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New York State Joint Budget Hearing

Health Committee

*Double Up Food Bucks New York:
An Impactful Nutrition Incentive Program
Addressing Food Insecurity, Health Disparities and
Bolstering Local Economies Across New York State*

By Lisa French
Co-founder & Chief Executive Officer
Field & Fork Network



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Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on behalf of Field & Fork Network and our nutrition incentive program Double Up Food Bucks New York (Double Up). My name is Lisa French. I am the Co-founder and CEO of Field & Fork Network, a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to building a thriving regional food system that serves all New Yorkers. Double Up Food Bucks New York is a nutrition incentive program that matches Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits \$1 for \$1 on local fresh fruits and vegetables, helping increase healthy food access for New Yorkers.

We are asking New York State lawmakers to support a \$2 million budget appropriation that will allow Field & Fork Network to continue to sustain and expand the Double Up Food Bucks program across more communities in New York.

Nutrition and Health Benefits

Food is vital to the health and well-being of all New Yorkers. Unfortunately, both hunger and food insecurity are prevalent problems in communities across this great state. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has increased in severity in New York. In September 2021, there were 1.6 million SNAP households and 2.8 million SNAP users in New York. According to Feeding America Food Insecurity Data, as of March 2021 14.5% of New York State residents (2.8 million people) experience food insecurity. This is a 35% increase from 2019 when 10.7% of residents (2 million people) experienced food insecurity. Food insecurity among children has seen an even larger increase during this time. As of 2021, 22.6% of children (908,280 children) face food insecurity, a 43% increase from 15.8% of children (634,570 children) in 2019.

Our experience implementing **Double Up Food Bucks New York** for the last 8 years has shown that matching SNAP benefits with incentives for locally and regionally grown fruits and vegetables **is a cost-effective way to simultaneously reduce hunger, improve dietary health, and stimulate local food economies in a way that can create new job opportunities.** Through this one intervention, we can meet immediate caloric needs and build a healthy population.

Since 2014, we have seen significant impact with the Double Up program:

- Served more than 32,000+ SNAP recipients at over 180+ program sites spanning 30 counties
- \$3 Million in sales of healthy food in SNAP and Double Up, supporting local businesses and farmers
- Over 400+ NY farmers directly benefit from the program as participating market vendors and wholesale produce suppliers



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The Double Up program also acts as a complement to emergency food organizations such as food banks. According to Feeding America, for every one meal provided through a food bank SNAP can provide nine meals. Nutrition incentive programs such as Double Up Food Bucks New York increase the amount of food a shopper can purchase, as well as the quality of food that they can afford. The Double Up program makes healthy, fresh produce more affordable while allowing recipients the dignity to choose what foods are best for themselves and their families. The Double Up program has an overall redemption rate of 95%, a strong indicator that the program is working.

Addressing Systemic Health Inequities

Widespread food insecurity has a devastating impact on overall public health. Diet is a leading contributor to death and chronic disease in New York. Having a poor diet ranks as the number one cause for cardiovascular disease and is a major risk factor for obesity. Obesity increases risk for serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, arthritis, and some cancers. Unfortunately, most of New York State's population is impacted by obesity and related non-communicable diseases.

The burden of these chronic health conditions is not distributed equitably. In New York, obesity is more common among blacks or Latinos, people without a college education, and those living in households earning less than \$50,000/year. Additionally, almost 51% of SNAP participants are in families with members who are elderly or have disabilities. **Diets that include nutrient-rich foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, can prevent weight gain and help control cholesterol levels and blood pressure. Double Up provides families the ability to purchase healthy foods** by making them more accessible and more affordable, while improving their overall dietary health.

Creating Long Term Change

Our most recent program evaluation shows that 96% of Double Up customers surveyed say they increased the amount of produce they consume because of the program, and 92% of Double Up shoppers reported that they are buying more fruits and vegetables for snacks since using the program.

The Double Up program is effective at creating long term changes in diet and purchasing habits. Farmers and market managers report that customers who come to the markets for the first time to take advantage of the Double Up program continue to shop at the markets when they are no longer using the SNAP program. This tells us that **Double Up participants are motivated shoppers who take nutrition and health seriously and work hard to get the best nutritional value for their very limited food dollars.** It also indicates that new, healthy shopping habits that form because of the Double Up program continue when families leave the SNAP program.



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We all know that changing dietary patterns takes time and that new healthy food cultures are forged through a combination of approaches. That's why we have built strong partnerships with over 160+ organizations and agencies in communities across New York that work to serve our most vulnerable populations in ways that aim to improve their lifestyles, health, and economic future.

Investing in our Communities

Healthy food incentive programs like Double Up Food Bucks New York do far more than just reduce hunger and improve nutrition, they also support economic development and jobs. **Double Up provides increased purchasing power for low-income families who can stretch their food budgets further. These food dollars drive additional sales at grocery stores and farmers markets. Those sales, in turn, circulate in the local economy, providing a boost to workers, businesses, farmers, and communities all throughout New York's supply chain.**

A 2021 research report, *The Economic Contributions of Healthy Food Incentives*, highlights the findings of a team of economists at Colorado State University that support the notion that programs such as Double Up Food Bucks New York can provide significant economic benefits if they were expanded widely across New York State. This pioneering study shows that broad expansions of healthy food incentives would provide powerful returns on that investment –for families, grocers, and farmers, as well as more broadly among the state economies where such benefits are expanded.

Field & Fork Network was part of the coalition of nutrition incentive providers that participated in the study which yielded the following potential economic benefits if there was significant state-wide investment and expansion of the program:

- Every \$1 of incentives spent on farm-direct purchases (farmers markets/farm stands/CSA), will result in an estimated contribution of \$2.5 dollars to New York's economy. \$1 of incentives spent on food in retail stores will result in \$2.2 dollars to New York's economy.
- A potential of \$27 million - \$52 million annual increase in farmer income.
- Estimated employment contributions: \$500K - \$1 million in labor income to the agriculture sector; \$2 million - \$4 million in labor income to the food retail sector.

Conclusion

For the last 8 years, Double Up Food Bucks New York has had a proven record of improving participant's diets and economic opportunity. This unique feature of the nutrition incentive program has garnered unparalleled support from over 31+ corporate and private foundations in NY since 2016. These non-federal dollars were used as a required match to federal dollars from the USDA National Institute of Food & Agriculture's Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (formerly the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program) – bringing

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in \$4.2 million of federal funding for the program since 2016. However, we are reaching the threshold of non-federal funding available from private sources and without state support we are leaving millions of federal dollars on the table.

The proposed \$2 million in State funding will be leveraged to bring in an additional \$2 million in federal funding. These resources will give approximately 100,000 additional SNAP shoppers access to the program. The funding will allow the program to expand into approximately 50 additional program sites which will include small retail/grocery sites and farm direct sites, bringing the total number of program sites statewide to 230.

Our experience implementing Double Up Food Bucks New York has shown that matching SNAP benefits with incentives for locally and regionally grown fruits and vegetables is a cost-effective way to simultaneously reduce hunger, improve dietary health, and stimulate local food economies. Through this one intervention, we can provide sustainable long-term support to families, businesses, and farmers.