

TESTIMONY

NEW YORK STATE JOINT BUDGET HEARING

HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

*Continued Investment in Double Up Food Bucks – An Impactful
Nutrition Incentive Program Addressing Food Insecurity and Health
Disparities Across New York State*

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Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on behalf of Field & Fork Network and our statewide nutrition incentive program Double Up Food Bucks NY (DUFBNY). My name is Lisa French and I am the Co-founder and Executive Director of Field & Fork Network, a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to building a thriving regional food system that serves all New Yorkers. Double Up Food Bucks NY is a program that matches Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits \$1 for \$1 on local fresh fruits and vegetables, helping increase healthy food access for New Yorkers.

Both hunger and food insecurity are prevalent problems in communities all across this great state. Economic factors such as inflation and rising food costs are only exacerbating these issues. Soon, all SNAP households will experience a change to their benefit amounts. That's because the temporary pandemic-related boost to SNAP benefits, known as emergency allotments (EA), are coming to an end this month. These emergency allotments have been in place since April 2020 and families have come to rely on them to put food on the table each month.

According to the NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) more than 2.8 million New Yorkers receive food-buying benefits through SNAP. Additionally, more than 58% of SNAP participants are in families with children, almost 51% of SNAP participants are in families with members who are elderly or have disabilities, and almost 38% are in working families. Double Up Food Bucks NY is a critical resource that helps families stretch their food dollars and put healthy food on the table.

Food is vital to the health and well-being of all New Yorkers. Poor diet is a leading contributor to death and chronic disease in New York State (NYS). Having a poor diet ranks as the number one cause for cardiovascular disease and is a major risk factor for obesity. Obesity increases the risk for serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, arthritis and some cancers. Unfortunately, most of New York State's population is impacted by obesity and related non-communicable diseases. The burden of these chronic health conditions is not distributed equitably. In NYS, obesity is more common among blacks or Latinos, people without a college education, and those living in households earning less than \$50,000/year. Diets that include nutrient-rich foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, can prevent weight gain and help control cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

I understand one of your goals as state leaders is to ensure that no New Yorker goes hungry while also helping families who are facing hard financial times to move out of poverty. You understand the cost of hunger and the toll that diet-related health conditions take on individuals and the lost economic productivity it represents.

The Multiple Wins of Double Up Food Bucks, New York State Impact

Our experience implementing Double Up Food Bucks NYS has shown that matching SNAP benefits with incentives for locally and regionally grown fruits and vegetables is a cost-effective way to simultaneously reduce hunger, improve dietary health, and stimulate local food economies in a way that can create new job opportunities. Through this one intervention, we can meet immediate caloric needs and build a healthy population.

Since 2014, we have seen significant impact with the Double Up program:

- Served more than 34,521 100,000 SNAP recipients
- \$9.4 Million in sales of healthy food in SNAP and Double Up, supporting local farmers and businesses
- More than 3.7 million lbs. of healthy food purchased and consumed
- Over 400 NYS farmers directly benefit from the program as participating market vendors and wholesale produce suppliers

Our most recent program evaluation shows that 96% of Double Up customers surveyed say they increased the amount of produce they consume because of the program, and 92% of Double Up shoppers reported that they are buying more fruits and vegetables for snacks since using the program. 80% of Double Up shoppers said they are buying fewer potato chips, candy, and cookies for snacks. At farmers markets, we find that SNAP customers are maximizing the full potential of the program—redemption rates top over 90 percent. Many SNAP shoppers report that NYS produce in the markets is less expensive and of higher quality than where they usually shop, and that the selection is better. Farmers and market managers also tell us that customers that come to the markets for the first time to take advantage of the Double Up program continue to shop at the markets when they are no longer using the SNAP program. This is all important

feedback. This tells us that Double Up participants are motivated shoppers who take nutrition and health seriously and work hard to get the best nutritional value for their very limited food dollars. It also indicates that new, healthy shopping habits that form as a result of the Double Up program continue when families leave the SNAP program.

Today, the program operates in 29 upstate NY counties with plans to double that number over the next 4 years. The range of food retail venues in which Double Up operates is broad and growing. We have expanded the program footprint to include farmers markets, farm stands, mobile markets, small retail, and grocery stores all in communities that have SNAP recipients. Federal and private funding has allowed us to implement the program using innovative technology solutions that are safe, secure, and convenient for the Double Up shopper. We are also expanding into large retail grocery stores such as Tops Markets and Price Chopper, to meet more SNAP shoppers where they are and improve equitability and reach of the program.

We all know that changing dietary patterns takes time and that new healthy food cultures are forged through a combination of approaches. That's why we have built strong partnerships with over 200+ organizations and agencies in communities across New York and the United States that work to serve our most vulnerable populations in ways that aim to improve their lifestyles, health, and economic future.

Double Up Food Bucks NY is a proven, innovative model that simultaneously delivers health and economic opportunity. This unique feature of the nutrition incentive program has garnered unparalleled support from private and corporate philanthropy and federal agencies. But that is not enough. For nutrition incentive programs to be sustainable, state support is critical. We were thankful to receive \$2 million in the 2022-2023 NYS budget and are hoping to build upon this relationship. More than 13 states have been supporting nutrition incentive programs with annual budget appropriations up to \$20 million per year since as far back as 2016, recognizing the significant impact Double Up Food Bucks has in communities. These states include Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan, California, and Wisconsin among others.

Conclusion

We know that there is no silver bullet that will solve our hunger and health challenges. However, the state can continue to invest in Double Up Food Bucks NY with its proven positive impact on those most in need.

- **We ask for the leaders of New York State to *continue its investment in Double Up Food Bucks NY. With inflation and food prices at an all-time high,* the needs of food insecure New Yorkers has never been greater. With matching federal dollars available, the return on investment is an immediate reduction in hunger, increase in produce consumption, and greater farmer income.**
- **Our experience with Double Up Food Bucks NY demonstrates the power of healthy food incentives. They work.** By collaborating across disciplines, we can integrate healthy local produce into an existing federal nutrition program and create benefits on multiple fronts simultaneously.
- **The positive and immediate impact of nutrition incentives is an opportunity to help all New Yorkers thrive.** The standardized model of Double Up Food Bucks NY and the ability to successfully implement the program in diverse food retail outlets, makes it a unique program that has the power enhance the value of the SNAP program and build healthier food environments and a more viable and responsive food system.

We ask the Committee to please support a \$4 million request in annual funding for Double Up Food Bucks NY in the 2023-2024 NYS budget. This will ensure New Yorkers get the food and nutrition they need to live healthy and productive lives.