



NEW YORK

## **Testimony for the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare and Aging on Food Insecurity in New York City**

**April 19, 2023**

**Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning, Chair Ayala, Chair Hudson, and members of the Committees on General Welfare and Aging 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 food insecurity in New York City.

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, the expansion of universal school meals, and leading the charge for increased, baselined funding for food pantries and soup kitchens to ensuring that 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. We were especially pleased by Speaker Adams' recent State of the City address and the recommendations tied to addressing food insecurity.

No Kid Hungry New York is a campaign of Share Our Strength, a national organization dedicated to ending hunger and poverty. Using proven, practical strategies, our No Kid Hungry campaign builds and supports 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 provided more than \$7 million in emergency grants and support in New York and Puerto Rico to help schools, food banks and other community organizations feed kids during the crisis. In addition to our grant-making, we also offered strategic assistance to hundreds of local organizations and advocated for policies to address the unique barriers and unprecedented level of need brought on by the pandemic. This included national child nutrition waivers, which allowed meal providers to adapt and streamline their federal child nutrition program operations so they could keep serving meals to kids, other program flexibilities for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Pandemic EBT to help reach more kids in need. No Kid Hungry will also continue to operate a local text line this summer – “NYC FOOD” or “NYC COMIDA” to 304-304 - to help families locate meals, and No Kid Hungry New York will work closely with the New York City 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.

**No Kid Hungry New York believes that all children, no matter their borough or circumstance, deserve the opportunity to be nourished and safe, so they can live up to their full potential and achieve their dreams.** Adequate nutrition, both at school and at home, helps lay the foundation for a child’s physical and emotional development, educational attainment, and health and well-being. Years of data and research have demonstrated that federal nutrition programs are our nation’s most effective defense against hunger and food insecurity and have helped lift millions of families out of poverty.

As the Council continues its work to improve the futures of all New Yorkers, there are numerous investments that can and must be made in the coming months and years to improve food access and food security for children and families across New York City. By providing needed support and funds to strengthen, expand, and promote federal nutrition programs and other safety net programs, New York City can help to reduce food insecurity for New Yorkers in every borough and continue to reverse the trend of drastically increased food insecurity.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO TACKLE HUNGER IN NEW YORK CITY**

### ***STRENGTHEN FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS FOR ALL NEW YORK CITY KIDS***

**Fully Implement Breakfast After the Bell.** In 2015, New York City made a bold commitment to equity, requiring all city elementary schools to implement Breakfast in the Classroom and ensuring students in those schools could start the school day with a nutritious breakfast. New York City became a national model for child nutrition programs and paved the way for New York State, which passed legislation in 2018 requiring breakfast be part of the school day for more than 1,400 schools statewide, including over 1,000 schools in New York City. Despite these agreements, many schools chose not to participate and claimed there were operational barriers to offering grab and go breakfast or breakfast delivered to the classroom. During the pandemic, all New York City public schools have provided alternative breakfast options and this program expansion must become permanent. Students who start the day with breakfast have higher attendance, better test scores and fewer chronic health problems.

**Prioritize SNAP on All Levels of Government.** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of the most effective and efficient ways to ensure that kids and families have the support they need to purchase food. With the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis permeating every part of the city, it is more important than ever to remove barriers that impede access to SNAP. The New York City Council can utilize their authority and voice on all levels of government to ensure eligible families are accessing SNAP.

At the City level, ensure SNAP applications in New York City are being processed within 30 days. The timeliness rate for SNAP applications in NYC dropped to 60 % in 2022<sup>1</sup>, meaning 40% of the applications took a month or longer to be processed. Families and children cannot wait on agencies to fill roles or streamline internal procedures. The Council should work with the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and Human Resources Administration to immediately address staffing shortages to unlock and leverage federal dollars to support families and fuel economic recovery.

