



NEW YORK

May 24, 2023

Committee on Finance  
New York City Council  
Council Chambers- City Hall  
New York, New York 10007

**Re: Executive Budget Hearings for Fiscal Year 2024**

Chairman Brannan; Members of the Committee on Finance:

Chair Brannan and members of the Committee on Finance 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 and provide recommendations for today's hearing on the Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2024.

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.

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, 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 FY 2024 New York City budget to improve food access and food security for children and families across New York City. By providing needed support to expand participation in federal nutrition programs and increase coordination and innovation, 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 for Fiscal Year 2024**

**Increase Timeliness in the Processing of SNAP Applications.** SNAP applications are required by USDA guidelines to be processed within 30 days, but the timeliness rate for SNAP applications in NYC dropped to 60% in 2022, with a low of 19.2% in December 2022<sup>12</sup>. That means 80% of the applications took a month or longer to be processed. This backlog impacts all SNAP participants. Agency explanations for this drastic reduction from previous years have included high application volume due to COVID and staffing shortages.

The reality is that the nearly 2.9 million New Yorkers enrolled in SNAP<sup>3</sup> are hungry now. Families and children cannot wait on agencies to fill roles or streamline internal procedures. OTDA and HRA must cooperate and immediately address staffing shortages to unlock and leverage federal dollars to support families and fuel economic recovery. NKH NY is making great investments in frontline organizations that help enroll families in SNAP, and this work can help speed up application processing, but solutions are needed to realize these benefits and keep delays from undermining their success.

**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.

---

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

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/new-york-elections-government/ny-nyc-food-stamps-processing-dipped-december-before-rebounding-20230419-tc3actmqazcfjpnx2w14f417ti-story.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

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. Increased support for SNAP outreach, particularly through community-based organizations offering services in multiple languages, is vital to making sure vulnerable New Yorkers are able to access safety net services.

**Ensure Full Implementation of 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. Since 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. We urge the Council to support funding and other measures that ensure the Department of Education has appropriate funding and resources to fully implement Breakfast After the Bell in EVERY New York City public school.

**Support Culturally Relevant 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 childcare 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.

**Increase Investment and Participation in School Meals.** School meals are the foundation of many New York students' daily nutrition. Investments in culinary training for school food workers, nutrition education, and school cafeteria infrastructure can help increase participation in school meals and make sure students are healthy and ready to thrive. An investment of \$200 million would continue important work citywide to support school cafeterias with improved serving stations, furniture, and food display equipment, which eases burdens on school food staff and encourages student meal participation. Similarly, an investment of \$6.58 million would provide in-depth culinary training for school food workers and help incorporate nutrition education into existing curriculum, improving meal quality and setting up students for long-term health.

**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.

**Strengthen the Emergency Food Network by Investing in Community Food Pantries.** 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, and they must have the resources to provide support to all clients. 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.

The FY 2024 budget should increase funding for the Community Food Connection program to \$59 million, to reflect increased costs and increased need across the city, particularly for pantries serving asylum seekers. Particularly as CFC now distributes fresh produce, it is essential to increase funds and ensure distribution of CFC product is done in an equitable manner. Likewise, the budget 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.

**Increase Investment in School Food and Hygiene Pantries.** 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 FY 2024 budget should invest in new school pantries, and it should prioritize their location in communities experiencing the greatest food insecurity or lacking a nearby, existing emergency food provider. There are limited funds available to support school pantries, and with record interest and need, Council funds are one of the only ways programs can find support to operate these needed services. Doubling the Council's support of school food and hygiene pantries would help to sustain these essential community resources.

**Expand Awareness of and Participation in Summer Meals.** Summer meals historically reach far fewer eligible students than meals served during the school year, making summer the hungriest time of the year. In New York City, barriers to access often include accessibility of meal sites and lack of program awareness among families. 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. We also urge the Council to help promote summer meals to your own constituents.

### **New York City Hunger Survey**

In April 2023, No Kid Hungry engaged in a polling project in New York that shows that many New Yorkers report experiencing hunger in the past 12 months due to lack of money or other resources. The numbers are impactful, particularly among parents of school age children.

Here are some of the key findings:

- Over a quarter (26%) of New Yorkers had to decide between purchasing food versus another necessity, such as utility bills, rent, or gas. As one respondent from the Bronx wrote, “I had to choose between feeding my children or paying my light bill because there just isn't enough food resources out here.”
- Over half (56%) of New Yorkers would worry they would be unable to afford groceries if faced with an unexpected \$500 expense.
- A majority (67%) of New Yorkers say it has become harder to afford groceries for their household in the past 12 months.

New York City is recovering 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 reopening for business and life taking on signs of more normal existence, it is essential that no New Yorkers are left behind. As you deliberate the FY 2024 New York City budget, we urge the New York City Council to prioritize 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.

Sincerely,

Rachel Sabella

Director, No Kid Hungry New York

Share Our Strength

[rsabella@strength.org](mailto:rsabella@strength.org)