



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.

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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.