Lastly, long-term policy changes can only happen with intervention or approval from the state and federal government. As a member of the New York City Council, your voice carries a lot of weight with members of the New York State Legislature and Congress. As SNAP bills are being introduced in the New York State Assembly and Senate, the Council can play a major role in strengthening and expanding access to college students and ensuring reissuance of benefits to recipients who were victims of fraud. With Farm Bill negotiations already underway, it is critical for the New York City Council to ensure SNAP is strengthened and protected through the 2023 Farm Bill. No Kid Hungry New York is encouraging you to work with the NY

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2022/hra.pdf>

Congressional Delegation to protect the value of SNAP benefits, maintain and increase access to SNAP and defend and expand access to SNAP-Ed.

**Address Summer Hunger For Every Family Member.** Historically summer has been the hungriest time of year for students and families. Summer meals reach far fewer eligible students than meals served during the school year and pre-COVID, adults weren't served meals at all. In New York City, barriers to access summer meals often include lack of program awareness among families, accessibility of meal sites, and availability of meals to adults.

Broad promotion of the summer meals program and available meal sites is integral to reducing summer hunger among New York City's children. Ensuring that information regarding meal sites comes from trusted messengers, such as schools, local elected officials, principals, parent advisory councils, and faith leaders, is an important way to encourage families to participate in the summer meals program. Many families also struggle with reaching meal sites, especially if meal sites are not close to home or when facing extreme weather. Expanding the number of meal sites and strategically placing them to avoid gaps in service are both essential strategies to increase summer meals participation.

The New York City Council can also advocate to the federal government for the authority to distribute "non-congregate meals," which would allow summer meal sites to distribute 'grab and go' meals or deliver meals to eligible kids. Non-congregate summer meal service was available nationwide through pandemic waiver authorities which expired September 30, 2022. Congress additionally provided nationwide non-congregate service for specific rural communities in the FY23 Omnibus appropriations bill last year. Unfortunately, because this service is limited to rural communities, New York City cannot participate in this program. During the pandemic, this flexibility was critical to New York City families – they no longer had to bring children to a site and have someone watch them eat the meals in a set window. Families could pick up meals and bring it home to ensure children had the meals when they needed it. No Kid Hungry New York urges the Council to encourage Congress to provide this flexibility to all communities as non-congregate meal options meet families where they are.

Within the same FY23 Omnibus appropriations bill, Congress made Summer EBT (SEBT), a grocery benefit provided to families with eligible children during the summer months, into a permanent nationwide program. This legislation turned SEBT from a small-scale pilot that required an annual appropriation into a permanent program that serves all children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals in all states, territories, and covered Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) starting in summer 2024. Since SEBT won't go into effect until next summer, it is critical for the New York City Council to take the steps now to ensure smooth implementation. No Kid Hungry New York urges the Council to encourage Governor Kathy Hochul to allocate the necessary resources and funds for implementation. We encourage the Council to maintain a regular dialogue with the Governor and OTDA to ensure New York's plans around SEBT implementation and promotion is robust and reaches all eligible families. In addition, we urge the Council to weigh in with the United States Department of Agriculture on the SEBT rulemaking that is required to be finalized by the end of 2023.

Lastly, New York City should continue to provide meals to adults at summer meals sites as done during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked why they did not participate in the summer meals programs before COVID, many parents responded it was because only the child could eat and there weren't meals available for adults. As the hunger crisis will not disappear overnight, New York City should invest funds to continue to provide adult meals at all summer meal sites so that each member of the family can have regular access to meals.

**Increase Awareness, Outreach and Enrollment for Nutrition Programs.** With many New Yorkers still facing unemployment and underemployment, especially in the face of rising food prices and rent, 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), Medicaid 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, which can be confusing and lead to lack of confidence in enrolling or utilizing programs. New York City must prioritize funding for outreach and education efforts to help families enroll in programs for which they or their children are eligible.

**Address Systemic Barriers for Immigrant Families.** As many New Yorkers are qualifying for benefits for the first time and the chilling effect of the rescinded Public Charge rule is still being felt by immigrant families, all programs that serve children and families must address systemic barriers to ensure equitable access for immigrant families, such as promoting language access and cultural competency, partnering with trusted community-based organizations, strengthening transportation access, removing burdensome paperwork requirements, and addressing the impacts of structural racism and discriminatory policies.

