

NY Food Policy Alliance

Testimony Submitted by
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on behalf of the NYC Food Policy Alliance
At the February 13, 2022 Virtual Budget Forum on the FY23 NYS Budget
For the Legislative Hearing on the FY23-24 NYS Budget: Human Services

February 13, 2023

My name is Leah Eden, Executive Director of Equity Advocates. Thank you to Assemblymember Maritza Davila and Senator Roxanne Persaud for holding today's budget hearing and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Equity Advocates works to ensure all New Yorkers have access to healthy, affordable food by building the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address the underlying causes of food inequity through policy and systems change. We partner with New York-based organizations working to alleviate hunger and poverty, providing them with the tools they need to be more civically engaged—including policy education, advocacy training and coalition building services.

Equity Advocates convenes and facilitates The NY Food Policy Alliance, multi-sector group of 75+ food system stakeholders from across New York State that work together to identify and advocate for public policies and funding that not only respond to our current economic and hunger crises, but also address the ongoing vulnerabilities and injustices of the food system. We approach this work through an anti-racism lens to ensure communities of color and other systemically under-resourced communities benefit from public policies and funding.

Our state has not fully recovered from the economic impacts of the pandemic. Many families are still struggling to make ends meet and our partners are seeing an unprecedented demand for emergency food assistance. Since May of 2020, the unemployment rate in New York City has hovered around twice the national average at around 5.6%.¹ In addition, families are experiencing historically high levels of inflation and a significant increase in housing costs. The most recent United States Department of Labor data shows that inflation rose to a record 9.1% in June 2022, the largest gain in nearly four decades, reflecting increased food, shelter, and fuel costs nationwide.² In that same time period, United States Census Bureau Household Pulse Data Survey results from

¹ <https://projects.thecity.nyc/hows-new-york-city-doing/index.html>

² <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2022/consumer-prices-up-9-1-percent-over-the-year-ended-june-2022-large-increase-in-40-years.htm#:~:text=Consumer%20prices%20up%209.1%20percent,U.S.%20Bureau%20of%20Labor%20Statistics&text=The%20.,gov%20means%20it's%20official.>

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September 2022 estimate that 64% of respondents had difficulty paying for usual household expenses.³ With a national economic recession looming, we are concerned that the poverty rates, inequality and need for food assistance we are already seeing across the state will worsen.

The Federal Government has not taken action on critical food, housing anti-poverty initiatives that need to be addressed and, as a result, the nonprofit sector is overwhelmed by demand for social services. The State has a responsibility to step in to provide the support that families desperately need right now to make ends meet and to address the underlying systemic causes of hunger, income inequality, and unequal access to healthy food. Member organizations of the NYC Food Policy Alliance respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following budget recommendations in the FY24 Enacted Budget.

These investments, including an initiative to provide Healthy School Meals for all New York school students, will help advance racial equity, address some of the existing systemic inequalities exacerbated by COVID, and ensure that New Yorkers are well fed and supported as we rebuild and prepare for the oncoming economic recession.

FY24 BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

- **New York must establish and fund a statewide, permanent Healthy School Meals for All program across all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program.** We're disappointed that Healthy School Meals for All was not included in the Governor's Executive Budget, but the legislature can still fund this critical policy. We join the Healthy School Meals for All New York Kids Coalition, a group of more than 240 nonprofits, parent and teacher groups, labor unions, and other anti-hunger advocates that have come together to call on NYS to fund universal free school meals in 2023. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a federal policy ensured every student in the nation had access to free school meals – but the expiration of federal funding for universal free school meals this year has had a devastating impact on students and families in New York. Across the state, 726,000 students at nearly 2,000 schools lost access to the meals they depend on to thrive in the classroom. At a time when inflation is driving grocery prices to historic highs, this loss is also hitting families hard. By devoting \$275 per student—about 0.1 percent of our budget—to feeding our kids, we can solve the problem of hunger in schools and help families who are struggling to make ends meet. Universal free school meals is a proven policy that addresses hunger, improves student outcomes, and is good for the economy as a whole. States across the country have already implemented it successfully and nearly 90 percent of New Yorkers support it. Now it is time for New York to step up for our kids and take the lead on ending childhood hunger in our state. In her inaugural address, Governor Hochul pledged to make our state more affordable. Providing school meals for all children is a concrete way to support families,

³ <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/demo/hhp/hhp50.html>

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providing an estimated \$140/month per child in grocery savings. Furthermore, Universal free school meals will also move us toward the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council's goal of cutting child poverty 50% over the next ten years.

