

Joint Legislative Hearing – Health
Testimony of Feeding New York State
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Executive Summary

Every county in New York is home to people who cannot afford adequate food, and it is about to get worse. Over 2.2 million New Yorkers are food insecure. Hunger and health are closely related; poor nutrition drives health problems. The problem is about to get worse due to new USDA decisions that will affect 113,000 New Yorkers who receive SNAP (food stamp) benefits; it is estimated that 48,000 will lose their benefits. The facts and the science are clear here. The question is what we will do about it.

The resources exist to address this problem, and a significant improvement is attainable. The nine food banks of Feeding New York State distributed 184 million pounds of food last year, including over 60 million pounds of produce, to hungry New Yorkers. We are prepared to do more if given the resources. Feeding NYS has worked closely with the Department of Health for 35 years, and more recently with the Department of Agriculture and Markets to improve food distribution and reduce waste. We ask only for additional tools to do the job.

The Department of Health's Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) must be protected. At minimum we request that funding be restored to last year's level of \$35 million. Ideally it should be increased by another \$6 million to enable us to do more for our citizens. Additional funds would be used for capacity building to enable us to distribute more food.

The Department of Agriculture and Markets does not currently support food banks, but we have developed a plan in cooperation with the Commissioner to distribute a much higher quantity of New York-grown produce and dairy, while simultaneously assisting those struggling farmers. New York's farmers raise 18 billion pounds of produce annually, of which about 1.2 billion pounds is wasted. It is never consumed by anyone. We have developed a \$6 million plan to link New York farms to all hungry New Yorkers, providing fresh dairy and produce to those in need.

The capability, will, and expertise is present. If these two requested resources are added, we can close the new gap being created by the Federal SNAP cuts.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, the great New York State Department of Health Commissioner Dr David Axelrod told us that everything we do must be built on a foundation of solid science. And, he said, to do otherwise was to build public policy on a foundation of sand.

The facts and the science are clear here. New York has a hunger problem; it affects every part of the State; it drives related health problems. Feeding New York State can significantly impact these problems with a small addition of State resources. Let us review the problem and our proposed solutions.

HUNGER IN NEW YORK STATE

The data are clear. Feeding America estimates that over 2.2 million New Yorkers cannot afford to put food on the table. This is 11.4% of our total population. For children the rate is even higher – over 17% are food insecure. There is no county - from Chautauqua to Clinton to Suffolk - that does not have people living in hunger. These New Yorkers are children trying to learn in school. They are veterans who wrote blank checks to this country. They are elderly people who have worked their entire lives contributing to their communities. Most live in households with employment. There are also thousands of charity food providers, most run by volunteers, helping to distribute food. All of these people are our neighbors and they are your constituents. They deserve support.

The science is also clear. Food insecurity and health are closely connected. Families living in food-insecure homes cannot access nutritious foods and find it difficult to eat healthy meals. It is well understood that poor nutrition can increase the risk of developing health problems, including diabetes and hypertension. Food insecurity also makes managing chronic disease much more difficult. Food insecure children cannot learn in school at the same level as their peers.

Moreover, this problem is about to get worse. The USDA announced on Dec 4, 2019, that it will restrict States' ability to waive areas of high unemployment from the SNAP Time Limit Rule. New York is one of the 36 states that currently waive this rule in certain areas. Hunger Solutions estimates that 113,000 New Yorkers will be affected by this rule, including 73,000 in NYC and 40,000 upstate. It is estimated that 48,000 will lose benefits.

The impact of this SNAP cut will be severe and immediate. The average SNAP recipient gets \$1524 in benefits annually (<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table>). The average cost of a meal in New York is \$3.14, according to Feeding America. Therefore, the average New Yorker who loses SNAP will lose 485 meals ($\$1524/\3.14) over the course of one year. The 48,000 New Yorkers who are about to be affected will together lose over 23 million meals ($48,000*485$).

What would it take to make up that gap? Feeding America uses an average figure of 1.2 pounds of food to provide one meal. To provide one person 485 meals would mean they would need to obtain 582

pounds of food (485*1.2). To cover all 48,000 New Yorkers who are about to lose SNAP benefits would take over 27 million pounds of food (582*48,000).

MAKING UP THE GAP

In recent decades, food banks have become an essential part of the economy for lower-income New Yorkers. These New Yorkers simply do not have enough money to meet their needs. Every month they make difficult decisions about rent, clothing, utilities and food. Although three-quarters of hungry New Yorkers receive SNAP, about a quarter of those eligible do not (and, as we have seen, this is about to get worse). Because expenses such as rent are fixed each month, while food costs can be reduced slightly, poverty frequently manifests as hunger. These families rely on food banks to make it through each month.

The nine Feeding NYS food banks are mostly supported by donations, but do receive some funding from New York State. This funding is appreciated but is not enough to meet current needs, much less make up the new gap being opened by USDA.

The current State funding is primarily the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP). This program was funded at \$35 million in last year's final budget, with roughly half of that funding going to food banks (the rest is granted to other food relief charities).

Governor Andrew Cuomo released his Executive Budget for the new year amidst anticipation over how he would close a \$6.1 billion deficit. As in prior years, the Governor proposed keeping food bank assistance flat, even though his administration knows that hunger is going to increase this year.

Feeding New York State proposes two budget actions to address the increase in hunger this coming year.

PROPOSALS

1. Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) funding

Pp. 493-494 of the Aid to Localities budget bill covering the Department of Health –
“For services and expenses, including operating expenses related to providing nutritional services and nutrition education for hunger prevention and nutrition assistance. A portion of this appropriation may be suballocated to other state agencies (26822) 34,547,000”

This is the same amount the Governor proposed last year. Thanks to support from members of the Legislature, the final Budget agreement last year included an additional \$500,000 for the HPNAP program.

At minimum, we ask that HPNAP be restored to the full \$35 million needed for current grant contracts that are already in place. If funding is increased by an additional \$6 million, food banks can add to their operational capabilities to obtain and distribute more food.

2. Farm Food Sourcing proposal through the Department of Agriculture and Markets

Individual food banks work in close partnership with many farmers in New York State, and we are grateful for their donations. Last year over 7 million pounds of fresh, New York-grown food was donated by our farmers to food banks. But this is not enough, and we know we can do better.

Feeding New York State has worked closely with the Department of Agriculture and Markets to develop a plan to distribute up to 30 million additional pounds of New York-grown produce and thousands of gallons of New York-produced milk. This plan has been reviewed by the Council on Hunger and Food Policy. The plan would create a single statewide produce sourcing program that would allow additional New York farms to be paid for their cost of donating food, and would also support the transportation of that food to food banks and ultimately to those in need. The groundwork for this plan has been put in place over recent months, with a small private grant expected this winter. Experts from Feeding America have contributed to the plan, as have our colleagues at Feeding Pennsylvania. The State of Pennsylvania has a similar concept in place now known as PASS (Pennsylvania Agriculture Surplus System). New York can learn from this model, but due to our greater need and larger-scale agricultural sector, we can execute our plan on a larger scale. Once this project has reached full capacity, and in conjunction with increased HPNAP operational support, it could provide enough food to completely close the gap being created by the USDA SNAP cuts.

The Governor did not include this request in his Executive Budget. We will continue advocating for the proposal with the Legislature. The creation of a new \$6 million grant program that would help food banks obtain produce and dairy from New York State farms is sound health policy.

CONCLUSION

We began this testimony by noting that the protection of the public's health must be based in sound science. The science is clear here. We have a plan to address New York's hunger problem. Will we base our health policy on science and planning or on mere sand? The decision is in your hands.

