

Hunger Action Network of New York State
Health Budget Hearing Testimony to the Joint Hearing of the
NYS Assembly Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee
By Susan Zimet, Executive Director
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Hunger Action Network of New York State is a statewide membership organization of direct food providers, advocates and other individuals whose goal is to end hunger and its root causes, including poverty, in New York State. The dire straits confronting so many low-income New Yorkers highlights the need for the state to both strengthen the safety net and help lift people out of poverty.

Increase Funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program to \$51 Million

More than one million households throughout New York State were unable to afford enough food to feed themselves or their families in 2012, according to the Food Research and Action Center. Of those households, more than 400,000 were considered to have "very low food security," meaning they repeatedly skipped meals or reduced the amount eaten.

Right now, in every community, children go to school without breakfast, working adults skip meals to pay for housing and energy, older adults struggle to afford food and medications and the working poor cannot make ends meet.

Unfortunately, there is also a growing sectors of hunger amongst veterans who have returned from service and are not yet employed or receiving benefits and college students who sometimes take out additional loans to cover living costs and are then left to repay substantial interest. And not let's forget the disabled who struggle to put food on the table.

The New York State Office of the Aging states that one in four older adults living at home is nutritionally at-risk, which is a factor in half of all older adult hospital admissions and readmissions.

In a statewide survey of EFP guests that Hunger Action Network did 3 years ago, for our 30th anniversary, more than 2/3 of the food pantries and soup kitchens reported a drop in food donations. Yet 89% reported that they are serving more people and 40% of the programs reported that they turned people away at some point; this number is higher in NYC.

Hunger is unacceptable and preventable

Last year the New York City Food Bank calculated that for food banks/ food pantries to be able to meet the minimum NYS guidelines for a Healthy Pantry Bag, the allocation for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program Hunger needed to be \$51 million dollars.

This figure was calculated by the Food Bank based on their examination of the increase in poverty and food costs in the state over time. The Food Bank's calculation took into account for the increase in the number of New Yorkers in poverty since the start of the recession (19%), the increase in the cost of food since then (18%), and to correct for the inadequacy of the existing supply (a 31% adjustment).

Backing up these numbers are the growing lines at pantries.

Natasha Pernicka, the Executive Director of the Food Pantries for the Capital District said "Here in the Capital District our coalition of food pantries are maintaining the highest levels of our 36 year history. Funding for food is critical to ensure our pantries can continue to provide enough food for the more than 2.6 million meals annually. Every day of the year more than 250 children have dinner because their parents were able to access nutritious food from a local food pantry."

Christy Robb, Director of Food Services at St. John's Bread and Life (Brooklyn) said "We could not have met the demand, 741,687 meals served in our soup kitchen and food pantry in 2014, without the dollars provided by HPNAP. To meet the increasing needs, about 20% a year, an increase in HPNAP funds will make the critical difference in our ability to deliver food to all that need it."

Brian Riddell, Executive Director of Dutchess Outreach, Inc. stated "It is plausible to say at least 15,000 people in Dutchess County are relying on emergency food programs. This growing demand on food programs reflects recent statistics on the number of people now living in poverty in our cities upstate. This reality has placed an undue and desperate burden on programs now stretched to the bone to provide food for the people of New York; people who may now rely on our having enough food when they need it. Here at Dutchess Outreach we are serving 500 meals a day; lunch, dinner and afterschool meals to at-risk children. Our food pantry reaches 4000 people per year; a third of them children. HPNAP support now lasts about six months. Flat funding or only small increases in HPNAP funding has actually meant cuts to our grants, because, due to the expanding need, there are more pantries popping up each year drawing on those funds."

Finally Michael Haynes, Director of Government Relations at Long Island Cares said "The HPNAP budget line is designed to support the States Food Banks so they can do their job of making sure no New Yorker goes hungry. The food banks want to and are mandated to provide nutritious food, but the difficulties are that without increased HPNAP funding to meet the guidelines, the food banks can't purchase as much food with the HPNAP dollars at a time when there is more demand."

Having started as the new Executive Director for Hunger Action Network at this time last year, my eyes were opened to the extensive poverty and hunger impacting New York.

As most of you already know, the majority of children in the cities of Rochester, Syracuse, and Schenectady "officially" live in poverty. And what about the South Bronx, the poorest district in the nation where the U.S Census Bureau finds that 38% live below the poverty line.

Hunger Action Network's goal is to work on legislation that will help to lift people out of poverty. However, in the meantime, the most important thing for those on the front line is to ensure that those that need services of the pantries get the food they need and are not rationed or turned away as we solve the bigger problems.

Last year's HPNAP allocation was \$34.5 million, leaving the food banks, pantries and soup kitchens to have to find other ways to meet the growing needs in an economy at a time when a great majority of us are trying to keep our own heads above water.

After the budget was adopted last year, there were two articles in the Legislative Gazette on the budget, "Done Deal" and "Spending in the Shadows". The second article wrote about the \$ 2.6 billion set aside for discretionary spending.