- **Increase the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program Funding to \$63 Million.** We are disappointed to see only \$34.5M included in the Governor's Executive Budget for this incredibly impactful program that addresses the ongoing hunger crises. Given rising levels of inflation and increased demand at emergency food providers across the state, we call on the Legislature to ensure the additional \$22M they included in the FY23 Budget is again included in the one-house bills and the final FY24 Budget. We are also calling for an increase in program funding for a total of \$63 million per year. We also ask that, going forward, HPNAP allow program participants to use funds to cover overhead administrative costs and that education and technical assistance on how to source, prepare and offer culturally and religiously responsive food is offered to participants through the existing food safety/training curriculum.
- **Increase Nourish NY (NNY) Funding to \$75 Million.** NNY has been a valuable source of funding for NYS farmers and producers to get fresh, local food into the emergency food system and fuel local economies. While we are pleased the program has been made permanent, there is only \$50M in the Executive Budget. We call for increased funding for the program to \$75 Million per year to keep up with demand. We urge the State to increase transparency and evaluation of this program by making public information on who receives Nourish NY funding and at what levels across as well as data on and analysis of the economic, farming, supply chain, anti-hunger and nutrition impacts of the program. Finally, we ask that the Administration keep NNY and HPNAP funding, applications and administration separate to maintain the integrity and intention of both the programs.
- **Maintain support at \$4.2M for the Nutrition Outreach & Education Program (NOEP),** which funds public outreach and education around participation in SNAP and promotes participation in WIC, and school meals and summer meals.
- **Maintain \$2M for the Urban Farming and Community Garden Grant Program.** In last year's budget the State funded a new grant program to support urban farms and community gardens, including but not limited to the development and enhancement of community gardens, school gardens and urban farms across the state. We were thrilled to see funding for the new Urban Farms and Community Gardens grant program was increased to \$2M. We urge the Legislature to maintain funding at this level in the one-house bills and to set aside funds for outreach and education about the new program to raise awareness amongst urban agriculture organizations regarding this grant opportunity.
- **Increase funding to \$500,000 for Black Farmers United NYS.** We are concerned to see the Governor's budget cutting its initial investment in Black Farmers United of NYS by half and

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urge the State to maintain its support for services and expenses of programs to support capacity building and assist farms and food businesses owned by people of color in New York state. It is crucial to increase this level of funding to amplify and create pathways to ownership for NYS Black farmers through education, policy development, networking, and mutual aid.

- **Incorporate language from S.3062C/A.7503 in the FY24 Enacted Budget to raise the minimum wage annually by a percentage based on the rate of inflation.** We applaud the Governor for committing to increase minimum wage annually based on economic inflation. One of the central underlying causes of hunger is poverty. This fall, consumer prices on food and many other essential items rose to a 40 year high. Each year that inflation increases and wages at the bottom do not, workers in the lowest-paying positions struggle to pay bills, feed their families, and access transportation. Across the state, minimum wage workers are disproportionately women and people of color, groups which also face significant barriers to advancement. To ensure that wages in the state keeps up with rising prices, we urge the state to incorporate language from S.3062/A.75023 into the state budget to raise the minimum wage annually by a percentage based on inflation.
- **Provide \$38.6 million to support NYS Office for the Aging-funded Home Delivered Meals for older adults.** The home delivered meals (HDM) program, often referred to as "Meals on Wheels," offers crucial support for older adults across the state. Nonprofit HDM providers deliver a daily nutritious meal to homebound older adults who are unable to prepare their own food, while also providing support to combat social isolation. HDM programs have been significantly underfunded for many years, with the COVID-19 pandemic putting even greater strain on the system. Challenges include difficulty hiring drivers and delivery staff at low wages, rising costs of raw food and gas due to inflation, significant growth in the state's 65+ population, and higher food insecurity for older adults that has persisted throughout the pandemic. \$38.6 million is needed to alleviate the pressures on this system and ensure older adults can continue receiving meals and social support, including \$29.1 million just to cover inflation costs for existing participants and \$9.5 million for unmet needs. These funds should be allocated through NYSOFA's Community Services for the Elderly (CSE) budget line.
- **Establish and fund a state task force to study the development and impact of the creation of "Food For All NY," a State funded nutrition program for undocumented New Yorkers that are not eligible for SNAP.** Over 4 million immigrants reside in our state and our economy has yet to fully recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted immigrant families that may not be eligible for current nutrition programs. We know that SNAP is one of our country's most important poverty reduction tools, especially for children; in FY21, more than 54% of SNAP participants in New York are families with children but many children in need are not eligible for SNAP

