

Addressing Child Hunger in New York City

2023 Policy Agenda

The last several years have been difficult for New York City and thousands of New York children are still growing up facing hunger, especially those within historically marginalized communities. Hunger takes a profound toll on children's health, happiness, and their ability to build successful futures and break the cycle of poverty. As a result, an estimated 1 in 5 children in New York City could face hunger this year.

No Kid Hungry New York believes that all children, no matter their borough or circumstances, deserve the opportunity to be safe and nourished, to live up to their full potential and able to achieve their dreams. Adequate nutrition, both at school and at home, is essential to a child's physical and emotional development, health outcomes and educational attainment. Years of data and research have demonstrated that federal nutrition programs are our nation's most effective defense against hunger, poverty, and food insecurity, lifting millions of families out of poverty.

Although food insecurity is one of the most daunting challenges facing our City, it is also one of the most readily solvable. With the right policies, New York City can lead the country in combatting rising hunger during the pandemic and making lasting change that ensures that no New Yorker faces hunger in the future. 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.

Nutrition Programs in the New York City Public Schools

For many children, school meals are their only source of consistent nutrition. The importance of school meals has never been more apparent than when school buildings closed for classroom learning in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic. Over the years, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has expanded access to school meals by implementing Breakfast After the Bell programs in select schools and offering no-cost breakfast and lunch to all students.

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. New York City must ensure ALL schools offer alternative breakfast models.

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.

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 with input from local stakeholders 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 safety net programs to families including SNAP and WIC.

Coordination and Collaboration Across New York City Agencies

Agencies across New York City touch the lives of children and families, yet programs are often run in silos and cross-agency promotion is rare. With so many New Yorkers facing food insecurity, it is critical that agencies come together to broaden awareness and outreach to support families in need.

Increase Awareness, Outreach and Enrollment for Nutrition Programs, with an Emphasis on Immigrant Families

With many New Yorkers facing unemployment and underemployment, 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. 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, accessing public benefits can be confusing and lead to lack of confidence in enrolling or utilizing programs. Providing education about public benefits can encourage immigrant families to enroll in programs for which they or their children are eligible. New York City must prioritize funding for outreach efforts to address this issue. Further, 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.

Comprehensive Outreach and Advocacy Campaign on Tax Credits

The Child Tax Credit has been helping families with children for decades in the form of an annual tax refund, but under the newly enhanced version, for one year, the benefit will also be available to the hardest hit families with income too low to require filing taxes. In a few short months, this has already had a major impact on children and families. In addition, families can receive benefits monthly, as an advance on their return. Experts say this could be a game-changer for children in poverty so it is critical that New York City widely promote the program and make sure families are enrolled. The NYC Department of Consumer and Worker Protection supports one of the largest free tax programs in the country. Working closely with community organizations that are tax providers as well as city agencies that provide support to children and families which could include DOE, DYCD, ACS, HRA and the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, New York City should embark on a large public awareness and enrollment campaign. New York City could also be a leading voice in advocating to the federal government for the expansion and continuation of this vital program.

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. 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.

Innovation and Leadership

The eyes of the world are always on New York City and we have an opportunity to lead in implementation and advocacy on programs that can address child food insecurity.

Provide Adult Meals at Summer Meals Sites

Starting in the spring of 2020, New York City took the extraordinary step of providing meals to adults at the City's own expense during the school year and through summer 2021. The summer is often referred to as the hungriest time of year and 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.**

Leading Voice at the Federal Level

Many key policy changes can only happen with intervention or approval from the federal government. As negotiations occur on the **Farm Bill, Child Nutrition Reauthorization and other relevant legislation,** New York City can play a major role in advocating for policy change and flexibilities to expand program access, including improving the adequacy of SNAP benefits and providing flexibilities to the summer meals program to make it easier for families across the city to access these programs. For example, in the past, New York City had to shut down some of the most utilized summer meals sites in the city because the federal government does not permit "non-congregate meals" (in non-COVID times) where children do not sit together. For many children in New York City, limited transportation and extreme weather events like heat waves and floods can inhibit access to congregate meal sites. More children in New York City would have access to summer meals if federal law allowed the NYC Department of Education to provide non-congregate meals.

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.