Hunger Action Network addressed a letter to Governor Cuomo, Majority Leader Flannigan and Speaker Heastie requesting that \$16.5 million out of the state's unallocated \$2.6 billion be earmarked for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) in order to assure that emergency food providers have enough food so that no New Yorker goes hungry. This letter was hand delivered to the leaders as well as legislators that chair committees that deal with hunger and poverty.

Immediately Assemblyman Crespo's office reached out to Hunger Action Network and asked how they could help us with this request.

A press conference was held days later with the Assemblyman and Directors of food pantries from around the state. The story was covered all over the country by the Associated Press. Assemblyman Crespo followed up with a sign on letter to all his colleagues asking for support for the increased HPNAP funding. Senator Bonacic did a sign on letter to his colleagues also. Both legislators said if it was not the next to last day of session, there would have certainly been more signatures as every Senator and Assemblyperson has many food pantries and soup kitchens in their district.

While we were hoping to see the funding allocated, we were certainly hoping that in this year's State budget, \$51 million would be allocated. However, the Governor has proposed \$34.5 million in funding for emergency food in the state budget for 2016-17.

The Draft Anti-Hunger Task Force report recommends that at least \$51million is needed to meet higher need and rising food costs since the recession.

Of course there are many demands on a budget. But a budget is a reflection of who we are as a government. It speaks to our values. If it takes \$51 million to meet the demand to feed our fellow New Yorker's, we respectfully request that the committee ask the Governor to increase HPNAP funding to \$51 million.

HPNAP is one of the most successful anti-poverty, nutrition, and social service programs in the nation. Without this assistance, many of the 2,400 agencies the 8 New York State food banks support would face closure and 3,000,000 New Yorkers would be at risk.

Furthermore, increasing HPNAP funding will also assist NY member food banks in purchasing more produce directly from New York State farms. In 2014, New York State food banks procured nearly 10 million pounds of healthy fruits and vegetables from New York farms; sadly it was not enough in light of the extremely high demand for locally grown produce. This necessary investment in HPNAP will not only help put nutritious food on New York families' tables, but it will also bolster the New York State farm economy.

Pilot Program to Support Innovative Approaches to Fighting Hunger

Food banks across New York State are developing new programs to address hunger by nontraditional means. For example, Long Island Cares recently established the region's first Mobile School Pantry in partnership with the Brentwood Union Free School District in 2014. The Mobile School Pantry program alleviates childhood hunger through the provision of food to children and families at each of the district's elementary schools. In the program's first 2 months, LI Cares distributed 31,608 meals to 1,082 children (439 families) in Long Island's largest school district. Food banks across the nation are contacting them and hoping to create similar programs in their communities.

Hunger does not discriminate, it impacts people of all ages, races; hunger resides in every neighborhood in New York. Therefore we need to continue to develop new methods that not only maximize efficiency but also uniquely address the diverse challenges that various demographic groups encounter when they are experiencing hunger.

To that end the food banks are interested in pilot program to support innovative approaches to fighting hunger to challenge its food banks to continue to adapt to our constantly evolving clientele (veterans, students, seniors, etc.) through the creation of a pilot program incentivizing the creation of programs which provide meals to the hungry in nontraditional ways. In addition to HPNAP support, a request has been made to some Senators that the State sets aside an additional \$1 million fund for its food banks to apply for in a competitive process.

Hunger Action Network of New York is delighted that the Governor included in his State of the State policy book the plan to implement the recommendations of the Anti- Hunger Task Force. The recommendations are all of importance and will go a long way in structurally helping to make sure people have access to the benefits provided.

However in the Governor's Anti- Poverty Proposals we believe that Empire State Poverty Initiative could be restructured to be more cost effective. The Governor proposal would provide \$5 million in operating aid (\$500,000 each for 10 selected cities). It is our understanding that the money is for grants are for community poverty assessments.

In conversations with anti - poverty leaders it was pointed out that Community Action Programs (CAPS) are federally mandated to do this every 3 years. Working with them, the data can be fine- tuned for the targeted 10 cities for less than \$75K not the proposed \$500K. This would free up approximately \$425K per each of ten cities to fund programs to fight poverty in each of those cities now. Community Action could become the contractor for each of 10 cities. CAP has been acting as the federal anti-poverty arm for the past 50 years. By potentially freeing up this money, it can be reinvested in to help feed and house people.

Health Care as a Right in NYS through Single Payer Health Care

Before ending there is one other issue that can make a big difference in the ability for people to have the resources to provide food for themselves and their families and that is the adoption of Single Payer Health Insurance.

There are three big bills that drive people to EFPs: high rent, high utility bills, and high health care bills.

We need a health care system which provides quality health care to everyone, with no exceptions or exclusions. And with no co-pays, no deductibles, no premiums.

Many guests at who use food pantries are not be able to afford to pay for health insurance.

New York and the US are already paying for universal health care – we are just not getting it. The amount of funds we spend on Medicaid and Medicare alone is more than any other country spends in total to provide quality health care for all. We don't need more money for health care. We need more health care for the money we are already spending.

The solution to hunger is not more food pantries and soup kitchens feeding more people but rather eliminating the reasons that force people to seek help in feeding their families.

Let's solve the problems, reduce the number of hungry and homeless, but let's make sure we are taking care of our fellow New Yorker's at the same time.

Thank you for your time and service.