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due to their immigration status. Data from the most recent American Community Survey shows that as of 2021, 1 out of every 5 foreign-born residents (21 percent) in New York receive SNAP benefits (equivalent to 972,700 residents). Further, the number of foreign-born NY residents who receive SNAP benefits has increased by 19 percent since before the pandemic in 2019. Seeing such high levels of reliance on SNAP among foreign-born New Yorkers, it is jarring to think about the countless numbers of immigrant New Yorkers without status that are hard to count and in need of food. We know that proven anti-poverty measures like SNAP make a lasting difference in a child's life by preventing low birth weights and malnutrition, yet all too often a family's immigration status will stand in its way of accessing these critical lifelines out of poverty. The California Food Assistance Program (CFAP, a state-funded food assistance program) and the success of the recently passed "Food4All" campaign should act as a model for ensuring that all families have access to food benefits regardless of immigration status as a proven tool for reducing child poverty rates. Established [via the CA state budget](#) in June 2022, Food4All removes statewide CFAP eligibility restrictions on a population of non-citizens, meaning undocumented Californians are now able to access food benefits. We learned that a key step in creating and securing funding for this CA program was the launch of a state level task force to study the concept, including looking at demographic data about the need for the program and an implementation plan, and the resulting [policy brief](#). In addition to the many long term undocumented families here in New York, there is an unprecedented number of asylum seekers, migrant families and refugees arriving into the state every week. To help meet their nutrition needs and take pressure off of the emergency food system, we ask that the FY24 budget fund the creation of a state level task force including representatives from OTDA, anti-hunger and immigrant rights advocates from across the state to explore the creation of a SNAP-like state funded nutrition program open to undocumented families in our state.

- **Create a pool of funding for New York City to help connect new asylum seekers and refugees to social services.** The City has been relying heavily on community and faith based organizations to provide services to the large number of migrants and refugees arriving into the city over the last couple of months without providing funding or infrastructure support. The New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) system is not currently set up for meeting the needs of undocumented individuals. We call on the state to provide additional funding to the City to help DHS and the Department of Social Services connect asylum seekers and refugees with housing and social services, including funding for translation services, and language support for students enrolling in school to take the pressure off of the nonprofit system.
- **Maintain \$250k for Child and Adult Care Food Program outreach project.** Maintain current state funding for CACFP outreach and provide supplemental reimbursement to CACFP providers in recognition of increasing food and administrative costs .

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- **\$13 Million to Support Farm to School in New York State.** We applaud the Governor’s support for an expanded Farm to School Reimbursement Incentive program. We must build on the momentum of the farm to school program, fully unlock their potential to increase the total amount spent on food from New York farms to over \$328 million and generate nearly an additional half of a billion dollars in economic impact statewide, by including the following in the FY24 Enacted Budget:
 - \$10 million for an expanded Farm to School Reimbursement Incentive program which incentivizes schools that spend at least 30% of total meal costs on New York foods served at any school meal with an increased reimbursement for breakfast and lunch;
 - At least \$3 million for the Farm to School Grants program to meet high unmet demand, ensuring at least \$500,000 is set aside as non-competitive funding to support a growing statewide network of regional farm to school coordinators; and
 - Increasing the state Small Purchase Threshold to at least \$250,000 in GML § 103 so that schools can purchase more fresh food directly from New York farmers using informal bidding methods.
- **Incorporate language from the Good Cause Eviction Bill: [S3082](#) / [A5573](#) into the FY24 Enacted Budget.** All across the state, families are faced with historically high housing rental prices that significantly impact their monthly budgets and ability to feed their families. We join Housing Justice for All in their calls to support the Good Cause Eviction bill which would grant every tenant in New York protection against unjust eviction and unreasonable rent increases by allowing tenants to challenge annual rent increases over 3% or 150% of the consumer price index—whichever is higher—and the landlord to justify the increase.
- **Incorporate language from [Senate Bill S.9557](#) into the FY24 Enacted Budget to require public housing authorities with 100 units or more to provide food and drinking water for all tenants in the building during utility service disruptions.** We applaud the State for taking the necessary steps to address the need for emergency food assistance in case of water service disruptions in public housing. We ask that language be added to ensure that housing authorities provide healthy food during emergencies that meets local municipal nutrition standards OR meal stipends during both planned and unplanned outages of all utilities, including power, gas and water. In addition, language should be included encouraging public housing authorities to contract with local emergency food CBOs, including mobile markets, to supply food to tenants during these outages before the emergencies take place. Finally, we ask for the addition of language requiring that public housing authorities develop a written plan for addressing the underlying cause for utility service disruptions to prevent future outages.

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