

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing-Health
Testimony of The Food Pantries for the Capital District
Angela Pender-Fox, Associate Executive Director
January 19, 2024

The right to food is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as part of the right to an adequate standard of living and enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

New York State Department of Health recently released a report stating that 1 in 4 New York adults are food insecure. **25%** of the adult population in New York does not have adequate resources for, or access to, enough nutritious food for a healthy life.

Surely, this does **NOT** meet what is an adequate standard of living.

On January 17, 2024, our Food Access Referral line received 85 calls from community members seeking food assistance. This is the most calls our referral line has EVER received in one day. In 2022 our referral line received and assisted nearly 8500 callers seeking food assistance. In 2023, we saw a 15% increase, equating to 10,095 referrals.

Founded in 1979, The Food Pantries for the Capital District is a coalition of 70 food pantries serving Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady and Saratoga counties. As a coalition, we had thought we had seen our highest service levels in 2022 only to see an increase in pantry visits in 2023. Our pantry system is buckling and looks to the government to assist in ensuring that all New York State residents have adequate resources and access to nutritious food for a healthy life.

The Governor's current budget does **NOT** meet the need.

The Food Pantries for the Capital District calls on this committee and the Governor to increase funding to the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) to \$75 million and Nourish New York to \$75 million, while continuing to expand direct contracts with emergency food relief programs.

Both HPNAP and Nourish New York are essential to the emergency food system. Reducing and/or static funding turns a blind eye to the increasing need and our people.

It is important to keep in mind that what was once an emergency food system is no longer the case. Adults, families, and children in our state are living in a consistent and constant state of hunger. How can the richest state in the richest nation in the world allow this to happen?

In the Governor's State of the State, she spoke of NY residents looking at their kitchen tables and having to decide whether to pay medical bills or rent etc. However, she never mentioned food. She forgot FOOD. I can guarantee you the families we serve every day do NOT forget about food. The parent with children to feed is not forgetting about food, the senior who cannot get to the grocery store or the pantry and only gets \$28 a month on SNAP is not forgetting about food, the veteran who has served their country and now is in need is NOT forgetting about food, the child who goes to bed hungry is NOT forgetting about food.

We ask you to NOT forget about food, and most importantly, to NOT forget the people who are experiencing this need and those that serve them. We ask you to support our request:

- HPNAP-\$75 million
- Nourish New York-\$75 million
- Expand Direct Contracts with Emergency Food Relief Programs

As a coalition of food pantries, we come together monthly to share ideas, trends, information and best practices. We also survey our member pantries at least twice a year. Our members telling us:

- The need continues to grow—some pantries are seeing 20, 30, 40% increases in service levels
- Funding is a concern—30% of our pantries were concerned that they would not have enough funding to get through 2023
- Consistent sourcing is an issue—pantries are not always able to find the foods that meet the needs of their community

As a coalition we also work on service coordination and collaboration. Currently we have a handful of pantries who have direct contracts for Nourish New York. These pantries are able to purchase culturally sensitive, fresh foods for those they serve. They have come together as a group to collectively tackle the community needs and support smaller pantries in purchasing these items. If more pantries are able to have direct contracts, they too would be better able to better meet the needs of those in their communities. Our front-line pantry workers/volunteers are best able and have firsthand knowledge of those they serve. There is resiliency in a strong, local food chain and expanding direct contracts only strengthens this.

Together, we can do more and nourish more.

Together, we **must** to do more.

Respectfully submitted by,

Angie Pender-Fox

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