

**Testimony of the Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance (SOFSA)
Before the New York State Assembly and New York State Senate
Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the FY 2026-FY 2027 Executive Budget
Topic: Economic Development**

February 10, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the FY 2026-2027 Executive Budget. **The Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance (SOFSA) urges that the FY27 Enacted Budget include a \$2 million investment to create a First-in-the-Nation investment in a statewide network of community-rooted Local Food Councils (LFCs)** that are uniquely positioned to work at the local and regional level to improve access to healthy food, strengthen local economies, and advance racial and economic justice in the food system.

Founded in 2019, SOFSA serves as the local food council for Syracuse, Onondaga County, and the Onondaga Nation. We convene hundreds of cross-sector partners – including farmers, food business operators, emergency food providers, public officials, food chain workers, healthcare leaders, school leaders, and residents with lived experience of food insecurity – to collaboratively address the root causes of hunger and strengthen our regional food economy. Through community listening sessions, policy advocacy, participatory grantmaking, and coordinated response efforts, SOFSA has mobilized resources, influenced local and state policy, and directed funding to grassroots leaders while building durable relationships across systems that too often operate in silos. With modest public investment, we have demonstrated how a locally-rooted council can leverage significant outside resources, respond rapidly to emerging needs, and serve as trusted infrastructure for both everyday coordination and moments of crisis. Sustained state funding would allow us to deepen this work locally while contributing even more effectively to the statewide network of councils described below.

A Pivotal Moment for New York’s Food System

Providing funding for New Yorkers to access food is only a small part in increasing food security. We are at a critical juncture where New York’s food system is both our greatest vulnerability and our most promising solution to climate, economic, and health challenges. According to the 2022 USDA census, more than 2 million acres of New York’s farmland belong to aging farmers, 90% of whom do not have a plan for farmland transfer. New York’s producers are also navigating unprecedented and unpredictable weather patterns and climate conditions, rising farmland prices, and most recently tariffs which are affecting many farm businesses and contributing to rising food costs. Infrastructure to support aggregation, transportation, food processing, and cold and dry storage to ensure the food that is grown can reach communities also remains a challenge. And with increased ICE presence and uncertainty regarding the safety and wellbeing of immigrant and migrant workers along the food chain, food supply is also affected.

New York’s food system touches every aspect of daily life, yet critical decisions about food access, agriculture, transportation, and public health are often made in isolation rather than coordination. When systems operate in silos, resources are wasted, communities lose

efficiency, and the state remains less prepared to respond to both everyday needs and moments of crisis.

Local Food Councils in New York: An Existing Network & Opportunities

Existing Local Food Councils Across New York State



Local Food Councils (LFC) offer a proven, community-rooted solution. New York currently benefits from 13 active LFCs serving diverse geographies—from the Adirondacks to New York City to the Southern Tier—and connecting thousands of residents, farmers, and business operators to collectively respond to food emergencies and work together to build resiliency in their hyperlocal food systems. LFCs are cross-sector, community-led coalitions working at the local and regional level to strengthen food systems through collaboration, policy change, and place-based action. They are the "connective tissue" of the

food system, building statewide food democracy through community-engaged governance. Additionally, through dedicated statewide coordination over the last several years, these LFCs are poised to collaborate as a statewide network to increase the sustainability and resiliency of New York's food system as a whole, which will over time lessen the demand on emergency food suppliers, but are lacking the necessary and sustained funding to carry out their work.

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.

While New York is home to 13 LFCs, more than half of our counties (35 out of 62) currently lack these vital mechanisms for coordinated food system transformation. Many of these underserved regions face food insecurity rates as high as 15%, alongside overlapping challenges like housing instability and transportation barriers. A \$2 million investment would provide \$900,000 to stabilize and scale our existing councils, \$450,000 to launch exploratory and planning work in underserved regions, and \$280,000 to expand a nationally-recognized participatory grantmaking model that shifts decision-making power directly to residents with lived experience of food insecurity. This is complemented by \$370,000 for statewide network operations to ensure consistent communication, data sharing, peer to peer training, and administration of funding.

National research from Johns Hopkins University and Michigan State University demonstrates that LFCs are uniquely effective at breaking down silos between sectors like public health, transportation, and economic development¹. Decades of work from Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems documents how structural racism shapes land access, wages, transportation, zoning, market access, and procurement – and identifies community-rooted coalitions as critical infrastructure for correcting these inequities². Collective impact models in food systems research reinforce that coordinated, cross-sector networks produce stronger outcomes in food access, local innovation, and community resilience than isolated efforts³. LFCs embody the core functions of *impact networks*: they foster deep community relationships, build alignment around shared priorities, and mobilize coordinated action. This structure allows regions to respond quickly to crises, innovate collaboratively, and drive long-term structural change.⁴

These councils do more than just expand access to food; they address the upstream, structural drivers of hunger, such as transportation gaps, unaffordable and aging housing stock, economic instability, procurement barriers and market access, supply chain disruption, and racialized disparities in food and land access while also strengthening food democracy, deepening civic participation, and breaking down silos between sectors. By fostering impact networks, LFCs allow regions to respond quickly to crises while driving the long-term changes needed to build community resilience. Investing in these councils also directly supports New York's goals under the *Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA)*. With one acre of New York farmland capable of generating 1,000 meals per day, a coordinated network of LFCs is the infrastructure required to reduce food waste, lower greenhouse gas emissions through regional sourcing, and ensure our food system can withstand the shocks of a changing climate.