### ***INVEST IN THE COMMUNITY***

**Continue Providing and Expanding Culturally Responsive Meals.** The New York City Department of Education has prioritized offering kosher and halal meals to children and families across the city. Each year, they have also expanded vegetarian and now vegan options. Failure to accommodate cultural food preferences can discourage children from participating in school, out-of-school time, and child care nutrition programs, so this expansion has helped increase participation. New York City should continue to expand diverse food options and provide city agencies with training and tools to engage communities and plan culturally relevant menus.

**Strengthen the Emergency Food Network by Investing in Community and School Food Pantries.** The New York City Council 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 higher food costs, staffing shortages and increased need. 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 the Community Food Connections (CFC, formerly known as EFAP) program, the Food Pantries Initiative and other new funding streams created at the start of the pandemic to support food pantries and soup kitchens should continue to be expanded. Particularly as CFC now distributes fresh produce, it's essential to increase funds and ensure distribution of CFC product is done in an equitable manner.

In 2016, New York City created the first-in-the-nation food and hygiene pantries in New York City public schools, which provide food, cleaning supplies, menstrual products, and tools to address hygiene for families in the school community. The New York City Council should invest in new school pantries, and it should prioritize their location in communities experiencing the greatest food insecurity or lack a nearby, existing emergency food provider. Likewise, they should invest in mobile markets, which are another important strategy to increase access to healthy food, particularly in underserved communities. Mobile markets offer an opportunity for city agencies to partner with local nonprofit organizations and businesses to bring fresh produce to communities across the city that struggle to access it.

**Ensure Meal Accessibility on Weekends and Holidays.** The typical 180-day school year represents just under half of all days in a year. Summer weekdays only add about 50 more days. More than one-third of the year is made up of "non-traditional times" where children do not have consistent access to school meals or summer meals programs, such as weekends, holidays, and school breaks. New York City should explore

opportunities to provide better availability of food options during this time whether through schools, city-funded programs or community organizations to ensure children have access to meals no matter the day.

### ***BE A CHAMPION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES***

**Create a Child Hunger Task Force.** In order to address the child hunger crisis in a holistic way, New York City should convene a Child Hunger Task Force, led by the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. The Task Force would be composed of a range of stakeholders including high-level representatives of every city agency, elected officials, non-profits, faith-based leaders, and other stakeholders. The Task Force's mandate might include identifying barriers that impede families from accessing nutrition programs (and whether there are different barriers for different constituencies) along with policies and programs to address those very barriers; cross-agency specific plans for promotion of child nutrition programs; recommendations for new initiatives to help families put food on the table; and if the programs are reaching all equitably. Making the Task Force a formal structure ensures that it is a long-standing commitment and priority for the City of New York.

**Advocate for Children Beyond the Federal Nutrition Programs.** It takes more than having access to food and federal nutrition programs to fight hunger. Safety net programs, like tax credits, child care and others, create economic opportunities for children and families that are fundamental to addressing the root causes of childhood hunger. The Child Tax Credit has been helping families with children for decades in the form of an annual tax refund, and in 2021, the benefit was expanded as part of the federal government's pandemic response to be available to the hardest hit families with income too low to require filing taxes. Unfortunately, Congress failed to extend the enhanced Child Tax Credit, which expired in 2021 and families are once again facing the decision to choose between paying for rent, utilities, and food. Without action from Congress, No Kid Hungry New York encourages the Council to advocate for the expansion of the Empire State child credit and New York State Child Tax Credit so families are provided with extra income support and avoid making difficult decisions.

### **CONCLUSION**

New York City is continuing to recover from a prolonged period of unprecedented loss and challenges. Throughout the pandemic, city agencies and nonprofit organizations sustained and fed children and families. With the city back open for business and life taking on signs of more normal existence, it is essential that no New Yorkers are left behind. As you discuss food insecurity today, we urge the New York City Council to prioritize strengthening and funding 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.