

**Testimony Submitted by
Gabrielle Blavatsky, Policy Director of Equity Advocates
Before the NYS Senate Standing Committees on Agriculture, Labor and Social
Services**

**Hearing on Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside Continuing
Inequalities in our Food System
April 13, 2021**

My name is Gabrielle Blavatsky and I am the Co-Founder and Policy Director of Equity Advocates. Thank you to Chairwoman Hinchey, Chairwoman Ramos, and Chairwoman Persaud and members of the Committees on Agriculture, Labor and Social Services for holding today's hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Equity Advocates works to ensure all New Yorkers have access to healthy, affordable food by building the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address the underlying causes of food inequity through policy and systems change. We partner with New York-based organizations working to alleviate hunger and poverty, providing them with the tools they need to be more civically engaged—including policy education, advocacy training and coalition building services.

New York was the first American epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis is causing major disruptions to our food system and is exacerbating poverty and food inequity across the state. New York's unemployment rate skyrocketed during the pandemic and remains over 8% - twice 2019 levels¹- and an estimated 2.2 million are struggling with hunger across the state². In addition, significant racial disparities in food insecurity which existed before COVID-19 have been exacerbated by the crisis. Feeding America estimates that 21% of Black people across the country (1 in 5) may experience food insecurity in 2021 compared to 11% of White people (1 in 9).³

We respectfully call upon our representatives and policy makers across New York State to allocate resources towards the following programs and priorities that will help advance racial equity, protect the legacy and ensure the success of Black farmers, address some of the existing systemic inequalities exacerbated by COVID, and ensure that New Yorkers are well fed and supported as we start the slow process of rebuilding from these crises:

- **Invest in the nine solutions for racial equity in New York agriculture developed by Black Farmers United NYS:**

¹ New York State Department of Labor. *NYS Unemployment Rate Falls to 8.2% in December 2020*. <https://labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/pruistat.pdf>

² Hunger Solutions New York. *COVID-19 Updates*. <https://hungersolutionsny.org/covid-19/>

³ Feeding America. *The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity*. March 2021. https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief_3.9.2021_0.pdf

- Create ownership opportunities for black farmers by making a path for guest workers, migrant workers, and undocumented farmworkers to become business owners.
 - Allocate \$10 Million to fund Black farm start ups and empower food and farm businesses in the Black community by the Black Farmer Fund of NY.
 - Supply 400 acres of affordable land access to indigenous and Black farmers and earthkeepers in New York and New England.
 - Provide exceptional education through a Cornell Certificate Program for new Black farmers taught by salaried, experienced Black farmers.
 - Use conservation easements to fund and protect Black led urban farms and support farmers as they build urban to rural grower pipelines.
 - Insist that Black people are included as “Farmland for a New Generation New York” navigators.
 - Provide full scholarships to all black students pursuing SUNY agricultural degrees.
 - Improve data collection to identify who and where New York’s Black farmers are.
 - Increase the number of Black farmers in New York state by converting these solutions into a plan of action.
- **Increase funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) to \$51 Million** to adjust for rising food costs and increased need during the pandemic. In the newly finalized FY22 Budget, the HPNAP program was once again funded at \$36.9M. An increase in funding would help EFPs purchase higher quality food, cover additional administrative and operational support for the program.
 - **Finalizing pilot program for accepting electronic WIC at Farmers Markets.** Act on recommendations and learnings from the pilot to quickly roll out equipment and technology at farmers markets for accepting electronic WIC across the state. Provide funding to Farmers’ Market to purchase needed technology to farmers and promote the program.
 - **Invest \$10 Million to support the Wellness in Nutrition (WIN) program** which provides funding for home delivered meals to New York’s older adults, as well as nutrition counseling, nutrition education and congregate meals. This \$10M will be a downpayment for the \$27 Million that is needed to clear wait lists, support home delivered meals and case management services for older adults. After years of stagnant state investment and the impact of COVID-19, funding for this program is critical. There has been significant growth in the 65+ population; rising programmatic costs; alarming rates of food insecurity among seniors; and federal threats to food access.
 - **Maintain \$3.02 Million of the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP)** for community-based organizations to conduct outreach and increase participation in federal food benefits. This program includes a 50% federal funding share using SNAP dollars. Future RFP and/or guidance for NOEPs should offer

For more information please contact:

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specific resources/technical assistance and targeted outreach to immigrant communities and vulnerable populations that were impacted by COVID.

- **Continue NYS's investment in the Vital Brooklyn Healthy Food Initiative and \$28.92 Million for the Central Brooklyn Food Hub Project, including:**
 - \$11.5M in Capital Funds and \$7.7M in Operational funds for a 20,500 sf Food hub processing and distribution warehouse
 - \$2.5M in Capital funds for a 10,000 sf community mixed temperature storage facility
 - \$1.2M in Capital Funds and \$530K in Operation funds for a Community Kitchen
 - \$990K in Capital Funds and \$2.9M in Operational funds for Community-owned Retail
 - \$1.6M over two year for Dedicated support & grant program to local growers (for food production)

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G Blavatsky". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gabrielle Blavatsky
Co-Founder and Policy Director
Equity Advocates