



Written Testimony on behalf of Rebecca Sanin, President & CEO of Health & Welfare Council of Long Island

**Before the New York State Senate Committee on Finance and
the New York State Assembly Committee on Ways and Means**

**New York State Joint Legislative Hearing
Human Services**

February 13, 2023

Dear Esteemed Members of the Budget Committee:

As the President & CEO of the premiere Health & Human Services umbrella agency for the Long Island Region, I am uniquely positioned to hear from executives, clients and community partners across every area of health and human services in our region on a continual basis. As Long Island's convening body for the the Human Services Sector region-wide, we have worked with many of you over the years to identify solutions and opportunities to serve Long Island's most vulnerable.

We applaud the Governor's commitment to equity and to families and at the same time understand that more investment is needed in basic human needs in order for families in our region with one of the highest costs of living nationally to be safe, healthy and contribute to our economy. As economic recession looms on the horizon, Long Islanders, like all New Yorkers, are grappling with the continued fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic amid expiring federal funding and Public health emergency waivers. Everywhere families are struggling to make ends meet as food costs continue to rise and household budgets are tighter than ever. 1 in 4 adults on Long Island face food insecurity and 68,000 children are unsure where their next meal will come from each day. It is also astounding to know that 1/3 of Long Island households have incomes above the poverty level, but below the costs of meeting basic needs. As a region that is often portrayed as a place of privilege and wealth, the reality of circumstances for families is often misunderstood. Families with two working adults, sometimes managing more than one job, often cannot meet their basic needs and rely on food pantries and other supports just to access the most basic and most vital supply: food.

With the myriad of challenges facing families on Long Island today, hunger remains a primary, escalated crisis since the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the State's investments in mental health and our schools will be for naught if the driver of brain development and well being (nutrition) continues to be unattainable for our communities. Access to healthy meals is critical for the development of our children and the wellbeing of our parents, families, and communities.

To this end, we call upon our lawmakers to include the following critical lifesaving programs in their budget for New York State:

- **Nutrition Outreach and Education Program:**
 - We urge the Senate to include \$1.92 million in its one-house proposal to increase funding for the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) to a total of \$5.22 million. This funding enables community-based organizations to conduct outreach and increase participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in all New York counties, and especially high-need areas. HWCLI has been a proud NOEP contractor for 30 years and the program plays an integral role in allowing Long Islanders access to live saving SNAP benefits. Our NOEP coordinators on Long Island and across NYS are lifelines in their local communities their work keeps communities safe and healthier.
- **Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) Funding Cuts:**
 - Food banks utilize HPNAP funding to purchase nutritious foods which are then distributed to feeding programs in their respective communities. Food banks also use these funds to issue operational support grants which give local food pantries and soup kitchens the ability to purchase additional racking, refrigeration, or vehicles. The current budget proposes to fund HPNAP at \$34.5M. This reflects a 38 percent cut from the \$56M allocated in 2022. Furthermore, this is nearly \$30M less than the \$63M food banks requested to counteract inflation this budget cycle.
 - We are calling on our state lawmakers to increase HPNAP funding so that our Food Bank partners can continue to make an equitable difference in the lives of the people they serve.
- **Nourish New York:**
 - Nourish New York enables food banks to support food insecure families with produce grown right here in New York. Since 2020, Nourish New York has provided hungry families with over 70 million pounds of healthy, nutritious food from over 4,000 producers from across the Empire State. The proposed budget also funds Nourish NY at \$50M which represents flat funding from 2022. While not a cut, this funding will not as far in 2023 due to rising food costs.
 - We stand with our Food Bank Partners in asking NY to fund Nourish New York at \$75 Million for the upcoming year.
- **SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs) funding cuts in March 2023:**
 - Emergency Allotments are set to expire later this month, meaning that beginning in March 2023 households will be receiving their pre-covid benefits for the first time in years.
 - This change couldn't come at a worse time. Food costs continue to rise to astronomical heights, economic recession looms on the horizon, and the upcoming end to the Public Health Emergency means the loss of important flexibilities that allow New Yorkers to enjoy access to a stronger social safety net. For example, **older, vulnerable adults who often received the minimum benefit pre-covid will watch their SNAP benefits decline from \$281 per month (with the Emergency Allotments) to just \$23 per month.** These are our seniors who are income-limited and have no other means by which to access food. How can \$23 sustain an elderly person for a month?
 - In States like New Jersey, lawmakers are acting quickly to fill in this tremendous gap that will leave our neediest in an even more vulnerable position.

- We are calling upon New York to establish a new minimum benefit for SNAP.

Finally- I would be remiss if I did not take the time here to urge NYS to ensure funding for Healthy School Meals for All. Although this technically falls under the education budget- school meals are a critical component of family nutritional security in our region and the importance of universal school meals for our children cannot be overlooked or overstated. When children are hungry, human services sector leaders meet them in a variety of service categories because without this most basic need being addressed, development, mental health, academic capacity, health, safety and so much more is impacted and the trajectory of their lives are limited.

- The impacts locally for this program are staggering: **578 schools** in Nassau and Suffolk counties – 90% of LI schools – will see a direct positive impact from Healthy School Meals for All:
 - **506 schools** will be newly able to provide free school meals for all students.
 - **72 schools** that are currently using the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to provide free school meals for all will receive additional funding to make their meal programs financially whole.
 - Across the state, **726,000 additional students** will gain access to free school meals – about **one-third of those students are on Long Island (~243,000)**.

School meals don't just support families in financial need; they support children in a wide variety of circumstances where family stress ultimately increases the likelihood of children missing critical meals or being undernourished during the time period in life where nutrition is essential to healthy brain development. In a time in which the cost of healthy food is unattainable for so many, providing school meals for all children is a concrete way to support families, providing an estimated \$140/month per child in grocery savings. California, Maine, Colorado, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Nevada all provide state funding to ensure healthy meals for all of their students. New York should be a leader in the region and across the country in valuing children and thereby creating healthier and safer communities. Together with the other critical investments identified in this testimony, you have an opportunity to address public safety, public health, economic stability and so much more by ensuring that the most vital basic need is accessible across the lifespan. Hunger is not a given—New York can end hunger as we know it today by making the investments outlined in this letter and can celebrate a future in which our collective health and well-being is a model for the nation.

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