

Joint Legislative Hearing – Health
Testimony of Feeding New York State
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Feb 8, 2022

The covid pandemic has exposed and deepened the terrible problem of hunger in New York State – but it did not create this problem. The economic crisis that resulted from the pandemic heightened our awareness and worsened a problem we already had. Prior to the pandemic, 2.2 million New Yorkers were hungry. During the pandemic, Feeding America has estimated that over 3 million New Yorkers now need us to obtain their basic food needs.

The ten member food banks of Feeding New York State distributed about 270 million pounds of food statewide in the twelve months prior to the pandemic. In the first year of the pandemic, from March 2020 to Feb 2021, we distributed 470 million pounds. In the current 12-month period, from March 2021 to February 2022, we are on track to distribute over 430 million pounds. You can see from these numbers that we are still quite close to the peak of our distribution. The crisis has not passed. On the contrary, we continue to distribute food at nearly the same rate as during the worst days of the crisis, and we expect to do so for the next several years. Previous recessions have taken years to recover from, and we have no reason to believe this one will be different.

We all know that there are too many people who are hungry. What you may not know is that we have all the food we need to provide them every missing meal. In New York, we throw out more food than we need to entirely solve this problem. Why then is there hunger in New York?

The problem is simply this: those who need the food do not have the purchasing power to buy what they need. Neither their wages nor their public assistance is enough to close the gap.

This is where the charity food system comes into play. This is why we are distributing hundreds of millions of pounds of food every year. To give you some idea of the scale of this effort, our ten food banks are moving hundreds of truckloads of food every year, from eleven warehouses, to nearly 5,000 food pantries and other providers in every part of the state. We put millions of miles on those trucks. It takes tens of thousands of staff hours and volunteer time to make all this work. It takes warehouses, warehouse staff, drive-in coolers, forklifts, forklift drivers, inventory systems, thousands of gallons of diesel fuel, hundreds of refrigerators at thousands of food pantries, hundreds of thousands of cardboard boxes, and most of all it takes generous donors and volunteers.

We have been fortunate over the last two years that donors have given generously to provide us food, and state support has enabled us to buy additional food.

But food alone is not the solution. We need the tools to transport, store and distribute that food. Food pantries need the ability to store and distribute it. We can get the food, but we must have the tools to do the job.

This week our staff worked on a donation of yogurt that needed to be transported from central New York to food banks in the capital area and Westchester. Due to the nationwide shortage of trucking resources, it took over a week to secure a refrigerated tractor trailer to move this food. We came close to losing a donation of \$68,000 worth of brand new yogurt because we couldn't get a \$3,000 truck contract into place. The trucks and drivers simply were not available to us. We should have been able to pick it up 48 hours after it was offered; instead it took over a week.

During the month of January 2022, we distributed well over 20 million pounds of food. However, we were offered donations of 1.3 million pounds that we were not able to take. We could not transport it, so that food was lost.

The facts today are that over 3 million New Yorkers are now food insecure. That is a 46% increase in need. In some communities it is much higher. This has been covered very well in the media; I am sure you have all seen the lines of people, stretching around the block, waiting for a food pantry. You've seen the lines of cars being loaded. Last week, our staff were loading those cars one mile from where we are sitting today.

What tools do we need to handle this need?

Feeding NYS has worked closely with the **Department of Health** for over 35 years, and more recently with the Department of Agriculture and Markets and the Department of Environmental Conservation to improve food distribution and reduce waste. All three agencies have been tremendous partners to us. The people of our state can be proud of the work these staff do.

The Department of Health's Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) must be protected and enhanced. HPNAP has been the State's major anti-hunger program for many years. HPNAP is critical because it funds our operations – paying for staff, rent, fuel, and other things that, while not glamorous, are essential to getting food to people. The Executive Budget proposes funding HPNAP at \$34.5 million. In past years the Legislature has restored \$500,000 to fund the program at \$35 million annually. We are thankful for that support. But let us recall that the need for food is up dramatically. It is unconscionable that HPNAP funding has remained flat while the crisis swirls all around us. **A HPNAP increase to \$54 million is critically needed to ensure that operational resources at food banks and food pantries keep pace with need.**

We applaud the Legislature for establishing Nourish New York as a permanent state program. We have been able to purchase millions of pounds of top quality, New York-origin food from over 4,100 New York farms. With this food we have provided tens of millions of meals that would not otherwise have been possible.

The Department of Agriculture and Markets has managed the Nourish NY program in partnership with the **Department of Health**. Both agencies have been fantastic partners; state staff have been instrumental in connecting us with farms and have ensured that funds flowed where and when they were needed. I think you all know what a fantastic program Nourish NY is.

The Governor has provided \$50 million in the Executive Budget for Nourish New York. **We request that a total of \$85 million be allocated to Nourish NY this year.** The program has proven to be efficient and effective; it is both an anti-hunger program and an economic development program. It is simply the right thing to do.

As the charity food system has nearly doubled its productivity over the last two years, staff and equipment have been pushed hard. I can tell you that staff and volunteers are exhausted, but they carry on. Their morale is high and their leadership is top notch. But we are all doing double the job using the same warehouse space, the same coolers and refrigerators, the same trucks and equipment. We are putting the pedal to the metal with every piece of equipment we have. It is not enough. We need a replenishment of capital equipment to ensure that our truck fleet and storage resources can continue to function at this high level. It will ensure that future donations are not lost and that we can distribute the highest-quality fresh food to our neighbors. **A Food Bank Capital Fund of \$10 million is critical** to get this work started.

The Department of Environmental Conservation has provided us funding to obtain more produce and dairy products. Their funding has enabled us to distribute millions of pounds of produce in recent years that would otherwise have gone to waste. **The Food Donation and Food Scraps Law**, which came into effect in January of 2022, has already proven to be a boon to our work. In the last four months we have secured over 240,000 pounds of donated food from 39 new donors that we would otherwise not have had. Additional DEC funding to continue and expand this work, especially food transportation funding, is needed over the long term.

If these requested resources are added, we can close the new hunger gap, support our farmers, reduce food waste, and make New York a better place.