



MET COUNCIL

Feeding the hungry. Serving the poor.
Changing lives.

Chair Krueger and Chair Weinstein,

Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty (Met Council) is a 50-year-old anti-poverty organization. In addition to our wide array of social services, domestic violence prevention, and senior services, we operate the largest kosher food pantry network in the country. While our network serves all those who are hungry, we specialize in the provision of emergency food that meets the cultural and religious dietary needs of food insecure kosher- and halal-observant households. Our partner pantries serve food insufficient clients regardless of race, faith, ethnicity, sexual identity, or gender.

As you know, New York State is home to the country's largest Jewish and Muslim populations. Both groups have specific dietary requirements that generally cost more at the consumer level, causing increased food insecurity. On average, we distribute emergency food to 95 pantries a month in New York State, including a growing network of up to 30 halal pantries. Combined we serve an average 200,000 people each month across the New York metro region.

The emergency feeding system in our state is not adequately designed to serve these communities. There is a lack of publicly available food products at the local, state, and federal levels, and many emergency providers that manage this supply chain do not understand the cultural nuance of required certifications for diverse communities. When these issues are combined, organizations like ours are left with limited procurement options and no flexibility to spend our dollars on appropriate products, further exacerbating food insecurity within communities with specific dietary restrictions.

As we enter 2023 and begin budgeting for fiscal year 2024, it is essential to understand the state of food insecurity in our post-COVID emergency food operations. Since 2019 our Met Council's food program operations have grown by 327%. While much of this change was due to our rapid response to the pandemic, we have grown every year over the last three fiscal years through June of 2022. Met Council's food bank, in partnership with our network of pantries, has delivered over 49.7 million lbs. of kosher and halal food to more than 200,000 New Yorkers a month since March 2020.

Last year, during these same hearings, we said we expected the need for emergency food in the communities we serve to remain high. Then record levels of inflation swept through the food market, causing our clients to need us even more while our funding was increasingly stretched thin. At the same time, we saw significant decreases in both public and private funding that impacted our ability to serve the communities that rely on our religiously informed emergency food network. This led to the first decrease in the amount of food we have been able to give to our clients since 2019.

As shown in the table to the right, in FY 2020, our clients received an average of 15.3 lbs. of emergency food per month; this grew to 19.4 lbs. in FY 2021 and 22.3 lbs. in FY 2022. Since July of 2022, this figure has dropped to 15.6 lbs. per client, a 30% decrease over last year, close to FY 20, when three-fourths of the year's data reflected pre-COVID operations.

Average Monthly Pounds Per Client July 2019 – June 2022		
Fiscal Year	Pounds Per Client	Pct. Change
FY 20 (July 19 – June 20)	15.3 lbs.	
FY 21 (July 20 – June 21)	19.4 lbs.	+27%
FY 22 (July 21 – June 22)	22.3 lbs.	+15%
FY 23 (To date July 22 – Present)	15.6 lbs.	-30%

The lack of funding and subsequent lack of emergency food not only hurts emergency food service providers but also directly impacts our local economies and threatens the health and well-being of our clients and their families.

This does not have to happen. Met Council and other emergency food providers throughout New York State have shown the capability and expertise to distribute massive amounts of food to the millions in need. We simply need the funding and resources to do so.

This year's State budget must build on the support for the Emergency Feeding System we saw last year. To do so, it should ensure that kosher and halal emergency food providers have adequate access to culturally appropriate food products and priority ordering processes for kosher and halal protein and processed products.

In partnership with the UJA-Federation of New York and Emergency Food Providers across the state, we request the following:

- **A \$28.5 million increase to funding for New York State's Hunger Prevention and Nutritional Assistance Program (HPNAP) bringing the FY 24 funding up to \$63 million** - HPNAP funds are the backbone of emergency feeding in NYS and provide the greatest flexibility and potential to fulfill the needs of kosher- and halal-observant New Yorkers. While we were grateful to see an increase of \$22 million in the annual budget last year, we were dismayed to see that these funds are being rolled over from FY 23. This means that as we watched our budgets decrease and our clients continue to struggle, HPNAP has not allocated last year's increase, effectively nullifying the effect of any budget wins we thought we had secured. Last year we stated that the per capita funding for HPNAP had fallen 30% over the past five years. With the known effects of inflation and the fact that the increases from last year were not allocated, we know that over the past six years, HPNAP per capital funding has only worsened. Now is the time to not only include last year's \$22 million in increased individual allocations for HPNAP member organizations but to increase overall FY 24 funding to \$63 million, a figure reflective of the impacts of inflation and the known need throughout our state. Increasing the FY 24 HPNAP allocation would account for the per capita decrease and bring HPNAP funding back in line with its previous standard. There is also a need for additional dollars specifically for staffing and operations support. Pantries are far too reliant on informal and volunteer labor. In addition to the requested funding, we need direct support for professional pantry operators and their staff to maintain continued expertise in emergency food programming.
- **Increase funding for Nourish New York (Nourish NY) to \$70 million** – The proposed budget maintains consistent funding for Nourish NY at the FY 22 and FY 23 budget level of \$50 million. We believe this funding should increase to support this innovative program that leverages emergency food need to support upstate agriculture while alleviating food insecurity in urban and rural counties throughout the state. While we recognize that Nourish is still relatively new and that its funding was intended to stay flat for five years, that should not unduly restrict a program so vital to New Yorkers. Many of the products Nourish NY offers meet the needs of those we serve, including those with religiously informed dietary needs, who rely on fresh produce as healthy, culturally competent, and nutritious food options. Increased funding for Nourish NY is vital to the continued success of this program.
- **20% of all emergency food products and dollars destined for New York City must meet the standards for kosher and halal emergency food recipients and be directed to providers that have the expertise to meet the need of these communities** - New data from our study of New York City's COVID-19 emergency food delivery program, GetFoodNYC, found that over **20% of the nearly 130 million meals delivered throughout the life of this program were either kosher or halal meals.**ⁱ While 20% may seem like an astonishing figure, we estimate that this need is even higher due to certain restrictions within the operations of the GetFoodNYC program that likely reduced utilization by kosher- and halal-observant households.ⁱⁱ The state must act on this data and work to adequately supply the kosher and halal pantries of New York City to the fullest extent possible.

Thank you for your continued support of New York's emergency food programs. If you have any questions, please contact

Thank you,

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ⁱ "Home | MMZ," accessed January 5, 2022, <https://gettingfoodnyc.metcouncil.org/>.

ⁱⁱ "MetCouncil-GettingFood.Pdf," 17, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://gettingfoodnyc.metcouncil.org/dist/pdf/MetCouncil%E2%80%93GettingFood.pdf?v=1.1>.