We have already seen what this community-led infrastructure can achieve. Within New York, LFCs have already advanced major wins: regional planning efforts, transportation coordination, support for Indigenous foodways, expanded local procurement, zoning updates, and anti-hunger programs. In Central New York, when an aquaculture business unexpectedly had 30,000 pounds of salmon at risk of waste, the Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance (SOFA)

¹ [Characteristics of Regional Food Policy Councils in the United States, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 2024.](#)

² [Structural Racism in the U.S. Food System: A Review of the Literature](#)

³ [Collective Impact Models of Food System Change](#)

⁴ [Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration, and Catalyze Systemic Change](#)

mobilized partners in hours to redirect that protein to the Onondaga Nation and local households. The New York City Food Policy Alliance has also been a critical voice in shaping citywide food policy. It played a central role in informing New York City's first-ever 10-year food policy plan, *Food Forward NYC*, advocating for changes to the development process that ensured meaningful community engagement and incorporation of a racial equity framework. As a result, 25 of the plan's policy strategies (35%) were originally proposed by Alliance members, demonstrating our ability to translate community priorities into actionable city policy. In Schenectady, the Food Council worked with local legislators to turn a community vision for vacant land into the Urban Farming Land Initiative, which was signed into law in 2024. Even in our most rural areas, like Tioga County, the mentorship of established councils is currently helping residents build their own LFC to address deep-seated food deserts. These examples prove that when we invest in the "backbone" of the food system, we get more than just emergency relief; we get innovation, coordination, and a stronger local economy.

The Federal LAMP Gap: Why State Investment Is Urgent Now

The USDA's Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) – particularly the Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) program⁵ – has long been one of the most effective federal funding streams supporting the exact kinds of community engagement, cross-sector coordination, and inclusion that LFCs across New York are already practicing. Prior to January 2025, these programs explicitly prioritized community-led planning, inclusion efforts geared at diverse and often marginalized stakeholders, and regional collaboration, making them a strong match for New York's LFC ecosystem.

In May 2025, Local Food Councils from across the state came together to submit a coordinated RFSP proposal to sustain and strengthen this work under a shared banner, the "NYS Community Food Collaborative". That proposal reflected years of organic collaboration and co-learning among councils and would have supported a formal statewide network to align local efforts, convene partners regularly, share data and strategy, and develop a statewide food system framework grounded in local and regional realities. Despite strong alignment with program priorities, Congressional appropriation of funds, and the most recent application cycle closing in June 2025, no awards have been announced for the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP), or RFSP – announcements that historically arrive each October. Under the current federal administration, it is doubtful that this proposal will be funded in the current federal cycle, effectively closing a key pathway to sustained federal investment.

This pause in federal funding is not theoretical. It represents the loss of a proven mechanism for leveraging modest local investments into significant federal resources. SOFSA provides a clear example of what is now at risk. Beginning with an initial \$25,000 investment from Onondaga County in 2020, SOFSA became the first organization in the nation to receive two rounds of RFSP funding, ultimately securing more than \$1.2 million in combined federal and private philanthropic investment over five years (2020–2025) to support community-led food system

⁵ [USDA Regional Food Systems Partnerships Program](#)

coordination. That federal capital fueled local organizing, strengthened regional partnerships, and delivered tangible outcomes far beyond what local dollars alone could have achieved.

With federal LAMP funding stalled despite formal authorization and appropriations, state investment is now essential to stabilize this infrastructure. A \$2M annual commitment from New York ensures that proven, community-rooted food system networks do not lose momentum – and that the state retains the capacity to leverage future federal opportunities when they reopen.

How Local Food Councils Complement the State Council on Hunger and Food Policy

New York State already benefits from the Council on Hunger and Food Policy, a formally appointed body that brings together senior agency leadership, statewide organizations, and institutional stakeholders to advise on policy priorities and program alignment. This council plays an important role in statewide coordination and high-level policy discussion.

Local Food Councils serve a distinct and complementary function. LFCs are place-based, community-governed, and operationally nimble – rooted in ongoing relationships with residents, farmers, food workers, small businesses, and local governments. While each LFC is structured differently, they share a commitment to intentional, democratic stakeholder inclusion and to translating policy into practice on the ground. They are designed to move quickly, respond to local conditions, and mobilize partnerships across sectors in real time.

The difference is not one of importance, but of function and scale. The State Council operates primarily through formal appointments and statewide representation, while LFCs operate through distributed, local leadership and lived experience, with consistent presence in communities. Notably, there is currently no formal representation of Local Food Councils within the State Council, and regional representation is uneven – for example, the North Country/Adirondacks, which accounts for roughly 20% of New York’s agricultural production, does not have direct representation.

Investing in LFCs strengthens the overall ecosystem by ensuring that state-level policy discussions are informed by grounded, community-level coordination and implementation. In practice, LFCs help make state strategies real – connecting programs to people, surfacing barriers early, and supporting faster, more responsive action. Together, these structures function best not as duplicates, but as parallel and mutually-reinforcing parts of New York’s food system governance.

Conclusion

New York’s food system requires both immediate anti-hunger supports and the long-term structural transformation that only Local Food Councils can provide. This \$2 million investment ensures that every region of our state has the capacity to participate in shaping a fair,

accessible, and resilient food system. It is a cost-effective, high-impact strategy to ensure that the state's anti-hunger programs are supported by a durable, community-rooted infrastructure. I respectfully request that you include this funding in the final enacted budget to secure a healthier, more democratic future for all New Yorkers.