



NEW YORK

**Testimony for the New York City Council Committees on General Welfare
Oversight - Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City**

May 29, 2024

Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York

Good morning, Chair Ayala 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 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 fighting for increased supports for school meal operations to championing Breakfast in the Classroom and the expansion of no-cost school meals for every child, 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, No Kid Hungry New York builds and supports public-private partnerships with the goal of ensuring children have access to the healthy food they need, every day.

With 1 in 5 children facing hunger in New York State - and the number rising to 1 in 4 in New York City - we are counting on your continued partnership in the fight against food insecurity. As pandemic era programs (such as the expanded Child Tax Credit and increased SNAP benefits) end and New Yorkers continue to face rising costs, we must take every step possible to connect more children and families with meals. Even when other levels of government have stepped back, New York City found the means to prioritize the fight against child hunger in our schools. New York City has a tremendous opportunity to lead the nation in this work and can do that by investing resources in school meal programs. Together we can make no kid hungry a reality.

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.

2024 NEW YORK HUNGER SURVEY FINDINGS

As New Yorkers grapple with an affordability crisis, rising food prices are adding to their cost of living according to the most recent poll commissioned by No Kid Hungry New York. 85 percent of New Yorkers reported that the cost of food was rising faster than their income. As a result, nearly 4 in 5 households said it had become harder to afford groceries over the past 12 months—the highest percentage tracked yet in their annual poll.

Those challenges are affecting how much New Yorkers buy and what foods they choose. Just under half of New Yorkers (43%) reported a sign of food insecurity due to rising prices like eating less nutritious food or not having enough to eat. Roughly half of New Yorkers said they now purchase less—or no—fresh produce and proteins like meat because of their cost, and 43% reported they had experienced signs of food insecurity because of cost. Those figures are significantly higher for parents of school-age children and households in rural areas.

The poll was in the field in mid-March of 2024 - when some of the students’ favorite items were removed from the menus due to budget cuts. Not only are parents struggling to provide nutritious food at home, 28% of parents identified that the quality of food in New York City Public Schools was on the decline. We believe this was likely driven by the budget cuts implemented which reduced school meal options. Parents are already grappling with the challenge of providing nutritious meals at home, and the proposed cuts may further exacerbate the situation, potentially leaving many children without access to healthy foods.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO TACKLE HUNGER IN NEW YORK CITY

New York City can take many steps to address hunger and poverty across the five boroughs. Last year, we made recommendations related to the processing delays families were experiencing with SNAP applications. We are thankful that New York City stepped up and addressed the issue and we urge you to continue to work as quickly as possible to continue processing SNAP applications. As we continue to combat food insecurity, we believe fully implementing Breakfast After the Bell and increased outreach and enrollment for nutrition programs will further New York City’s efforts in addition to other program ideas.

Summer EBT

With the school year quickly approaching an end, we know that summer months can be some of the toughest months for parents. With many children relying on schools for breakfast and lunch, that burden traditionally fell on parents resulting in greater cost to fill that gap. Thanks to the work of Congress, Governor Huck and the New York State Legislature, New York will be participating in Summer EBT this year. Summer EBT provides eligible families with \$120 per child in grocery-buying benefits during summer break, helping replace the meals kids would otherwise get at school. As highlighted in the No Kid Hungry poll, 4 in 5 households in New York have said it has become harder to afford groceries and Summer EBT will help provide some relief during those summer months. We’d like to thank the Speaker for your remarks in the State of the City about Summer EBT.

While New York State will be administering the program, it is critical that New York City take action to promote the program to eligible families. Partnering with local elected officials to share information, pushing out through every city agency and encouraging eligible families to enroll in SNAP are just some steps to make it easier for New Yorkers to benefit from this program. It's also important to note that these funds will be spent in local businesses, supporting economic development across the City too.

Support for School Meal Programs

Over the last few months, there has been confusion among students, parents, and advocates over opaque funding changes for the Mayor's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS). These changes have caused concern around potential impacts to the school meal program in the largest school district in the nation.

During the City Council's preliminary budget hearing with the Department of Education, students, parents, and advocates had a clear message about the adverse effects of menu reductions at schools. At this time, the Administration made public an additional \$25 million of federal funds for FY24 to restore the cut items to school food menus, which appeared in the FY25 Executive Budget released in April. We were grateful the Administration and NYC Public Schools heard the message and restored the mid-year cuts, ensuring children could continue to access healthy no-cost meals.

Our concern now stems from the \$25 million in federal funds for OFNS not included in the office's FY25 budget. Not only does the program not include the \$25 million that allowed the restoration of menu cuts, but the FY25 proposed budget for OFNS drops by \$52 million overall.

In a city as diverse as this one, the OFNS team has worked diligently to expand options and provide culturally responsive meals. The turn out at the preliminary budget hearing and testimony focused on the cuts made to school meals showed the value students place on having more options. Students spoke loudly about how much they valued the diverse menu items such as bean and cheese burritos, chicken drumsticks, dumplings, guacamole and salsa, and bagel sticks especially as they were replaced by "soggy mozzarella sticks" as one student describes, and other lesser desired options. This made the return of preferred items even more important. But with the proposed \$25 million funding drop in FY25, will there be a return to soggy mozzarella sticks?

The budget reduction in FY25 could have a detrimental impact on the unionized workforce as well. Training programs, the installation of air conditioners in kitchens, and other safety supports were initially rolled back when the first cuts were made. At the height of the pandemic, it was the men and women of OFNS that fed the entire City of New York, and we must protect their safety. We encourage the NYC Public Schools to ensure these supports are restored now to at least the \$606.9 million and continue in future years.

Proposed Food Insecurity Resolutions

We are thankful that the New York City Council is standing up against food insecurity at all levels of government and we are in staunch support of resolutions 227, 25, 50-A, and 237. We stand in strong support with that language in Res 0227 stating "Funding for SNAP and other Farm Bill programs is vital and should be continued and increased; and any cuts to the life-saving food aid provided in the Farm Bill will increase food insecurity in New York City and threaten the health and lives of the City's most vulnerable residents".

As members of the New York City Council, your voices carry tremendous weight with members of Congress. With Farm Bill markups and votes already underway, it is critical for the New York City Council to ensure SNAP is strengthened and protected through the Farm Bill. No Kid Hungry New York is encouraging you to work with the NY Congressional Delegation to protect the value of SNAP benefits, maintain and increase access to SNAP and defend and expand access to SNAP-Ed.

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.

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 expanded tax credits exist to help families get back on their feet during challenging 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.

Summer Meals Accessibility

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.

Expand School Pantries and Mobile Markets

In 2016, New York City created first-in-the-nation food and hygiene pantries in New York City public schools. The school pantries provide food, cleaning supplies, menstrual products and tools to address hygiene for families in the school community. Investing in new school pantries would help families put food on the table, and pantry location could be determined based on food insecurity rates, if the school was in an area considered a food desert or did not have an emergency food provider in close proximity. Knowing how many communities across the city struggle to access fresh produce, partnering with other city agencies and nonprofit organizations to set up mobile markets could also increase access to fresh

produce and resources for families. School pantries also provide another opportunity to promote other nutrition programs to families.

Conclusion

The New York City Council has played a key role in combating hunger and food insecurity and has set an example for the rest of the nation. While New York City has made progress on this issue, there is more work to be done. As budget negotiations continue, we urge you to continue to prioritize increased funding for school meal programs. No Kid Hungry New York looks forward to working with the City Council and the entire Adams Administration to continue to address ending childhood hunger. We are grateful that we can count on you as a partner in this effort to ensure no kid hungry.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to share my testimony.