



**Testimony Submitted by
Leah Eden, Executive Director, Co-founder, Equity Advocates
For the Health Budget Hearing on the FY25 NYS Budget**

January 23, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Equity Advocates. 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](#), a multi-sector group of 70+ 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.

Hunger, poverty, and food insecurity are issues of public health. Public health research also identifies a strong correlation between food insecurity and mental health challenges including clinical depression, anxiety, and cognitive impairment. We know food insecurity is on the rise in New York and across the country. Back in October, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that, in 2022, food insecurity rose at the fastest one-year rate since 2008 – the first full year of the Great Recession. That came just one month after Census data from 2022 found child poverty more than doubled following the expiration of the expanded Child Tax Credit. Meanwhile, here in New York, our Department of Health just reported that nearly one in four (24.9%) New York adults experienced food insecurity within the past 12 months. These alarming data points highlight the need for New York to commit to substantial investment in the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), Nourish New York (NNY), creating a SNAP Minimum Benefit as well as support of Healthy School Meals for All and the Working Families Tax Credit – both of which would increase the health and wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of New York children.

We, on behalf of the NY Food Policy Alliance, respectfully request your support for the inclusion of the following budget recommendations in the FY25 Budget:

FY25 BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Incorporate language from S.7663 (May) / A.6214 (Gonzalez-Rojas) to establish a state SNAP minimum benefit program.** Last year, the nearly 3 million New Yorkers who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) saw a significant decrease to their monthly benefits. New York households saw an average loss of \$151 per month, while some saw their monthly benefits drop to just \$23. Worse, this loss of benefits comes as families and individuals continue to face higher prices at the grocery store. With food insecurity on the rise, we urge this committee to support an adequate minimum SNAP benefit of \$100 per month. Legislation on this issue has been introduced by Assemblymember Jessica González-Rojas and Senator Rachel May, and a total of 56 state legislators signed a letter to Governor Hochul in support. Further 66% of registered NY voters supported increasing SNAP minimum benefits to \$100 a month, according to a November Siena College poll.
- **Increase the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program Funding to \$64 Million.** We are concerned about the apparent reappropriation of \$22M from the FY23 Budget to 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 State not to cut the \$22M as well as an increase in program funding for a total of \$64 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. We call for an increase in 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. There is currently only one training on Nourish management which does not provide enough guidance and resources for program management are difficult to locate, we urge additional trainings to be provided as well as more communication around existing resources. Finally, we ask that the Administration provide more clarity regarding the NNY and HPNAP programs including related to funding, applications and administration so that providers are better able to navigate the funding structures
- **Establish and fund a permanent, statewide Healthy School Meals for All program across all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program.** We join the Healthy School Meals for All New York Kids Coalition, a group of more than 280 nonprofits, parent and teacher groups, labor unions, and anti-hunger advocates that have come



together to call on NYS to fund universal free school meals. In the FY 2024 State budget, lawmakers took a critical step in this direction, and yet an estimated 700 schools serving 325,000 students were excluded from the expansion of free school meals in last year's budget. In these schools, children are still means-tested for school meals, a broken system that fosters stigma and leaves struggling families without relief. 77% of registered NY voters support state funding for Healthy School Meals for All, according to a November Siena College poll. Strong support held true across party lines, with 63% of Republicans in support, and across geography, income, race, and age. This policy aligns with shared goals of improving affordability and ensuring New York families can meet their basic needs. Providing school breakfast and lunch at no cost saves families an estimated \$150 per child per month in grocery costs. As food insecurity disproportionately impacts Black and Latino households, especially those with children, providing Healthy School Meals for All is a meaningful step to advance racial equity in health and education.

- **Create the Working Families Tax Credit by streamlining two existing tax credits (the Empire State Child Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit into one new program, while expanding eligibility and increasing the value.** New Yorkers are struggling with the high cost of living, and tax credits can be among the most visible actions New York can take to make a major impact on affordability for a modest cost. By making some changes to our tax code, we can give economically burdened workers and families cash to pay for what they need – food, rent, utilities, child care, and more. The Working Families Tax Credit, as laid out in S.277A/A.40221, will ensure families can make ends meet, specifically it will:

For more information please contact: Leah Eden at Leah@nyequityadvocates.org