recognition of the emergency food network. Food pantries and soup kitchens are often the last line of defense against hunger for many families. We have seen emergency food providers be forced to close their doors across the state and those that are able to stay open are seeing an overwhelming number of clients. Increased funding and support to food pantries and soup kitchens is essential to address food insecurity.

### **CONCLUSION**

Over the weekend, The New York Times Magazine included a photo essay "[America at Hunger's Edge](#)," showing the struggle families across the country face with food insecurity. The piece included stories of families in Troy, New York pooling all of their resources together to ensure they had regular access for

food. The piece has put a personal face on a crisis that our country (and state) have always faced but was exacerbated by COVID-19. We can and must do better.

New York State is facing a time of unprecedented challenges and devastating loss. In order to rebuild stronger and help struggling New Yorkers, it is essential that we ALL come together to help the State rise again. No Kid Hungry New York stands at the ready to work with the Legislature, Governor Cuomo and our fellow New Yorkers to ensure all children and families have access to the food they need to thrive.