



NEW YORK

Testimony for the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare on the Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2022

March 17, 2021

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 the preliminary budget for Fiscal Year 2022.

First, we thank the City Council for your continued commitment to protect New Yorkers from food insecurity. The City Council has long been a leader in addressing food insecurity, 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 ensuring addressing food insecurity remained a top priority throughout the pandemic. Now more than ever, we are grateful to count you as our partner in the fight against food insecurity.

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 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 – “NYC FOOD” or “NYC COMIDA” to 877877 - to help families locate meals and worked closely with the Department of Education to customize the service to reflect their specific offerings. Since 2011, our No Kid Hungry New York campaign has helped connect millions of children across the state with school breakfast and summer meals.

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

The coronavirus pandemic has affected all parts of our lives as New Yorkers. As of December 2020, the city's unemployment rate was 11%, an increase of over 250% since December 2019.¹ 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 5 children were food insecure. **Now, recent estimates show that 1 in 3 children in New York City may have faced food insecurity over the last year.**²

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 the coronavirus reverberating across the city, an entire generation is at stake. The New York City Council must work with Mayor de Blasio to take decisive action to ensure that children have adequate nutrition whether at school or at home.

As we continue to learn more about the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that a decade of progress in improving child food security has likely been eliminated in a single year. Despite these challenging circumstances, there are numerous measures that the FY22 New York City budget can take to improve food access and food security for children and families across the city. By providing needed support to existing nutrition programs and by investing in outreach and awareness to connect families with federal nutrition programs, New York City can help to alleviate the impact of food insecurity for New Yorkers in every part of the city.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2022 NEW YORK CITY BUDGET

Increase Awareness, Outreach and Enrollment for Nutrition Programs. With record unemployment numbers in New York City and across the country, safety net programs are more important than ever. Federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) exist to help families get back on their feet during hard times. However, these programs only work when people can access them. Current discussions and budgets show a cut to marketing and awareness budgets when the reverse is true – New York City should be investing increased funds into outreach and awareness programs.

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, in different languages, to inform communities about these programs and help eligible families enroll in them. Community based organizations in all 5 boroughs are engaged in this work and additional support would help them deepen engagement and help even more New Yorkers use these programs to help put

¹ <https://labor.ny.gov/stats/laus.asp>

² <https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>

food on the table. Recent actions by the federal government have temporarily increased SNAP benefits by 15% until September of 2021 which is even more reason for eligible New Yorkers to enroll in these programs now.

Safety net programs are important tools to help families in New York City weather this crisis, and investing in robust outreach and enrollment campaigns, including interagency outreach campaigns, will help families keep their children healthy and fed.

Strengthen the Emergency Food Network. New York City must 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. The emergency food system is facing a double whammy of increased need and fewer providers to meet this need as many agencies were forced to close their doors due to the pandemic. Further, many organizations who were not directly involved in anti-hunger programs before were compelled to create new programs to address food insecurity for clients because the need is so high. It is clear that the hunger crisis is far from over. Funding for EFAP (Emergency Food Assistance Program), the Food Pantries Initiative and new funding streams created at the start of the pandemic to support food pantries and soup kitchens should continue and be expanded.

In 2016, the New York City Council created first in the nation food and hygiene pantries in New York City public schools. The pantries provide food, cleaning products and personal supplies for the school community. With food insecurity on the rise, especially among children, investing in new school pantries would help families put food on the table.

We urge the City Council to prioritize support for food purchasing for food pantries and soup kitchens as well as financial support to increase staffing, storage and other operational support in the FY22 New York City budget.

CONCLUSION

New York City is facing a time of unprecedented challenges and devastating loss. Despite these devastating circumstances, city agencies, and nonprofit organizations are taking the necessary steps to feed children and families across the city. In order to rebuild stronger and help struggling New Yorkers, it is essential that we ALL come together to help the City rise again. As you continue deliberations on the FY22 New York City budget, we urge the New York City Council to continue to prioritize funding to programs that ensure no New Yorker faces hunger. No Kid Hungry New York stands at the ready to work with the New York City Council and our fellow New Yorkers to ensure all children and families have access to the food they need to thrive.