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**Adirondack Food System Network Oral Testimony for the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
on Health and Medicaid**

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Thank you for allowing the space today to speak on the importance of the State budget to Adirondack communities, our rural farmers and growers, and the families who call northern New York home. My name is Josh Stephani and I represent the Adirondack Food System Network (“AFSN”), a collaborative effort across the vast Adirondack region. Since 2020, our Network works to broaden collaboration across the sectors, bringing and building capacity to organizations already stretched thin, and advocate for the North Country throughout the state and country. Working closely with nearly 40 organizations, we bridge the disconnect between food system actors, working to tackle the thorniest of challenges through collective action.

Let me be clear: our communities survive through the interconnectedness of our farms, our institutions, and social safety nets. Federal cuts to health care and emergency feeding programs have jeopardized the health of our communities, the investment in rural livelihoods, and the families of the Adirondack region. **It is the AFSN view that we must: (1) support our communities in need through increased anti-hunger and nutrition support, (2) invest in vibrant, local food economies, (3) protect our access to affordable healthcare and our rural health networks (4) strengthen local capacity to build long-term resiliency in communities.** Protecting and investing in New York communities, agricultural producers in rural regions, and the social safety nets must be at the forefront of New York’s budget priorities.

The Adirondack Park is unique. More than 6 million acres and a model of conservation for the world, the region is often seen as a place to visit, not to live. Yet, more than 125,000 people live within the Blue

Line, recent threats and decisions by the federal government have made life more difficult for our businesses, our communities, and our farmers. For Adirondackers, for consumers, and for farmers in this region, our needs are often overshadowed by other needs throughout the state. Yet, for our communities, the needs are growing and the struggle to live and work is becoming more and more difficult. While our region is getting older, access to fresh food and health care—critical and necessary elements to thrive in our communities—remain further at risk as a result of the shifting priorities at the federal government.

Yet, it is worth underscoring: resilience is baked into our way of life. Despite recent challenges to the USDA and to the Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP), our communities responded in remarkable ways. Local organizations joined forces to launch collective fundraising for regional pantries. Our regional food hubs stepped up to add more distribution routes and procure from local farmers. Campaigns were launched to serve impacted farm workers from the Caribbean and beyond. When our community and when our farmers need the most help, our community rose to the challenge.

Agriculture and our farmers are the bedrock of our livelihoods and the success in the Adirondacks as well as in New York. Our region produces over 15% of the state's entire agricultural output, roughly \$1 billion annually. Yet, our food system does not end at our county lines or even the 'Blue Line' of the Adirondack Park. Food grown in the North Country makes it way well beyond the borders of the Adirondacks, to regions of New York, and even other states. For our rural communities, our livelihoods are deeply intertwined with agriculture and community support.

However, as I am sure that you are aware, farmers and producers all over the state are facing difficult conditions. New York's farm economy has been struggling for years and recent events have exacerbated the problems. New York's agricultural and farming communities are under a barrage of continual threats – from tariffs imposing a high cost on fuel and silage to threats to our immigrant families working in our dairy barns and orchards. Extreme weather, heavy rains and long droughts, are wreaking havoc on our agricultural lands. Farmer succession and health concerns are rising as well. Investment in our rural communities is not merely about agriculture but health care, employment, infrastructure, and supporting our communities in need. At the core, for our communities to thrive, they must have access to critical social services, health care, and healthy food.

The challenges to accessing affordable, nutritious, and local food are growing, especially for our neighbors who struggle from paycheck to paycheck or those on a fixed income. Many of our northern counties—such as Herkimer, Franklin, and St. Lawrence in particular— are witnessing rising rates of

food insecurity and diet-related health issues are outpacing the state and national averages. Moreover, with rising food and fuel costs, emergency food programs are seeing significant increases in utilization. Programs like Nourish NY, which allows local food pantries to purchase from regional farms, is a win for food pantries and for local farmers. It is vital to increase funding for this program to \$75 million--a win-win for communities and the economy—as well as incentivize procurement from our regional producers, including our dairy and meat operations.

We applaud the Governor's NY PLATES Program, as many communities and pantries bear high operational and infrastructure costs in serving their communities. This is a needed capital investment in critical infrastructure for our organizations. Similarly, the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) keeps the doors open and lights on in many food pantries across the state and it is imperative that we match funding for this program at \$75 million. This program redirects food waste from retailers into our emergency food system, a successful practice of aiding the environment and reducing the costs for food pantries. **Funding both Nourish NY and HPNAP at \$75 million keeps our families fed, supports our local farmers, and shows that New York State is stepping up for its communities.**

Furthermore, no single program has been more effective at keeping people and families out of poverty and putting food on the table than SNAP. In the absence of federal funding, New York must step up to protect and expand this program to serve all who call New York home. **Raising the minimum benefit to \$100 and funding the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) will strengthen our protections and support for our vulnerable communities to access necessary and life-saving resources.**

AFSN recognizes the importance of supporting our rural health networks and health care facilities. While struggling over the last few years, hospitals and clinics are bordering on closure, from St. Lawrence County to Essex County. Rural Health Networks support the bridge between the healthcare and the social care systems working to improve health outcomes for rural communities. Most Rural Health Networks provide direct support for residents in need of transportation, healthy food, health education, and care navigation. Some also offer housing, doula and maternal care services, and behavioral health support. Rural Health Networks are engaged with Social Care Networks in each region and strive to implement the State's Prevention Agenda. **Continuing to fund RHNs fuels our rural economies, creates employment opportunities for critical health fields, and brings significant philanthropic and federal funding to our region. We ask the Legislature to continue to fund these critical programs.**

2025 has demonstrated that our state must step up to support our communities in need while looking for long-term investment in food and health care resiliency. Stronger investment is needed to address the system challenges and root causes rather than to provide a proverbial bandage for a symptom. Local Food Councils (LFCs) have long connected thousands of residents, farmers, food workers, small populations and provide key connections for healthy and local options. **We urge the state to invest \$2 million to create a new program to strengthen, expand, and coordinate Local Food Councils (LFCs) across the state.** This funding will provide the necessary infrastructure to bridge the divide between our producers, intermediaries, and consumers, ensuring that New York remains a national leader in resilient and sustainable local food economies. If included, New York would be the first state in the nation to invest in a network of food systems experts whose work has already been proven to strengthen, expand, and improve food access, local agricultural economies, climate resilience, and racial justice.

Thank you again for your support and opportunity to provide testimony. AFSN believes that through collaboration across our region and state, we can take bold steps to amplify agriculture, support healthy communities, and lend a hand to our neighbors in need. While our rural communities are strong and resilient, our food system demands attention and support from the Legislature and Executive Chamber. New York has the capacity to feed itself but this Government must ensure protections and support to make that a reality.

I look forward to continuing to make New York a guiding light for agriculture and healthy communities.